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# Homer

Second Edition

Barry B. Powell



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To little Gracie

Ἀὐτῷ μοι τί γένοιτο; θεοὶ τιμῶσιν ἀοιδούς.  
Τίς δέ κεν ἄλλου ἀκούσαι; ἅλις πάντεσσιν Ὅμηρος.  
οὗτος ἀοιδῶν λῶστος, ὃς ἐξ ἐμεῦ οἴσεται οὐδεν.

“What good is it to me? The gods honor the *aoidoi*.  
Who would hear any other? Homer is enough for everyone.  
He is the greatest of *aoidoi*, who will get nothing from me.”

Theocritus (third century BC) XVI, 19–21

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## Chronology

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BC

4000	Sumerian cuneiform writing is developed, c. 3400 Egyptian hieroglyphic writing, Pharaonic civilization emerge, c. 3300–3100
3000	<b>EARLY BRONZE AGE</b> Sumerian cities flourish in Mesopotamia, c. 2800–2340 Minoan civilization flourishes in Crete, c. 2500–1450 Akkadian empire in Mesopotamia, c. 2334–2220 <b>MIDDLE BRONZE AGE</b> begins with arrival of Indo-European Greeks in Balkan Peninsula, c. 2000–1600
2000	<b>LATE BRONZE AGE</b> (or <b>MYCENAEAN AGE</b> ) begins, c. 1600 Hittite empire rules in Anatolia, c. 1600–1200
1500	West Semitic syllabic writing invented, c. 1500 (?) Trojan War occurs, c. 1250 (?) Destruction of Ugarit, c. 1200 <b>DARK</b> (or <b>IRON</b> ) <b>AGE</b> begins with destruction of Mycenaean cities in Greece, c. 1200–1100
1000	Greek colonies are settled in Asia Minor, c. 1000
900	NeoHittite cities flourish in northern Syria, c. 900–700
800	Greek colonies in southern Italy and Sicily, c. 800–600 <b>ARCHAIC PERIOD</b> begins with invention of Greek alphabet, c. 800 The <i>Iliad</i> and the <i>Odyssey</i> , attributed to Homer, are written down, c. 800 Olympic games begin, 776 Rome, allegedly, is founded, 753 Hesiod's <i>Theogony</i> is written down, c. 775–700 (?)

- 700 *Homeric Hymns*, c. 700–500  
 Callinus, c. 650  
 Cyclic poets, c. 650–500  
 Age of Tyrants, c. 650–500  
 Pisistratus of Athens, 605?–527
- 600 Creation of Hebrew Pentateuch (first “five books” of Bible) during Babylonian Captivity of the Hebrews (586–538)  
 Cyrus the Great of Persia, c. 600–529  
 Xenophanes, c. 560–478  
 Pindar, c. 522–443  
 Alleged date of the expulsion of the Etruscan dynasty at Rome and the foundation of the “Roman Republic,” 510
- 500 Persians invade Greece; battle of Marathon, 490  
 Persians invade Greece again; destruction of Athens; Greek victories at Salamis and Plataea, 480–479  
**CLASSICAL PERIOD** begins with end of Persian Wars, 480  
 Aeschylus, c. 525–456  
 Sophocles, c. 496–406  
 Herodotus, c. 484–424  
 Euripides, c. 480–406  
 Socrates, c. 470–399  
 Peloponnesian War, 431–404  
 Thucydides, c. 470–400  
 Plato, c. 427–348
- 400 Aristotle, c. 384–322  
 Philip II of Macedon, Alexander’s father, conquers Greece, putting an end to local rule, 338–337  
 Alexander the Great, 356–323, conquers the Persian empire, founds Alexandria  
**HELLENISTIC PERIOD** begins with death of Alexander in 323
- 300 Mouseion founded by Ptolemy II, ruled 285–246  
 Apollonius of Rhodes, third century  
 Livius Andronicus, third century  
 Zenodotus of Ephesus, third century
- 200 Aristophanes of Byzantium, c. 257–180  
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 Cicero, 106–43  
 Vergil, 70–19  
 Augustus defeats Antony and Cleopatra at battle of Actium, 31, and annexes Egypt, 30
- year 0 Augustus Caesar reigns, 27 BC–AD 14
- AD
- 100 Josephus, 37–100
- 200
- 300 Transfer of Homeric texts from papyrus rolls to the codex

## Foreword

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hesitate to present conclusions that I have myself reached after decades of reflection.

Translations from the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are modernized and modified from the Loeb translations of A. T. Murray. Translations from other texts are my own.

People who are not in Classics, or who are just entering Classics, often ask me, "What do we really know about Homer?" This book is for them. I don't assume that the reader knows Greek, but sometimes I will discuss Greek words and concepts because, of course, Homer's thought is encoded in his words. I do assume that the reader has read the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* in translation, so that my small book will serve as a first reader's introduction and commentary to the texts of Homer.

From the last decade of the twentieth century one scholar gathered more than 2,200 books, monographs, and articles on Homer, totaling 60,000 pages! The whole century produced about 500,000 pages on Homer, matching a similar output from the nineteenth century, and a reduced but abundant output on and on back for twenty-five centuries. Scarce to be wondered that all things pertaining to Homer have been argued or *are* argued by someone somewhere. A recent study proposes that the ruins of Troy lie in the British Isles. In this small book I will leave aside as much as possible the "but so-and-so thinks," because concerning Homer you can find someone who thinks almost anything. Even many professional classicists do not understand the basis to assumptions often repeated about Homer, especially his date, although he is the most important author in the classical Greek canon by far. So this book will be for them too. We have made enormous progress in Homeric studies in the last several generations, and I will attempt to explain just where this progress has brought us. Many will claim, "This, or that, is controversial," but a range of opinions does not preclude clarity, if we wish to respect the evidence. We really do know some things about Homer. I will focus on superior thinkers about Homer, whom even in the cacophony of views most Homerists take to be reasonable. I will not

## Preface to the Second Edition

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My ambition in the first edition to provide a swift overview of Homeric studies and the Homeric poems has met with a good success, so much that in this second edition, following the suggestions of readers, I wish to expand modestly in several directions. I have added additional maps, updated the bibliography, and integrated a glossary with the index. I have added a new section on the ancient reception of Homer, as well as a review of recent discoveries at Troy. I have also expanded my treatment of oral theory, added remarks on the literary qualities of the poems, and included over twenty photographs. Still, the second edition preserves the swiftness and concision of the first, I hope, and I also hope that it will continue to serve as a convenient introduction to the vast topic of Homeric studies.

I would like to thank my colleague William Aylward, who has dug at Troy and has offered me many insights for this edition about Homer and his relationship to history.

## Introduction

---

By “Homer” and “Homer’s poems” I mean in this book the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, attributed to Homer from the earliest times. Was this poet really named Homer? Did he even exist? Poems certainly not by the composer of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were attributed to “Homer” during the Classical Period (see Chronology), but they were later. Such false attributions testify to the classic status of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. The name “Homer” must have come from somewhere, most probably because that was the name of a famous poet. Greek *homeros* means “hostage,” and many have looked for clues in that fact, or sought other fanciful explanations for Homer’s name. But these songs did not come out of thin air, or crystallize from a tradition: somebody sang them. Poets make poems. Was the name of that great singer forgotten forever, then quickly replaced by the mysterious “Homer”? It is plausible that the name of the poet who sang these songs was in fact Homer, just as everyone always said.

The striking systematic silence in the *Odyssey* about events told in the *Iliad*, which are never repeated in the *Odyssey*, and evident efforts in the *Odyssey* to round out the story of the Trojan War make clear that the singer of the *Odyssey* knew our *Iliad* intimately. For example, the *Odyssey* contains the story of the Trojan Horse and describes the funeral of Achilles. The same poet, Homer, must have sung both poems, although since ancient times commentators have wondered about this; yet in no other way could the poet of the *Odyssey* have known so well the text of our *Iliad*. There were no libraries in Homer’s day and no reading public. Even in the fifth century BC few possessed complete copies of the poems. Professional singers, like Homer, cannot have been readers under any conditions. Professional singers do not avoid repeating elements or actions that another poet used in a poem on a related topic – on the contrary!

Only the thesis of a single author can explain why the *Odyssey* complements but does not repeat traditions reported in the *Iliad*.

Not only are the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* the oldest surviving works of literature in the Western, Greek alphabetic tradition, but along with Hesiod's poems they are the oldest substantial pieces of alphabetic writing of any kind. Almost nothing (except for fragments) survives between these poems, which appear at the dawn of Greek alphabetic literacy, and the rich literary production of fifth-century BC Athens. Why did the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* not only survive but become the fundamental literary classics of Western civilization? How and why did they become classics? What is the answer to this mystery?

We must stand back a moment and ask: What are the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*? Before anything, they are *texts*, physical objects capable of corruption, decay, and willful alteration, with a history in the material world. They are *things*, which we forget when thinking about their qualities as literature. We want to know how these texts came into being – where, why, and when. This is the *philologist's Homer*, who wants to know what that first text looked like, how it read. Philologists are studying a physical Homer where marks on paper have certain shapes that can be explained in various ways.

Homer is also our richest source of information about early Greece, and because Homer was always a classic, about Greece itself and all that Western culture owes to Greece. There is no such thing as the “Greeks” without the Homeric poems. What does Homer have to say about the past? about travel, marriage, trade, war, architecture, economics, politics, religion? Here is the *historian's Homer*, our second Homer, written documents that tell us about the past.

But for most, who are neither philologist nor historian, Homer means the stories that everyone loves and loves to talk about, swept along in the trance of song. It's his stories that make Homer a classic. The *reader's Homer*, our third Homer, is the most important, because he makes worthwhile the labors of philologists and historians.

In this brief book, I will examine the three Homers in Part I. Working from these perspectives, I will in Part II lead the reader through the poems in a kind of gallop while pointing out on the way the philological, historical, and literary issues that have attracted attention for almost three thousand years. Then, in Part III, I will describe how Homer was understood and imitated by his Greek and Roman successors. Finally, I will review some important secondary literature on Homer and make suggestions for further reading.

## Part I

### Background

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## The Philologist's Homer

---

Philologists are “lovers of language” and everything about language interests them, but not language as a universally human faculty – linguists deal with that. Classical philologists are interested specifically in the Greek and Latin languages, or what we can infer about them from the vast number of written pages that survive. The philologist easily forgets that we know nothing directly about the Greek or Latin languages, however, but are always working with a representation in writing based on them. Writing is a system of conventional symbolic reference and by no means a scientific means of representing speech. The distance between writing and speech is therefore very great, as anyone knows who studies French, then travels to Paris.

Greek and Latin speech do not survive, then, but *texts* survive, a Latin word that means “something woven.” Many misunderstand Homer in failing to remember that Homer is a text and that texts are in code; speech, by contrast, is not in code (although it may *be* code). Texts are potentially eternal; speech is ephemeral. Texts are material and liable to corruption, distortion, and error; speech is immaterial and disappears immediately. Homer died long ago, but his texts will live forever.

Where did Homer's *texts* come from? More than anything the philologist would like to answer this question.

### What is a Homeric Text?

Texts of the Homeric poems are easy to find, in print constantly since the first printed edition in Florence in 1488, only years after the invention of printing by means of movable type. Because it is a material thing, a text has a certain appearance: not only the texture and color of the

paper or leather, but the conventions by which the signs are formed. Early printed editions were set in typefaces made to imitate handwriting in medieval Byzantine manuscripts, an orthographic system (= “way of writing”) much changed since ancient times, with many abbreviations and ligatures in which more than one letter is combined into a single sign. Certainly Plato could not have read the first printed text of Homer, nor can a modern scholar without special training, even a professor who has spent an entire lifetime teaching and studying Greek.

In the nineteenth century, modern printed typefaces and orthographic conventions replaced typographic conventions based on manuscripts handwritten in Byzantium before the invention of printing, but in no sense did such modern conventions attempt to recreate the actual appearance, or material nature, of an ancient text of Homer. For example, the forms of the Greek characters in T. W. Allen’s standard Oxford Classical Text, first published in 1902, imitate the admirable but entirely modern Greek handwriting of Richard Porson (1759–1808), a Cambridge don important in early modern textual criticism. Complete with lower and upper case characters, accents, breathing marks (that is, pronounced with an H or without one), dieresis marked by two horizontal dots (separate pronunciation of contiguous vowels), punctuation, word division, and paragraph division, such Greek seems normal to anyone who studies Greek, say, at Oxford or the University of Wisconsin today. Here is what the text of the first seven lines of the *Iliad* looks like in a modern printed type (from the Loeb Classical Library: see also Figure 1):

μῆνιν ἄειδε θεὰ Πηληϊάδεω Ἀχιλῆος  
 οὐλομένην, ἣ μυρὶ Ἀχαιοῖς ἄλγε’ ἔθηκε,  
 πολλὰς δ’ ἰφθίμους ψυχὰς Ἄϊδι προΐαψεν  
 ἠρώων, αὐτοὺς δὲ ἑλώρια τεῦχε κύνεσσιν  
 οἰωνοῖσιν τε πᾶσι, Διὸς δ’ ἐτελείετο βουλή,  
 ἐξ οὗ δὴ τὰ πρῶτα διαστήτην ἐρίσαντε  
 Ἀτρεΐδης τε ἄναξ ἀνδρῶν καὶ δῖος Ἀχιλλεύς.

If you study Greek today, and take a course in Homer, you will expect to translate such a version. You are reading “the poems of Homer,” you think, but in fact the orthography, the way things are written, is a hodgepodge that never existed before the nineteenth century AD. A full accentual system, only sometimes semantic (“carrying meaning”), does not appear until around AD 1000 in Greek writing and is never used consistently. The distinction between upper and lower case letters is medieval.

Porson’s internal sigma is drawn  $\sigma$ , but in the Classical Period the sigma was a vertical zigzag  $\Sigma$  (hence our “S”) and after the Alexandrian period always a half-moon-shape  $\subset$  (the “lunate sigma”); the shape  $\sigma$  appears to be Porson’s invention. The dieresis, or two horizontal dots to indicate that vowels are pronounced separately (e.g. *προΐαψεν*), is a convention of recent printing. Periods and commas are modern, as is word division, unknown in classical Greek.

The Oxford Classical Text would have mystified Thucydides or Plato just as much as the first printed text based on Byzantine conventions. The much earlier, we might say original, text of Homer would have puzzled them just as much, which seems to have looked something like Figure 1. The direction of reading switches back and forth from right to left, then left to right (called *boustrophédon* writing, “as the ox turns”). In this earliest form of Greek writing, as we reconstruct it from meager inscriptions, there is no distinction between *omicron* = short  $\ddot{o}$  and *omega* = long  $\bar{o}$ , or between *epsilon* = short  $\epsilon$  and *eta* = long  $\bar{\epsilon}$ , and doubled consonants are written as single consonants. There are no word divisions or upper and lower case letters, or diacritical marks such as accents, or capitals of any kind.

In reading such an early text the exchange of meaning from the material object to the human mind takes place in a different way from when we read Homer in Porsonian Greek orthography, or in English translation.

ΔΧΛΕΥΕΓΓΑΤΑΘΑΔΑΧΥΛΥΕΥ  
 ΑΟΧΧΥΛΑΘΕΟΛΟΜΑΜΕΜΘΑΜ  
 ΓΑΤΑΘΑΤΑΥΧΑΤΑΧΑΥΥ  
 ΟΛΦΕΔΣΦΟΜΟΕΦΕΥΧΑΤΑΥΝ  
 ΥΑΑΔΕΟΤΥΑΥΟΑΘΑΥΑΦΑΥΑΥ  
 ΟΡΣΤΑΥΧΑΥΟΥΜΑΜΣΝΟΛΟΜΟΣΕΣ  
 ΣΧΑΥΑΥΟΑΘΑΥΑΥΑΥΑΥΑΥΑΥΑΥ  
 ΘΟΔΑΥΑΥΑΥΑΥΑΥΑΥΑΥΑΥΑΥΑΥ  
 ΣΧΑΥΑΥΑΥΑΥΑΥΑΥΑΥΑΥΑΥΑΥΑΥ  
 ΚΝΑΡΟΥΚΑΤΣΔΣΟΣΧΧΥΛΑΥΣ

Figure 1. Reconstruction of the first five lines of the *Iliad* in archaic script, written right to left, left to right (after B. B. Powell, *Homer and the Origin of the Greek Alphabet*, Cambridge, UK, 1991, fig. 7)

The philologist is keenly interested in how this might have worked. Apparently the Greek reader of the eighth century BC was decoding his writing *by the ear*. For this reason the ancient Greek felt no need for word divisions or line divisions or diacritical marks or paragraph markers or quotation marks because to him (and very occasionally her) the signs represented a continuous stream of sounds. A thousand years after Homer the Greeks still did not divide their words. (In Latin, words were often divided from the earliest times.)

When we read Greek (or English), by contrast, we decode the text *by the eye*. We are deeply concerned where one word ends and another begins. The appearance of our texts is semantic, it carries meaning, as when a capital letter says "A sentence begins here" or a period says "A sentence ends here" or a space says "The word ends here." Our text of Homer is directly descended from an ancient Greek text, yes, but the text works for us in a different way.

When modern philologists attempt to recover as closely as possible an "original text" of Homer, as editors claim, in fact they never mean that they are going to reconstruct an original text, one that Homer might have recognized. Rather, they present an interpretation of how an original text might be explained according to modern rules. What appears to be *orthography*, in a modern text of Homer, "the way something is written," is really editorial comment on meaning and grammatical syntax. If editors gave us the original Homer, Homer as Homer really was, no one could read it.

### The Oldest Texts

Still, the philologist's Homer is always the *text* of Homer, however anyone might care to write it or print it. Investigation into the origin of this hypothetical physical object, this text, is the famous "Homeric Question" (from Latin *quaestio*, "investigation"), a central topic in the humanities for over two hundred years. *When* did this text come into being? *Where* and *why*? *How* and *by whom*? What did it look like? If we only knew where the Homeric poems came from, we would know where *we* come from, or big parts of us. Because we are Homer's cultural children, the Homeric Question has retained its extraordinary interest.

One way to find the source of something, its origin, is to follow backward, as if going upstream until you find where the water first flows. In physics this source would be the beginning of the universe, but in Homeric

studies that spring would be the very first text of Homer. Sometimes people think there were "many" first texts, but the variations in surviving versions of our Homer are so tiny that there can never have been more than one first text, the one we are looking for. The realization that there was a first text of Homer, that once upon a time one text and one only existed of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, is fundamental to modern Homeric studies. Let us see what happens when we travel upstream, searching for when that text came into being.

Our surviving texts are, of course, not very old. The oldest surviving complete text of the *Iliad* is from about AD 1000, a beautiful Byzantine manuscript inscribed on vellum. Kept in Venice, it is called the *Venetus A*. Vellum, also called parchment (from the city of Pergamum in Asia Minor where it may have been invented), is a beautiful and sturdy but very expensive basis for a written document. The *Venetus A* was an object of high material value when it was made.<sup>1</sup>

Like a modern book, the *Venetus A* is made of sewn-bound pages, a form of manuscript we call a *codex* ("tree trunk," because folding tablets were made of wood). Modern books are *codices*, though the paper has been folded many times into "signatures" before being sewn, then cut at the edges. Codices first appear in the second or third century AD and gained popularity through their early use in Christian liturgy. Earlier texts, including texts of Homer, were not codices, but rolls made of papyrus, in Latin called *volumina* ("rolled things"), our "volume." In Greek the word for papyrus is *byblos*, the name of the Near Eastern port in Phoenicia from where, or from near where, came the papyrus that made Homer's poems possible.

Some have thought that each of the twenty-four "books" of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* represents the amount that fits conveniently onto a roll, but rolls were much longer and easily held two or three "books"; many of our papyrus finds of Homer are from rolls that contained several books. The origins of the book-divisions are unclear, but perhaps librarians wished to indicate that these classic poems spanned "the alpha and the omega" of human experience; or the books made useful segments that could be memorized as units (still, why one book for each letter of the alphabet?); or the division facilitated cataloguing in the Mouseion, the "temple to the Muses" in Alexandria in the third century BC (but

<sup>1</sup> Paper, unknown to the ancient Western world, is made by breaking up wood into fiber, immersing the fibers in water, and allowing them to matt on a screen; the Arabs brought this very early Chinese invention (c. AD 100) to the West in the eighth century AD.



why all twenty-four letters?). Hints survive that the division preceded the Alexandrian period, but we cannot be sure when the division took place. In the mid-fifth century BC Herodotus still refers to the poems by episode, not by book.

Side by side with papyrus, the Greeks and Romans wrote notes and composed long works on tablets, usually of wood, hinged at the back with a low depression filled with wax into which the writer impressed the characters. Tablets could be hinged with many leaves, then folded up like an accordion; an actual example survives, found in a well at the Assyrian capital of Nineveh, destroyed in 612 BC. The single mention to writing in all of Homer refers to just such a tablet (*Il.* 6.168, about which more later; see Figure 2).

Probably most written composition, as we think of it, was done on such ephemeral and reusable tablets, although the immensely long Homeric texts must have begun their life directly on rolls of papyrus. Most Greek literature survives because at some point what was written on a

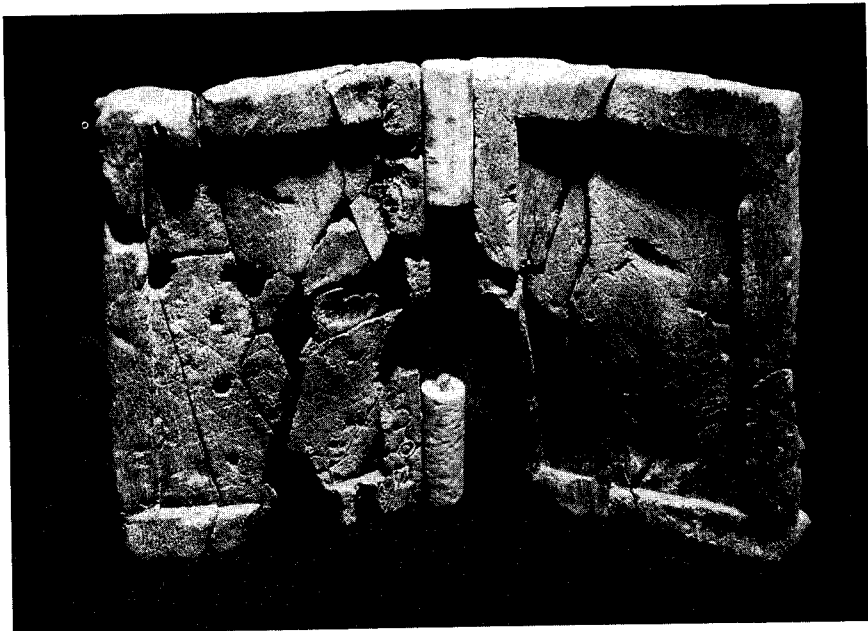


Figure 2. Wooden two-leafed tablet (called a diptych) from the shipwreck near Ulu Burun off the southern coast of modern Turkey. The depressed central area was once filled with wax, now lost from this very rare example. About five inches high, c. 1350 BC. Courtesy of the Institute of Nautical Archaeology

tablet was transferred to papyrus, an astonishingly durable and transportable substance.

The codex enabled the reader to look things up by paging through the text, as we do today, whereas it was difficult to look something up in a roll. The format of the codex was a kind of barrier between ancient and modern literatures. Unless a work was transferred from papyrus roll to codex in the early Christian centuries, and so leaped the barrier of the changed format, it was lost: for example the entire corpus of the obscure Greek lyric poets, little read in the early Christian centuries, including the celebrated poets Sappho and Alcaeus (only a few lines survive, mostly from papyri found in Egypt). Perhaps we today experience a similar disjunction between the preservation of information on hardcopy and in electronic files, when much is being transferred but much is not; our present paper libraries are not likely to exist, except as artifacts, one hundred years from now. The same is true of the tens of billions of 35 millimeter transparent photographic slides, which unless digitized will perish.

By the time Homer was transferred from roll to codex in the second or third century AD, a standard text had been established that we call the “vulgate” or “common” text. The “vulgate” is not a specific single text, as is the “Latin vulgate” Bible, St. Jerome’s translation of the Old Testament’s original Hebrew into everyday Latin in the fifth century AD. Rather it is a textual tradition in which deviations between different manuscripts are small and there is a fixed number of lines, as far as we can tell. The vulgate of the first few centuries AD, inscribed in codices, is virtually our modern text, except for modern orthography.

Vellum’s greater strength (along with its inordinate cost) allowed for a larger page than was possible for a papyrus roll, and the generous margins of the extraordinary Venetus A are covered with commentary written in a medieval script called minuscule, the ancestor of our “small letters” as opposed to the majuscule “capital letters” in which all Greek manuscripts, including Homer, were until then written (compare Figure 3).

### The Alexandrians

The small medieval script and the large margins allowed scribes to record in the Venetus A excerpts taken from scholars who worked in the library of Alexandria in Egypt, founded by the energetic Ptolemy II (285–246 BC), son of Alexander’s general, as part of his “temple to the

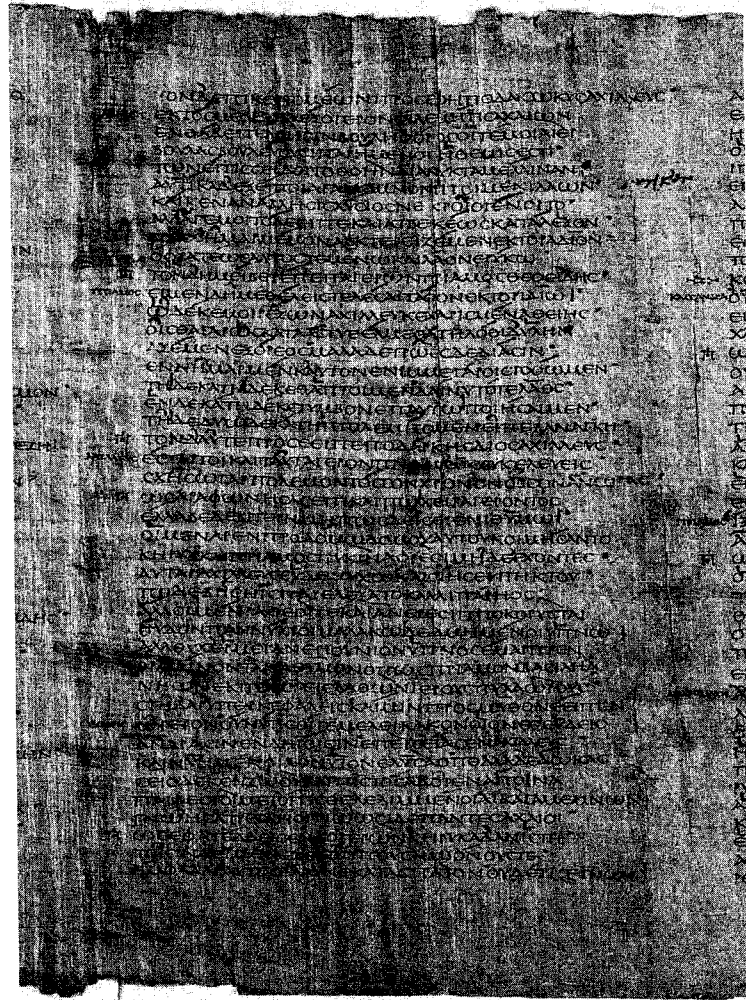


Figure 3. The Bankes papyrus, showing *Iliad* 24.649–691, second century AD. All signs are “capitals”; there is no word division or other diacritical marking. By permission of the British Library. Papyrus (114)

muses,” the Mouseion. Called *scholia*, these notes offer views on every conceivable topic pertaining to the Homeric poems. Study of the scholia is our only means for reconstructing what Alexandrian scholars of the second and third centuries BC thought about Homeric problems, although the layers of recomposition in the scholia make it impossible to be certain

which scholar thought what. Of course the Alexandrians lived hundreds of years after Homer and had no direct knowledge about him or the origins of his text. The earliest commentator was Zenodotus of Ephesus (third century BC), followed by Aristophanes of Byzantium (c. 257–180 BC) and Aristophanes' student Aristarchus of Samothrace (c. 217–145 BC), and in the first century BC by the formidable “bronze-gutted” Didymus, said to have written 3,500 books (all lost)! Philologists would like to work their way back all the way to the text that Homer himself in some way created, but we must admit that we have almost no evidence for the condition of the text earlier than the Alexandrian editors.

Somehow Alexandrian scholars stabilized and regularized the text of Homer, in fact created the vulgate later transferred from papyrus to codex. Our best evidence for the problems the Alexandrians faced comes from the many fragments of Homer's poems that survive on papyri found in Egypt (mostly on mummy wrappings for sacred crocodiles), far more than from any other author. About one third of all literary fragments found in Egypt are of Homer; pieces of the *Iliad* turn up three times more than pieces of the *Odyssey*. About forty fragments survive from the third and early second centuries BC, which often have extra “wild lines” not found in the vulgate. These fragments must reflect the condition of the text before the establishment of the vulgate. Striking is that the text shifted only in the direction of accretion; we do not find lines falling out. The “wild lines” almost always repeat a line or lines found elsewhere or they are slight variations of lines found elsewhere, or combinations of parts of lines that appear elsewhere. In no case do they change the narrative by adding characters or incidents, although in an extreme case a papyrus fragment from the third century BC has thirty extra lines out of ninety preserved.

We would certainly like to know the origin of these lines and their relation to any earlier text, but we must depend on speculation. Sometimes commentators imagine that “rhapsodic invention” must be responsible for them, as if a performing poet added new lines that crept into the text. However, it's not what is said, but what is written that counts. The inscribing of a text of Homer's poems was a monumental undertaking, not something that a performing poet did every time he repeated or reshaped a line. Others imagine that the “wild lines” reflect the variety of expression we are used to in oral traditions, as if, again, scribes took down the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* repeatedly from different singers at different times, varying now this word, now that, adding a line here or one there. The range of variations is far too small to support any such view.

The “wild lines” must result from scribal interference and depend on the scribe’s intimate familiarity with the text, so that he remembers and writes down related turns of phrase and whole lines as he makes his copy. Such corruptions are common in any textual tradition.

The “wild lines” do not, therefore, represent multiple original versions of the poems. Of extreme importance in attempting to understand Homer is the fact that there are no collateral lines of descent for the texts of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, as there are, for example, of the medieval *Chanson de Roland* (“Song of Roland”), the medieval Greek poem *Digenis Akritas* (c. AD 1000), the German *Nibelungelied* (c. AD 1200), or the Sanskrit *Mahabharata* (c. AD 400). These works survive in multiple and distinct versions, and sometimes in different languages and meters, with different events and characters, so that you can never say that one version is the “original.” Original versions of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, by contrast, did exist, if we could only recover them. We can’t, but the philologist goes on, doing his or her best.

Mainly the Alexandrian scholars/poets/editors seem to have reversed the process of scribal accretion by removing the wild lines to create the vulgate. What we actually know about their work, however, does not make it easy to understand how this standardization took place. From the scholia we learn that the Alexandrian scholars invented several signs still used today, including the *obelus*, a stroke in the margin (– or +) that designated lines suspicious for some reason. Obelized lines were not, however, actually removed from any specific text, as far as we can tell from the scholia. Nonetheless, scholars often call the vulgate the “text of Aristarchus.” By the first century AD the “wild lines” have disappeared from the papyrus fragments, as if the authority of an edition produced by the Mouseion had replaced earlier haphazard versions. Perhaps the book trade depended on royal labor or favor; the Mouseion produced the official version (under the supervision of Aristarchus or others) and its authority quickly prevailed. Between 150 BC and AD 700 we have about 900 Homeric papyrus fragments that display little variation.

Whereas we have abundant papyrus fragments from Egypt, little direct evidence survives about what the text might have been like earlier. Some think that the early text looked like the vulgate, that is, that the editors at Alexandria did a good job in removing the minor scribal accretions and infelicities from an earlier standard text. If so, the pre-Alexandrian vulgate text is likely to have come from Athens, where portions of both poems were performed at the great Panathenaic festival. We know that from Athens the Alexandrians obtained a standard set of the Greek

tragedies, and Athens was the center of Greek literary life. The scholiasts refer to a category of editions of Homer as “city-editions,” which came from seven places ranging from Marseilles to Cyprus, but curiously not from Athens. The scholiasts refer to another category of texts that they call *koinê*, “common”; these *koinê* texts may be the Athenian texts, the pre-Alexandrian vulgate.

Some 480 lines of Homer survive before the Alexandrian period, quoted in other authors, that is, from before c. 300 BC. Although quotations by such fourth-century writers as Plato (209 lines) and Aristotle (98 lines) sometimes differ from the Alexandrian vulgate, these writers appear to be quoting from memory in a roughshod manner, and the range of variation is not great in any case. Before 400 BC we have only a handful of citations. Herodotus quotes eleven lines, every one identical with the Alexandrian vulgate, line for line, word for word, particle for particle. The same is true of the one line cited by Thucydides from the *Iliad*, the four full verses in Aristophanes, and the twelve full verses in the historian Xenophon (427–355 BC).

#### Bellerophon’s Tablet: The Arguments of F. A. Wolf

Because the philologist’s Homer is the text of Homer, and because the text consists of symbolic markings on a material substance, the Homeric Question is tied inextricably to the history of writing. Already in the first century AD, Joseph ben Matthias, or Josephus, an important Jewish general and author of *History of the Jewish War* (c. AD 37–101), noticed the relevance of writing to the Homeric Question. In an essay *Against Apion* he attacked a Greek named Apion who had questioned the antiquity of the Jews. But the Greeks themselves, complains Josephus, are only a recent people, who had not even learned writing until very late:

They say that even Homer did not leave behind his poems in writing, but that they were transmitted by memorization and put together out of the songs, and that therefore they contain many inconsistencies. (*Against Apion* 1.2.12)

Because the Greeks were late-comers to writing, Josephus goes on, Homer’s very long songs could not have come into existence as we have them. They must be made up of shorter, memorized poems, later written down, then assembled into the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.

Josephus gave no evidence for his views and had none. Only modern scholarship has made possible an accurate dating of the invention of the Greek alphabet and thus an accurate “time after which” (*terminus post quem*) the texts of the Homeric poems could have come into being. European scholars of the eighteenth century had no good evidence to date the origin of the Greek alphabet, but a German scholar (writing in Latin) named Friedrich A. Wolf (1759–1824) argued the same position as Josephus with a vigor and brilliance that has influenced all subsequent Homeric scholarship. Basing his model of analysis on contemporary theories about the origin of the Hebrew Bible through editorial redaction of preexisting manuscripts, Wolf published in 1795 a complex theory about the origin of the Homeric poems in a book in Latin called *Prolegomena ad Homerum I*. The *Prolegomena* was intended to precede a critical edition of the text of Homer, but the edition never appeared. Wolf addressed his explanation to the conundrum that whereas Homer exists in writing, descriptions of writing do not seem to appear in his poems:

The word *book* is nowhere, *writing* is nowhere, *reading* is nowhere, *letters* are nowhere; nothing in so many thousands of verses is arranged for reading, everything for hearing; there are no pacts or treaties except face to face; there is no source of report for old times except memory and rumor and monuments without writing; from that comes the diligent and, in the *Iliad*, strenuously repeated invocations of the Muses, the goddesses of memory; there is no inscription on the pillars and tombs that are sometimes mentioned; there is no other inscription of any kind; there is no coin or fabricated money; there is no use of writing in domestic matters or trade; there are no maps; finally there are no letter carriers and no letters.<sup>2</sup>

We can discount the single apparent exception in Book 6 of the *Iliad*, Wolf argued, where the Lycian hero Glaucus tells the story about his ancestor Bellerophon. King Proetus of Argos, he recounts, had sent his guest Bellerophon, whom the queen falsely accused of making sexual advances, to the king’s uncle across the sea in Lycia. King Proetus gave to Bellerophon a “folded tablet” (see Figure 2) with “baneful signs” (*sēmata lugra*) (*Il.* 6.168–169) – presumably the message “Kill the bearer!” King Proetus’ uncle could not himself, however, kill his guest-friend Bellerophon because that would be a terrible crime against *xenia*, the

2 F. A. Wolf, tr. by A. Grafton, G. W. Most, and J. E. G. Zetzel, *Prolegomena to Homer* (Princeton, 1985), p. 101.

sacred customs regulating host and guest. Instead, he sent him to fight the dread multiformed Chimera.

“Bellerophon’s tablet” carries weight in every discussion of the problem of Homer and writing up to this day. Wolf denies that Homer referred to “writing” in this passage, because in ordinary usage *sēmata* “signs,” the word that Homer uses for the marks on the folded tablet, in later Greek never designate characters in writing, which are called *grammata* “scratchings.” Furthermore, Wolf insisted, in good Greek one never “shows” (*deixai*) writing to someone, as Homer reports. Homer’s *sēmata* “signs” were therefore symbols not attached to human speech. They are like the *sēmata* in another Homeric passage, where the Achaean heroes make *sēmata* on lots and shake them in a helmet to decide who will fight Hector (*Il.* 7.175ff.). When a lot flies out, the herald does not know what the *sēma* means but must walk down the line until its maker recognizes the *sēma*. Unspoken is Wolf’s assumption that “writing” requires a direct relationship between graphic symbols and human speech.

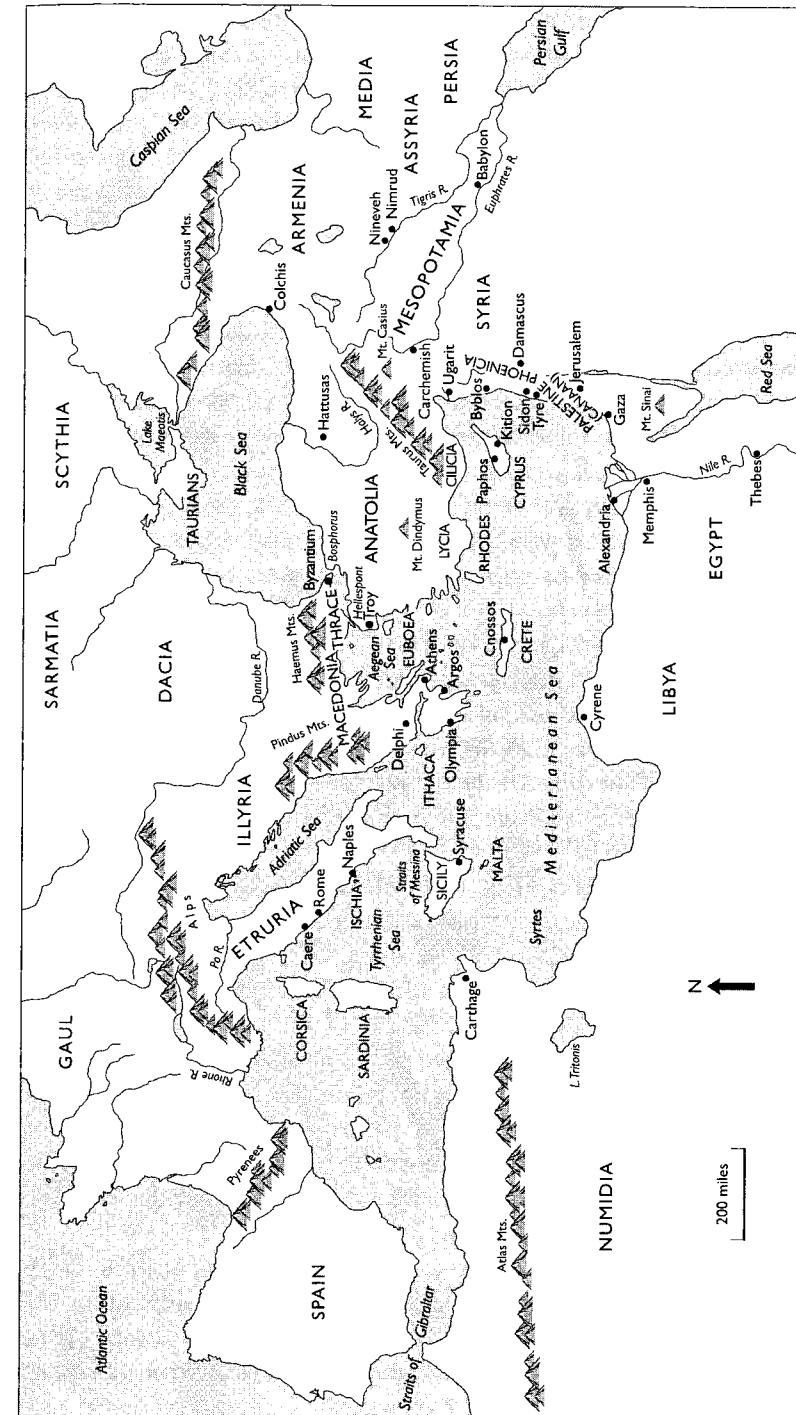
We now think of “writing” as being a broader category, being of two kinds, one referring to elements of human speech, or *lexigraphy*, “speech-writing,” and one communicating otherwise, or *semasiography*, “sign-writing.” The writing in this book is mostly lexigraphy, but the signs [:], [)], [.] are semasiography because they have meaning but do not designate necessary elements in human speech; they are pronounced differently in every language. The Greek alphabet is lexigraphy and icons on a computer screen are semasiography. Homer’s *sēmata lugra* in this important passage are evidently semasiographic signs, at least as Homer understands them, because they bear meaning, but they do not appear to refer to speech. They are not evidence for the technology that made Homer’s poems possible. Wolf did not in any event need to make an exception for the *sēmata lugra*, because his argument depended not on a single ambiguous example, but on the remarkable consistency of Homer’s ignorance of writing. Of those who rejected his explanation of *sēmata lugra*, Wolf noted in words still true today that this Greek phrase “was made more problematic by those who used not to learn Homeric customs from Homer but to import them into him, and to twist doubtful words to fit the customs of their own time” (Wolf, 97).

In the story of Bellerophon’s Tablet Homer has evidently received from an Eastern source, along with an Eastern story, the folktale motif of “the fatal letter.” The motif turns up in the biblical story of David and Uriah the Hittite, whom David sends to the front lines with a letter instructing that he be exposed to mortal danger (David wanted to marry

Uriah's wife Bathsheba: 2 Samuel 11:15). Bellerophon's name appears to be formed from that of the Near Eastern storm-god Baal. The Lycian king sends Bellerophon against the Chimera, a variation of a dragon-killer myth found already on clay tablets c. 1400 BC from the international emporium of Ugarit on the Syrian coast near Cyprus: Lycia lies on the coasting route west from Ugarit (Map 1). The Chimera is an Eastern monster, probably Hittite. So the motif came with the story. Homer knew nothing about "writing": *quod erat demonstrandum*. In Homer's day lexigraphic writing is over two thousand years old in the Near East, and we wonder how Homer has remained so ignorant of it that he refers to writing a single time in 28,000 lines and then in a garbled fashion. The absence of writing in Homer's world is clear testimony to Hellenic provincialism after the collapse of the Mycenaean world c. 1150 BC and proof of Hellenic remoteness from the centers of ancient civilization.

The modern shape of the Homeric Question begins with F. A. Wolf, because he saw the problem clearly: if Homer knows nothing about writing, how have his poems been preserved in writing? Assuming as did many (with little reason) that Homer lived around 950 BC, when there was no writing in Greece (another guess), Wolf argued that Homer's poems must have been preserved as songs short enough to be memorized without the aid of writing. In this "oral form," Wolf thought, they were passed down until, when writing appeared later, they were written down. In the sixth century BC in the time of the Athenian tyrant Pisistratus, skillful editors put together the shorter written texts and fashioned our own elegant (but obviously imperfect) *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, Wolf thought.

Wolf's model was parallel to, and inspired by, the discovery in the late eighteenth century that the biblical Pentateuch (= "five rolls"), the first five books of the Bible, was composed of three or four textual strands skillfully but not seamlessly melded at the hands of editors, no doubt during the captivity of the Jewish ruling class and their removal from Jerusalem to Babylon (586–538 BC). Although attributed to Moses, who may have lived in the Late Bronze Age c. 1200 BC, the Pentateuch is much too late to be attributed to him in any meaningful way. Sometime in the sixth century BC, Jewish scholars sat in a room with different scrolls before them. Taking now this, now that, these editors combined pre-existing inconsistent texts to create the version we have today. Some called God Yahweh (evidently a volcano spirit from the Sinai), others called him Elohim (Semitic for "gods"). That is why he has both names in Genesis, a thesis about the origins of the Pentateuch on which all modern scholars agree.



Map 1. The ancient Mediterranean

Wolf's evidence for his theory was complex. Certain superficial dialectal features appear to reflect an Athenian handling or dusting-up of the text, agreeing with a theory that the Alexandrian *koinê* text had come from Athens. According to Cicero, who lived in the first century BC about 100 years before Josephus, the Athenian tyrant Pisistratus (605?–527 BC) "first put together the books of Homer in the order in which we have them, which before were mixed up" (*de Oratore* 3.137). Cicero seems to mean that the "books," that is the rolls of papyrus, had earlier circulated independently and so could be recited in differing orders, until the time of Pisistratus. Cicero lived 600 years after Pisistratus, but depended on a Hellenistic commentator, who may have known something.

Cicero's remarks seem to accord with the claim from the fourth century BC in the Platonic dialogue *Hipparchus* (probably not by Plato), a tradition to which we referred earlier. In the *Hipparchus* Socrates refers to Pisistratus' son Hipparchus as "the eldest and wisest of Pisistratus' sons who, among the many excellent proofs of wisdom that he showed, first brought the poems of Homer into this country of ours and compelled men called *rhapsodes* at the Panathenaea [the principal Athenian festival] to recite them in relay, one man following on another as they still do now" (pseudo-Plato, *Hipparchus* 228 B). If there was need for a rule to govern how the poems should be read, there must have been times when they were read otherwise, not in order. To Wolf this fact meant that the poems did not up to this time have a unity, but existed first in the short pieces suitable for memorization that Homer's life in an illiterate age required.

Whereas most of the poems that went to make up the fresh compilation of the sixth century BC, now called the "Pisistratean recension," were composed by Homer, Wolf thought, some had been composed by the *Homeridae*, "descendants of Homer," said in various sources to have lived on the island of Chios. Pindar of the early fifth century BC mentions them. Nothing real is known of the *Homeridae*, however, except that they recited the poems of Homer and told stories about his life. Their presence on Chios is likely to be the origin of the story that Homer himself, about whom nothing whatever is known, came from Chios. Perhaps Pisistratus got the short poems from the *Homeridae* that were then assembled into our own poems, Wolf theorized.

In sum: You cannot have such long poems as the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* without writing, in spite of exaggerated claims about the mnemonic skills of ancient peoples. Because Homer's world is a world without writing, the poems, which exist in writing, cannot come directly from this world.

They must in some way be the product of evolution. They no more owe their present form and meaning to someone named Homer than Moses wrote the early books of the Bible (which describe the death and burial of Moses). The false attributions, or pseudepigraphy, are parallel. Scholars may disagree about where Homer stands on the evolutionary arc that begins in an illiterate world and ends with the poems we possess, but for Wolf Homer stood at the beginning of the arc as the creator of the short poems from which Athenian editors made the "Pisistratean recension" in the sixth century BC, the basis for the text that passed through Alexandria and became the modern vulgate.

No important scholar disagreed with Wolf's model and for over 100 years, throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century, intelligent and devoted scholars dissected the Homeric poems from every angle to identify the separate songs, or accretions, of which Wolf had proved the poems to be composed. Even today there are scholars who closely follow Wolf's argument. For example, an editor of the modern three-volume Oxford commentary on the *Odyssey* writes the following about Book 21:

Schadewaldt is inclined to accept a broad unity of authorship in [Book] xxi, attributing the whole book to A [one hypothetical author] with the exception of eight lines: namely, Telemachus' boast in 372–5 (already rejected by Bérard), whose removal requires the further deletion of the suitor's simile in 376–7 and the first foot and a half of 378 (which will therefore have to be rewritten); and Zeus's thunderbolt in 412–15. The latter is a melodramatic interpolation, as von der Mühl observed.<sup>3</sup>

The whole thing is a conspiracy of interpolation, redaction, and multiple authorship!

Wolf's explanation, just as these remarks, was learned, logical, and clever, but, just as these remarks, was completely wrong. He had put his finger on the essential problem – a written poem from an illiterate age – but few today believe that the Homeric poems came into being as editorial redactions of preexisting texts, as the biblical Pentateuch certainly did. The followers of Wolf, called Analysts because they attempted to break up Homer's texts into their constituent parts, produced interesting

3 J. Russo, M. Fernandez-Galiano, and A. Heubeck, eds., *A Commentary on Homer's Odyssey* vol. 3: Books XVII–XXIV (English edition, Oxford, 1992), p. 131.



theories and complex proofs, but because their premises were wrong their work was to a large degree a waste of time. In a way, the Homeric texts *are* made up of shorter songs, but they are not redacted texts. They are unified original poems created from traditional material by a single human intelligence, as the Californian Milman Parry proved in the early twentieth century.

### The Oral-Formulaic Theory: The Arguments of Milman Parry

Milman Parry (1902–35) lived a romantic life and died prematurely at age 33 (perhaps a suicide). Parry showed through penetrating stylistic studies of the Homeric texts that Homer's literary style was unique and unknown in such poets as the third-century BC Alexandrian Greek Apollonius of Rhodes, author of the *Argonautica*, the first-century BC Roman Vergil, author of the *Aeneid*, or the English John Milton of the seventeenth century AD, author of *Paradise Lost*. Parry proved that, from a stylistic point of view, Homer composed by means of units larger than the "word" and that in our terms these units include phrases, whole lines, and groups of lines, and even larger narrative patterns. Parry thrust a sword between the old view that great poetry is made with slow beautiful words aptly chosen to fit the moment and a modern view that poets can spin their charms in other ways. His theories have been more influential than those of any other literary critic of the twentieth century, not just on how we understand Homer, but on how we understand literature itself, its origins and nature.

#### The fixed epithet

Parry began with the ancient problem of the fixed epithet in Homer, so striking and so odd, those unvarying phrases tacked on to certain names that every reader notices immediately. Why is Achilles "swift-footed" even when he is seated, Hector "shining-helmed," Hera "cow-eyed," and the sea "as dark as wine"? Many had looked, but Parry was the first to notice that such fixed epithets changed not according to narrative context, what was happening in the story, but according to the place of the hero's name within the rhythm of the line. In other words, the epithet satisfied the needs of the meter, not the needs of the narrative.

By modern analysis, Homer's complicated meter, called dactylic hexameter, consists of lines made up of six units or "feet," each of which

can be a long and two shorts ( — ∪ ∪ *dactyl*) or two longs ( — — *spondee*), except for the sixth and last foot, which has only two beats, the first one long. The second beat of the last foot can be long or short, but was probably felt as long because of the line ending; that is, the hexameter always ends with a spondee ( — — ). The terms "long" and "short" refer to the time required to pronounce the vowel, which in turn depends on the essential nature of the vowel or on the phonetic environment of the vowel (a short vowel followed by two consonants becomes a long vowel). Sometimes even modern poets have imitated this rhythm, substituting stress for vowel length, as in *Evangeline* (1847) by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807–82):

This is the forest primeval. The murmurings pines and the hemlocks,  
Bearded with moss, and in garments green, indistinct in the twilight . . .

Homer would have known nothing about any of this, but had a feeling for a unit made up of six principal beats, each followed by two shorter beats or one longer beat, but the sixth principal beat was always followed by a single beat. The concept "line" depends on a written text, which this rhythmical system precedes by a very long time, yet the rule about the spondee in the sixth foot means that there must have been a pause there, or could be a pause there. In fact line-ends often bound units of sense and Parry studied carefully the ways in which Homer extended a unit of sense beyond the line-end (called *enjambment*). For example, the first line of the *Iliad* is complete in itself: "Sing to me, O goddess, the wrath of Achilles, the son of Peleus," but the first word of the second line, "baneful" (modifying "wrath"), continues the thought into the next line. Homer's audience, too, would have a feeling for this meter and its conventions, which would enhance their pleasure and their understanding.

The system of epithets helps the poet make up the metrical line by providing precast units larger than the name or what we think of as "words." The system within the metrical line is elaborate but thrifty: elaborate because of the different epithets assigned to different places in the line, and thrifty because ordinarily only a single epithet exists for any given place in the line.

For example, when the poet wishes to fill the last two feet of the line with the name of Odysseus, the hero is called "noble Odysseus" (*dios Odusseus* = — ∪ ∪ / — — ). When he wishes to fill the last two and one half feet of the line, his name is "wily Odysseus" (*polumētis Odusseus* =

UU / — UU / — —, commonly with the verb “said” *prosephê*, more than seventy times). But if in the same position the preceding word ends with a short vowel that needs to be lengthened by its phonetic environment, then he becomes “city-sacking Odysseus” because “city-sacking” begins with two consonants in Greek and two consonants lengthen the preceding short vowel (*ptoliporthos Odusseus* = UU / — UU / — —). Furthermore, in over 90 percent of Homeric verses a curious word break that scholars call a *caesura* (“cutting”) occurs in the third foot; that is, a word does not end before or after the foot, but in the middle of it, so that the word-end “cuts” the foot into two parts. But the third-foot caesura marks a point where set phrases tend to meet, one phrase occupying the portion of the line before the caesura, and a second phrase occupying the portion of the line after the caesura. In order to fill the line after the third-foot caesura with the name of Odysseus, a recurring need, the poet uses the set phrase “much-enduring noble Odysseus” (*polutlas dios Odusseus* U / — — / — UU / — —). There are other caesuras in the line too which function similarly as a join between phrases.

Because epithets shift not according to narrative context, but according to metrical demands, we must adjust our sense of the semantic value of the epithet, what it “means.” The varying repeated epithets of Odysseus no doubt tell us something about his essential character and tie him to a larger body of tales about clever deeds and city-sacking, and occasionally suit the context surprisingly well, but they do not drive the narrative forward. As far as the action of the narrative is concerned, the different name–epithet combinations all just mean “Odysseus.” Hence Parry’s proof had direct bearing on our understanding of what is “poetic” in Homer’s poetry. We must also accept that the complex system of preset expressions represented in noun–epithet combinations, and their “thrifty” deployment, cannot be the work of a single poet, but must have come into being over time through evolution. Homer’s poetic language must be *traditional*, therefore, a word of central importance in this discussion.

By contrast, the poetic language of, say, William Butler Yeats is not “traditional” because Yeats uses words to express his intention, not to fill out the line. Of course one might say that all language is traditional, otherwise it would be gibberish, but the Homeric language is a special kind of traditional language because it exists within the expectation of six principal longs followed by two shorts or one long, and the sixth principal beat always followed by a single beat. We cannot doubt that Homer and Yeats approached the use of adjectives in a different way.

Yeats was a “literate” poet and Homer was an “oral” poet. For Yeats epithets are nontraditional, but for Homer they are part of the machinery by which he builds his lines and generates his narrative. They enable the poet to finish his line in oral delivery and get on with his story, and they are not a necessary part of the story itself. The “theory of oral composition” or the “oral-formulaic theory” is based on evidence from Parry’s study of the fixed epithet, but the systematic application of his method to the Homeric text led to enormous perplexities and logical conundrums that still frustrate Homeric studies.

#### Formulas and type scenes

Parry described the noun plus epithet combination as a *formula*, a fixed expression with a certain meaning and metrical value and a certain place in the line. Unconscious that he was adopting a convention of alphabetic literacy in his description, which according to Parry’s own theory was not the means by which Homer had composed, Parry saw the formula as a fixed “phrase” made up of more than one “word” that worked in the composition of poetry as the “word” does in the composition of prose. In prose a word is a unit of meaning, whereas in Homer’s oral poetry a formula is a unit of meaning, Parry thought. We must remember that the theory that speech consists of “words” is a convention of literacy, the result of analysis and the making of lexicons. In fact linguists cannot define “word” more precisely than “those items listed in lexicons” (is it “some times” or “sometimes”?)

The proof of Homer’s “orality” is the existence of the formula, a device of no value to the literate poet. We can identify formulas beyond noun–epithet combinations, for example such expressions as “then he answered him” attached indifferently to the phrase “much-enduring goodly Odysseus,” to “Agamemnon king of men,” or to “swift-footed divine Achilles” to fill out a line. Many whole lines are formulaic too, for example “When early rosy-fingered dawn appeared . . .” One of every eight lines in the Homeric corpus repeats somewhere else. All of Homer is formulaic in this way, Parry thought, made up of phrases, although we do not always have enough of the tradition preserved to see the formulas clearly. Only a very long tradition could explain the formulaic basis of Homeric style. Parry was certain that Homer had composed without the aid of writing by means of such a traditional formulaic rhythmical speech. On this point, ironically, Wolf and Parry wholly agreed: each thought that Homer had composed without the aid of writing.



Eager to go beyond stylistic analysis and find in the contemporary world a model for what Homer may have been like in the ancient world, Parry traveled with his assistant Albert B. Lord to the southern Balkans between 1929 and 1933, legendary journeys in the history of literary criticism. There Parry and Lord amassed an enormous collection of recordings of songs by *guslari*, illiterate peasants who sang long songs, named after the *gusle*, a one-stringed bowed instrument they held between their legs. Their repertoire included songs about heroic battle and the abduction of women. One type of song, recorded in numerous examples, told of a man who returned home after many years just as his wife was about to marry another man. There, in disguise, he tested the woman and the men who besieged her, bested his rivals in a contest, revealed his identity, and reclaimed his wife. Parry's best *guslar*, Avdo Međedović, at Parry's encouragement sang for recording by dictation a song as long as the *Odyssey* (called *The Wedding of Smailagić Meho*), about 12,000 lines long, although he could neither read nor write (see Figure 4).

Parry's South Slavic field collection, on aluminum discs and aluminum wire, only partly published and today stored in the Widener Library at Harvard University, remains the largest field collection ever made of what we now call "oral song." Long after Parry's death, Lord returned to the southern Balkans in the 1950s to make fresh recordings. He sometimes took down the same song from the same singers that he and Parry had recorded nearly thirty years before. When analyzed, the written versions of the South Slavic songs prove to fall mostly into a ten-beat line, although the South Slavic line does not approach the Greek line for complexity, and there is little evidence for the elaboration and thrift in the use of epithets that Parry found in Homer. Parry's studies, published as short papers in professional journals in the late 1920s and early 1930s, made almost no impression until 1960, when Albert B. Lord published *The Singer of Tales*, a synthesis of Parry's theories together with insightful work of his own. I remember the extreme excitement with which I first read this book in 1962.

Lord took a keen interest in the lives and social environment of the *guslari*, inseparable from the tradition in which the singing took place. When a boy wished to become a singer, he would apprentice himself to a master singer. Listening to him and practicing alone, the student gradually learned, by unconscious means, the special metrical language of the *guslar*. If he was persistent and had talent, he could himself become a *guslar*, maybe even a great one.



Figure 4. Avdo Međedović, Milman Parry's best singer, bowing his one-string gusle in 1935. The gusle ends in a carved horse's head, as was customary. ©1999 Milman Parry Collection of Oral Literature and the President and Fellows of Harvard College. The author acknowledges the kind permission of G. Nagy and S. Mitchell (Curators of the Milman Parry Collection of Oral Literature) and David Elmer (Assistant Curator) to use this photo.

A *guslar* would know several or many songs, but in the *guslar's* mind the song did not consist of a fixed sequence of words, about which he could know nothing. After all the "word" is a convention of literacy. Nor does the *guslar* have a concept of the line as a discrete unit with ten beats, although we can analyze written versions in this way. Master *guslari* claimed, nonetheless, to be able to repeat a song exactly "word for word," even one heard a single time. Here is a brief conversation

between Parry and Lord's assistant Nikola Vujnović (a singer from Stolac, Hercegovina) and a *guslar* named Mujo Kukuruzović.<sup>4</sup>

*Nikola:* Let's consider this: "Mustajbeg from the Lika was drinking wine." Is this a single "word" (*reč*)?

*Mujo:* Yes.

*Nikola:* But how? It can't be one: "Mustajbeg of the Lika was drinking wine."

*Mujo:* In writing it can't be one.

*Nikola:* There are four "words" here ["*Pije vino licki Mustajbeze*"].

*Mujo:* It can't be one in writing. But let's say we're in my house and I pick up my *gusle* – "*Pije vino licki Mustajbeze*" – that's a single "word" on the *gusle* as far as I am concerned.

*Nikola:* And the second "word"?

*Mujo:* And the second "word" – "*At Ribnik in a drinking tavern*" ["*Na Ribniku u pjanoj mehani*"] – there!

Rather than graphic units separated by white space, as in the text you are reading now, the smallest unit of meaning is the whole ten-beat line. When challenged, such singers would never in fact sing the same song verbatim, "word for word," but would keep close to the same sequence of themes, although even these they would embellish, foreshorten, or expand. A theme, too, was a "word" (*reč*), a unit of meaning and expression. First this happened, then that happened. To the *guslar* the sequence of themes *was* the song, "word for word."

On closer questioning Parry/Lord's informants agreed that "word" (*reč*) can also designate a group of lines, or a speech, or a scene, or even a whole poem. These elements, too, are building blocks whereby the poet builds his song. Such larger elements, which we call "type scenes" in describing Homer's analogous poems, are highly flexible in length and detail, but nonetheless follow close patterns. One of the most common type scenes in the *Odyssey* is feasting, which recurs repeatedly. Although type scenes are never the same "word for word," the sequence of events is always the same: first a slave brings water for washing, then sets up tables before the guests and host, then lays out food, then a carver passes out meat and hands around golden cups. Homeric feasts always end with the same two lines:

4 From Parry Collection conversation 6619, adapted from J. M. Foley, "Oral Tradition and Its Implications," in I. Morris and B. B. Powell, *A New Companion to Homer* (Leiden, 1995), p. 152.

They put their hands to the excellent feast placed before them.  
But when they had satisfied their desire for food and drink . . .

A kind of sign-off, telling the listener that the familiar feasting scene is now over.

In spite of recurring features, in Homer the feasting scene has quite different meanings in the subversive feasting of the suitors in the halls of Odysseus, the enchanted meal on Circe's eerie island, and at the wedding banquet in the well-mannered palace of Menelaus at Sparta. "Feasting" is a kind of "word," then, a unit of expression, that takes on different meanings according to its context. Other recurrent type scenes in Homer are Assembly of the Gods, Assembly of Men, Arming, Battle, Travel, Duels, Supplication, Recognition, Messengers, Dreams, Seduction, and Dressing. All these scenes can expand or contract according to the needs of the narrative, and in the real world according to the needs of a live entertainer before a live audience. In the organization of the story, type scenes are analogous to words used to build sentences in modern literatures. The number of words is finite, predetermined, but there is no limit to the things you can say.

#### The oral-formulaic style

There is no verbatim repetition of oral song because there is no fixed text, as Lord put it, meaning really that there is no text at all. A text is a physical thing with symbolic markings on it liable to distortion and corruption and unfaithful copying, what the philologist studies, and texts have not yet come into being. The *guslar* remade his song each time he sang, using the resources of his technique of rhythmical singing and his control over typical scenes and traditional plots. By analogy, Homer must have done something similar, Parry thought. Homer was an oral poet, a *guslar*.

By drawing an analogy between modern South Slavic *guslari* and ancient *oidoi*, "singers" (singular = *oidos*), as Homer calls them, Parry and Lord confounded Wolf's conviction that without writing you cannot generate very long poems, while agreeing with Wolf that Homer had not used writing in the creation of his poems. In any event, Wolf's focus was not so much on the impossibility of creating long poems in an illiterate environment as on the impossibility of transmitting them. The famous instances of "Homer nodding," mistakes of various kinds, appear in Parry's theory as a common feature of "oral style." After Wolf such inconsistencies had formed the basis for theories by the Analysts, who sought to reduce the poems to their constituent parts. But neither

the *guslar/aoidos* nor his audience is annoyed when someone makes a mistake, because they are swept along in the thrill of song and have no means of checking anything in an oral environment, or the slightest interest in doing so. No wonder Homer's style is unique. He was an oral singer and the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were oral song.

Parry's stylistic studies were impeccable and the Parry/Lord analogy between oral composition in the modern Balkans and in the ancient world is a compelling anthropology. Wolf's premises were proven wrong and his followers therefore misguided. We cannot place a pen in Homer's hand – that would be ridiculous, as if asking John Coltrane to write down all those notes on a piece of paper. Somebody else must have created the text. The Homeric poems were therefore dictated oral texts; they were not redacted from preexisting shorter texts of various authorship. But if all Homer is formulaic, the proof of Homer's "orality," where is the brilliance and poetic genius of the divine Homer? The followers of Wolf had removed Homer from the equation: no more did Homer "write" the *Iliad* than Moses "wrote" Genesis. Parry restored the role of the poet Homer and disproved the redacted text, but in so doing seemed just as much to take away Homer's opportunity for creativity and greatness. If all his language is traditional, consisting of formulas and formulaic expressions and type scenes, then was not Homer more spokesman for a "tradition" than creator in his own right?

Because the proof that Homer was an oral poet was based on the existence of the formula, scholars expended great labor to define a formula, only to discover that "fixed phrases" open into looser phrases, now called "formulaic phrases," and that formulaic phrases can drift into almost anything. One scholar showed how one formula, *pioni dêmôî* "[hidden] in rich fat," can in other contexts (with different accentuation) mean "amid the flourishing populace"! Transformed by a series of rational steps, the same phrase even appears to shift from "in rich fat" *pioni dêmôî* by means of intermediate expressions into "he came to the land of strangers" (*allôn eksiketo dêmôn*). Formulas and formulaic expressions, Parry's proof that Homer was an oral poet similar to Balkan *guslari*, cannot themselves be defined. Furthermore, ordinary speech, although hardly metrical, is to a remarkable degree made up of set phrases hard to distinguish from Homer's formulas, "you see what I mean?"

Work to define the formula proved to be a dead-end. Evidently the realities of the printed page, on which the philologist labors, are just not the same as the realities of human speech. The elusive formula, which at first looks clear-cut, "swift-footed Achilles," then drifts away, is only

behaving in the same way that "words" do in ordinary speech, whose exact boundaries and definition elude us too, but which we use with perfect ease. We realize that in trying to understand Homeric verse we are trying to understand human speech, but no one knows, or has good theories about, how speech works. It is an innate human faculty.

Whatever the details, we cannot doubt that Homer was speaking a special language with its own vocabulary, rhythm, and units of meaning, analogous to but different from ordinary speech. Recent scholarship has shown how patterns of speech, not of written expression, best elucidate the Homeric style. Somehow Homer generated his poetry within the rules, limitations, and opportunities of this special language. According to Parry's analogy, the speech of "Homeric Greek," with its many odd forms and mixture of dialects, must have been learned by absorption like an ordinary language, by a young person from an older. Homeric speech had an inherent beat, a rhythm that the singer felt but did not understand in a conscious way. When the singer sings, he speaks this special language whose units are not "words" but "formulas," at least much of the time.

To say that the formulaic style limits a poet's expressiveness is therefore like saying that words limit what we can say. The rhythm drives the narrative, and words and word groups have settled down in certain places in the rhythm, which tends to break at certain places, especially in the third foot. Word groups, or formulas, fit in nicely before and after this break so that many lines build themselves, as it were, once you have absorbed the system of word groups. Then one can speak in this language. Other Greeks will understand you, although they cannot themselves speak the language. Modern English-speakers, if they have studied Shakespeare, can follow most of it on stage, but not all, and they do not speak such English. Shakespeare is not an oral poet, but the relation between the performer's speech and that of his modern audience is similar to that between Homer and his ancient audience.

Wolf showed how Homer could not have created the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* because he lived in a world without writing and only writing made the poems possible. Parry showed how Homer could well have created his poems without the aid of writing, just as did the *guslari*. Homer's formulaic style proved that he was an oral poet, heir to a long tradition of oral verse-making. Parry and Lord insisted on the origin of the Homeric poems through dictation, but how was this possible, if there was no writing in Homer's world? Neither Parry nor Lord ever addressed this question.

### Homer in Context: The Technological and Historical Background to the Making of the First Texts

The extraordinary epoch-making revolutionary technology of the Greek alphabet made Homer's texts possible, the first writing system that allowed an approximate reconstruction of the sound of the human voice. In recent years we have learned a good deal about the origin of this technology. In spite of their length and ambition, the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* seem to have been the first texts written in the Greek alphabet, as far as we can tell, but such complex texts did not appear from nowhere or without clear historical antecedents. Although most direct information about these antecedents has been lost, we can infer a good deal from comparative study and from sparse testimonies.

No doubt the earliest texts of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were encoded on papyrus, according to the predominant practice in the eastern Mediterranean on which the Greek model is based (hardly or not often on very expensive leather). Papyrus was an Egyptian invention from around 3200 BC, made from strips of a marsh plant pounded together at right angles, then cut into squares and pasted end to end (cf. Figure 3). In the Ptolemaic period (323–30 BC) papyrus production was a royal monopoly and perhaps always had been. The word *papyrus* seems to derive from the Egyptian for “the thing of the [king's] house.”

When we think about ancient writing, there were two spheres: the papyrus-using Egyptians and their cultural admirers on the Eastern shore of the Mediterranean, and the clay-using Mesopotamians, who had the older and truly international culture. The textual (but not intellectual) tradition of the Homeric poems comes from the Egyptian sphere. Papyrus is flexible, easily stored, durable, transportable, abundant, and to some extent reusable. Clay, by contrast, was in the Bronze Age the usual medium for writing outside the papyrus-using Egypt/Levantine axis.<sup>5</sup> The Mesopotamian literatures of the Sumerians and the Semitic Akkadians (third millennium BC), Babylonians (second millennium BC), and Assyrians (first millennium BC) and the Anatolian literature of the Indo-European Hittites (second millennium BC) were all inscribed on clay tablets. The Bronze Age Cretans, too, used clay. Clay was versatile,

<sup>5</sup> By Levant I mean Canaan–Syria, the strip of land from northern Phoenicia to Gaza, then inland to the Beka valley in the north enclosed by the Lebanon and anti-Lebanon ranges and to the Negev Desert in the south.

available anywhere, cost nothing, and if you fired it would last forever, but clay is unsuitable for recording very long poems. *Gilgamesh*, by far the longest literary work to survive from 3,000 years of literate Mesopotamian culture, and of great importance to understanding the origin of the Homeric poems, is the length of about three books of the *Iliad*. Although a long version of *Gilgamesh* survives from the Assyrian archives at Nineveh, destroyed in 612 BC, inscribed on twelve tablets, most Mesopotamian literary works are designed to fit on a single tablet, so the format of cuneiform writing has a good deal to do with the shape, and brevity, of literary works.

Egyptian magical texts were inscribed on papyrus in narrow vertical columns that marched relentlessly from top to bottom, from right to left, but ordinary Egyptian texts were written in horizontal lines arranged in broad columns that read from right to left, the ancestor of the modern printed page. The heirs of this writing tradition, including the Semitic Hebrews, also wrote from right to left in broad columns. You held the papyrus roll, or scroll, in your left hand and unrolled it from the bottom of the roll with your right hand. The Egyptian sat on the ground, stretched his linen kilt taut between spread thighs, ankles crossed, and used the surface of the kilt to support the papyrus while he wrote on it with a brush-stylus, or read from it. In Greece the literati did not wear kilts, but sat in chairs where they nonetheless stretched the papyrus across their knees. There were no writing desks in the ancient world.

Outside of Egypt, papyrus was used before the Greeks only by the Western Semites, those amorphous peoples who spoke a Semitic language and lived along the eastern shore of the Mediterranean and in the inland valleys (the Eastern Semites were the clay-users living in Mesopotamia). The Western Semites also used waxed folding tablets, like Bellerophon's tablet, a medium they shared with Mesopotamia, but not with Egypt (the Egyptians used flat chalked boards for temporary texts). Outside Egypt, where papyrus grew, papyrus was always an imported commodity, yet most documents in the eastern Mediterranean used it principally or exclusively from the earliest times. Papyrus-manufacture was evidently an important export industry in Egypt. As a writing-medium the folding tablet spanned the clay-using Eastern Semites and the papyrus-using Western Semites, and the Greeks, then Romans, were to take it over.

Homer calls these seafaring papyrus-using Western Semites *Phoinikes*, “redmen,” apparently because their hands were often stained from producing purple dye from a kind of shell fish, a Phoenician specialty; or he calls them *Sidonians*, “men of Sidon,” a port near Byblos. The Phoenicians

were never a united people in any way, and they did not call themselves Phoenicians. In their disunity, relative poverty, and intimacy with the sea they resembled the Greeks. “Phoenician” is a convenient term to distinguish the northern, coastal-dwelling Western Semites from the southern inland-dwelling Western Semites that included the Hebrews and the Canaanites, after the biblical name Canaan for this area. Palestine, the geographical area of the southern Levant, is named after the Philistines, apparently Mycenaean Greek refugees from Crete, who lived in five towns in the Gaza strip. Geography determined the division into the coastal north and the inland south: there are several good ports in the north Levant, none in the south.

Only two good passes lead inland from the Phoenician ports in the north through the Lebanon ranges that run right along the coast. The great Bronze Age port and emporium of Ugarit (see Map 1, Figure 5) lay south of one pass, ideally located to transship goods coming from inland Syria and Mesopotamia onto ships sailing to Mediterranean destinations. We will later return to the remarkable clay tablets with epic poems on them found at Ugarit, destroyed c. 1200 BC in the general collapse of Mediterranean Bronze Age civilization.



Figure 5. The monumental entry to the city emporium of Ugarit on the coast of northern Syria, destroyed c. 1200 BC. Photo by author

The inhabitants of Cyprus, just 75 miles off the coast from Ugarit, were natural partners in trade and culture with Phoenicia and a place of transshipment for goods heading to Cilicia on the southern coast of Anatolia (modern Turkey) and to Rhodes, the large Greek island of Euboea, and the far west. Egypt in the south was easily reached by sea. The Phoenician city of Byblos in modern Lebanon was nearly an Egyptian colony from the third millennium BC on and provided timber products for Egypt throughout its history, the biblical “cedars of Lebanon.” Phoenician decorative and religious arts borrowed heavily from the Egyptians, as did the arts of Canaan.

Like the Indo-European Greeks, the Semitic Phoenicians were superb seafarers. In the Late Iron Age, under military pressure from Assyrian imperial power in northern Mesopotamia, they colonized North Africa, Spain, Sicily, and various islands in the western Mediterranean, including Sardinia, about the same time that the Greeks settled southern Italy and eastern Sicily. These *Phoinikes* turn up repeatedly in Homer's *Odyssey*, where they are greedy, knavish slavers plying their wares on the high seas.

From an early time the Phoenicians shared with their Canaanite cousins a remarkable system of writing of around twenty-two signs. Commonly called an “alphabet,” it was really an odd syllabary in which each sign stands for what we call a consonant plus an unspecified vowel. More precisely, each sign referred to a speech sound defined as an obstruction or modification of the passage of air from the mouth (the consonant), without comment on the quality of the vibration of the vocal cords (the vowel): you, the native speaker, have to fill in that sound, while reading, according to context and your knowledge as a native speaker of the language. In practical terms, you cannot pronounce something written in the “Phoenician alphabet” unless you are a Phoenician. Furthermore, the extreme paucity of signs, twenty-two or twenty-five, enormously enhanced ambiguity; early West Semitic inscriptions, although complete and legible, are often not understood.

The “Phoenician alphabet” belonged to a family of scripts called West Semitic, which had various external forms called by scholars Ugaritic (see Figure 6, below), Aramaic, Hebrew, Moabite, or Canaanite, but it was a single system of writing with local variations. The oldest example in linear form (characters made up of lines, not wedges or pictures) is from a sarcophagus of about 1000 BC that belonged to a King Ahiiram of Byblos. Very early, but unreadable, possible antecedents to West Semitic writing are found from around 1800 BC, carved on rocks in remote valleys in Egypt.

Although West Semitic writing seems to be dependent in some way on Egyptian hieroglyphic writing, which also gave no information about how the vocal cords vibrated (hence is unpronounceable), its structure is unlike Egyptian writing, because *all* signs in West Semitic writing are phonetic, whereas in Egyptian writing only *some* are phonetic. The origins of the West Semitic family may somehow be tied to Cretan Aegean writing, where another mostly phonetic syllabic system called Linear B, which recorded Greek, appeared at about the same time as the West Semitic writing. Linear B syllabic signs, however, give information about vocalic sounds and five signs stand for pure vowels. Its undeciphered antecedent Linear A, which goes back to the eighteenth century BC, was apparently a phonetic system as well. Although the Philistines in Gaza appear to be Mycenaeans from Crete, no examples of Aegean writing have been found in Palestine.

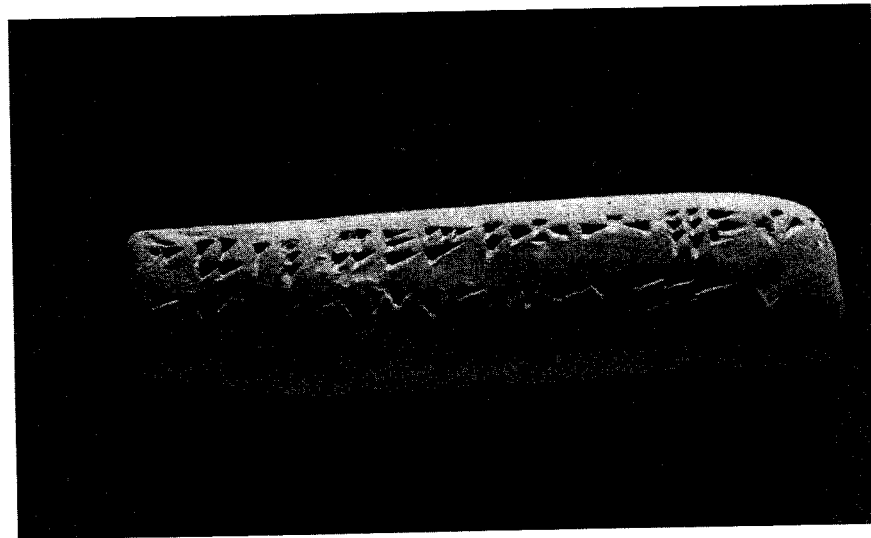
The Western Semites so preferred Egyptian papyrus as a basis for writing that their entire literature has been lost except for the Hebrew Bible, which survived because the Jews identified their survival as a people with faithful transmission of the physical text. Only about ninety West Semitic inscriptions survive on hard substances from c. 1000–300 BC in the Levant (considerably more turn up in Punic North Africa). By contrast, thousands of Greek alphabetic inscriptions survive on stone and other substances. Although the Greeks too were papyrus-users, a practice taken from the Levant, writing served a different social function among them than among the Western Semites.

The common but inaccurate use of the word “alphabet” to describe both the Greek alphabet and the West Semitic writing on which the Greek alphabet was based, as in “Phoenician alphabet” or “Hebrew alphabet,” obscures the enormous and cataclysmic historical change that took place when writing passed from the Western Semites to the Greeks. We date this moment of transference and modification of technologies by looking for the earliest Greek alphabetic inscriptions, which come from around 775 BC, then, just guessing, go back about a generation. Because after 775 BC we get a trickle, then a stream, then a river, then an ocean of inscriptions, it does not seem likely that the alphabet was in Greece long before our first evidence for it. This method of reasoning places the invention of the Greek alphabet around 800 BC, *the only secure date we have in our investigation of the date of Homer*. Homer must come after 800 BC because Homer is a text and texts are material things with markings on them. The alphabet made Homer’s texts possible and without the alphabet his poems could not and did not exist.

The Greek alphabet and the “Phoenician” syllabary are historically related, yes, but fundamentally different in structure. The difference is best seen in the fact that you can pronounce Greek alphabetic texts without knowing the language. West Semitic writing had one kind of sign, each giving hints about the obstruction of the breath. The Greek alphabet had two separate kinds of phonetic signs. The Greek vowel signs are pronounceable by themselves, whereas the Greek consonantal signs are not pronounceable by themselves. Thus A = the sound [a], but P cannot itself be pronounced (even if we might say [puh] if someone asked us). In West Semitic, by contrast, the sign we transliterate as P would = [pa], [pu], [po] or some other combination and a native speaker would know which. The invention of the Greek alphabet on the basis of the Phoenician syllabary depended, first, on the division of the signs into two different kinds and, second, on the spelling rule that one of the five vocalic signs must always notate every consonantal sign. BCKUP, the spelling preferred by Microsoft Word, is therefore a mixture of West Semitic and Greek practice, but such common usages as CMDR = commander, painted on US war planes, is a bona fide return to ancient West Semitic practice. If you speak English, you guess it’s “commander,” but otherwise you’re out of luck. Such license is *never allowed* in ancient Greek orthography, where the spelling rule that you must have both kinds of signs, working together, is inviolable.

Four hundred years earlier than the sarcophagus of Ahiaram come our very earliest certain examples of West Semitic writing, but written in a *nonlinear* script, c. 1400, on clay tablets from Ugarit, the Bronze Age emporium destroyed c. 1200 BC (Figure 6). The signs are made up of wedges pushed into clay in the way that wedges make up the otherwise wholly unrelated “cuneiform” writing of Mesopotamia. This “Ugaritic alphabet” was apparently a free invention by someone used to writing with wedges on clay; it survives only in Ugarit and its near environs, thanks to the sack of the city that burned the tablets and preserved them. We guess that the unattested linear forms for the signs are older, of which we use modified forms today.

Fifteen Ugaritic tablets preserve the story about the triumph of the storm-god Baal (“lord”) over his enemies Yamm (“sea”) and Mot (“death”), who is the son of El (“god”). We learn of Baal’s imprisonment in the underworld, from where his sister/wife Anat frees him, and about Baal’s victorious kingship over gods and humans. The portion *Baal and Anat* covers six multi-columned tablets and may have run 3,000 lines, the longest poem in the archive and one of the longest poems from all the Ancient



'a	b	g	h	d	h	w	z	h	t	y	k
š	l	m	d	n	z	s	'	p	š	q	r
t	g	t	'i <sub>e</sub>	'u <sub>0</sub>	š <sub>2</sub>						

Figure 6. Ugaritic abecedy, c. 1200 BC. This tablet is the oldest evidence for the order of signs that we still use today: the “ABC song” goes back directly to this tradition. The tablet reads from left to right, top to bottom. The key gives the “cuneiform” characters and the equivalents in modified Roman characters. Photo © Charles & Josette Lenars/CORBIS; table redrawn from a low resolution image on early alphabetic order by Drs. David Kelley and Steve Bett © BETA 1998

East, about the same length as the Assyrian *Gilgamesh* (but it is not certain that the tablets go together). The poem is dated to the reign of a certain Niqmadu, king of Ugarit between 1375 and 1345 BC, although the city was destroyed c. 1200 BC. Other tablets record legends close to the sort of histories we find in the Bible, based on similar semi-legendary accounts of historical figures.

A statement (called a colophon) appended to the end of the Baal tablets reports that “Ilimalku of Shuban is the *spr* (scribe? writer?), *lmd* (disciple?)

of Attanu, the diviner, the Head Priest, Head Shepherd [a military office] . . .” We are not sure what *spr* means or what *lmd* implies, but the colophon appears to draw a distinction between the *composer* of the mythical text, Attanu, and its *recorder* Ilimalku, a procedure for which there is no example in any earlier tradition of writing. The earliest attested use of West Semitic writing, the “cuneiform alphabet,” the direct ancestor of the Greek alphabet, seems to be the recording of a literary text by dictation!

Even so Jeremiah dictated to his scribe Baruch (Jer. 36:18), and perhaps all the early texts of what became the Old Testament are the product of dictation. The odd focus on purely phonetic but unpronounceable elements in West Semitic writing, which made it unlearnable except by someone who spoke the language, may reflect this writing’s origin in the practice of dictation as a means of composition. The composer speaks, and the scribe represents the sounds as best he can. In this way you can write anything you can say (hardly the case with Mesopotamian cuneiform or Egyptian hieroglyphic), so long as there is enough context for a literate native speaker to reconstruct the message. If you applied the West Semitic system to write down in this way the first line of the *Iliad*, and separated the words by dots as the Phoenicians did, in transliteration it would look something like

MNN•D•T•PLD•KLS

for the Greek alphabetic

MENIN AEIDE THEA PELEIADEO AKHILEOS.

Whereas the West Semitic system of writing worked after a fashion for West Semitic languages, whose words, differing in sound and grammatical function, are built around an unvarying consonantal skeleton, it simply did not work for Greek verse, filled with contiguous vowel sounds that establish the verse’s rhythm. To judge from very early and unexpected inscriptional finds in hexametric verse, the Greek alphabet was from the beginning used for just this purpose, to notate the rhythms of the Greek hexameter.

Perhaps a bilingual Semite, literate in West Semitic writing and heir to the ancient tradition of creating texts through dictation, tried his hand at notating Greek song. Making technical alterations to the West Semitic writing in order to accommodate the very different sounds of Greek speech, he established the two kinds of signs and the inviolable spelling rule that made Homer’s text possible. He invented the first true alphabet, the first



writing pronounceable by someone who is not a speaker of that language, a system that has today taken over the entire planet and turned human civilization in a certain direction. Many have expressed surprise that so powerful a tool should originate from an aesthetic, not an economic, environment; but evidence is strong that it happened in just that way. Even so the computer was invented in order to predict where artillery shells would fall, but appears to have developed other uses.

### Oral Song Becomes Text

Parry was interested in oral poetry as a living, breathing tradition, but Homer's poems are not oral poems; they are texts, the philologist's Homer. An oral poem is a public event, a performance before an audience, usually small, where there is music and lots of it, facial expression, gesture, emphasis, body language, and spontaneous adaptation to the mood of the audience. Homer himself gives us a vivid picture of the oral poet, the *oidos*, and his oral song in the *Odyssey* where a singer named Phemius ("famous one") entertains the suitors in the house of Odysseus, and another singer Demodocus ("pleasing to the people") holds in rapt attention the Phaeacian court, where Odysseus tells of his strange journey. The *oidos* is a commanding presence in the court and provides life with a special richness and meaning, as Odysseus explains:

"For myself I declare that there is no greater fulfillment of delight than when joy possesses a whole people, and banqueters in the halls listen to an *oidos* as they sit all in order, and beside them tables are laden with bread and meat, and the cup-bearer draws wine from the bowl and carries it around and pours it in the cups. This seems to my mind the fairest thing there is." (*Od.* 9.5–11)

Such men held a special place in Greek society, analogous to religious leaders in other ancient societies, whom according to an extraordinary social development in ancient Greece the *oidoi* replaced. No wonder the alphabet was invented to make texts of song: the *oidoi*, not the priests, defined moral values in Greek society.

A text, by contrast to oral song, is a physical object with marks on it capable of interpretation, if you are clever. A text allows the reconstruction of a phonetic version of the signs intelligible to someone who speaks Greek, but the reconstruction was not similar even theoretically to a

living song that some poet once sang. Specialists called *rhapsodes* memorized these texts and while holding a staff delivered them in a histrionic fashion at public gatherings, especially at the Athenian festival of the Panathenaea reformed by Pisistratus in the sixth century BC (Figure 7).

*Rhapsode* probably means "staff-singer," but the Greeks early etymologized it to mean "stitcher of song" and many moderns have followed. Rhapsodes are in any event descended not from the *oidoi*, who generated their song afresh with each performance, but from the inventor of the Greek alphabet, whose spelling rule and creation of two categories of signs allowed an approximate notation of the actual sounds of Greek verse. Rhapsodes, unlike *oidoi*, could read and write and, like proto-professors, prided themselves on their ability to explicate a text, above

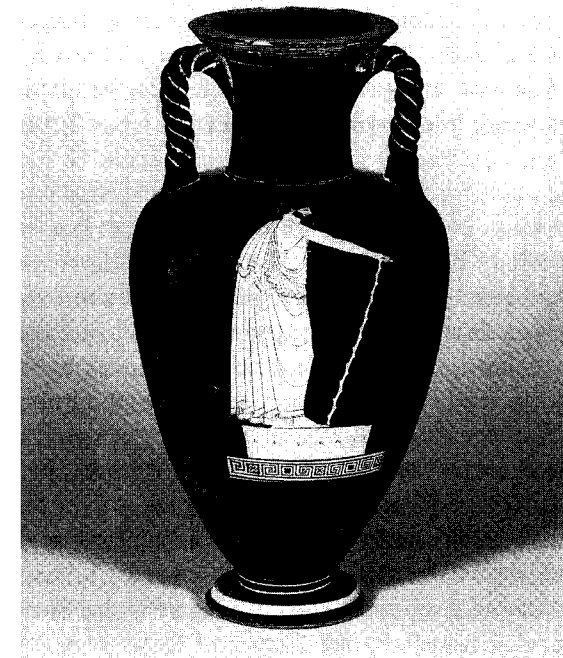


Figure 7. A rhapsode delivering a memorized poem. His indebtedness to written texts is reflected in the words that spill from his mouth (not visible in the photo), "Thus once in Tiryns . . .," a lost poem probably about Heracles, who ruled in Tiryns. Red-figure vase by Kleophrades, c. 480 BC. © Copyright The Trustees of The British Museum, E270



all Homer's text. Plato snidely mocks such pretensions in his dialogue the *Ion* from the fourth century BC. Plato does not trust men like Ion, who take pride in scholastic mastery of a *text* and think that truth resides in a *text*.

*Socrates*: I often envy the profession of a rhapsode, Ion, for you always wear fine clothes. Looking as beautiful as possible is part of your art. Furthermore you are obligated to be constantly in the company of many good poets, especially Homer, best and most divine of poets. To understand him and not merely learn his words by rote memorization is a thing greatly to be envied. And no man can be a rhapsode who does not understand the poet's meaning, for the rhapsode should interpret the mind of the poet to his listeners. But how can he interpret him well unless he knows what the poet means? All this is greatly to be envied.

*Ion*: Very true, Socrates. Interpretation has surely been the most laborious part of my art, and I believe myself able to speak about Homer better than any man. Neither Metrodorus of Lampsacus nor Stesimbrotus of Thasos nor Glaucon nor any one else who ever lived had as good ideas about Homer as I have, or as many. (Plato, *Ion*, 530b–530d)

Unlike the oral poet, who is an entertainer, the rhapsode is a protoscholar. He not only recites, but he explicates, uses the text as a basis for teaching. Teaching what? Plato goes on to wonder.

It is important not to confuse "oral poem," what an *aidos* sings, with Homer's text, which an *aidos* dictated and a rhapsode memorizes and recites. Getting these two mixed up has led to oceans of confusion in modern Homeric studies, so that some think that Homer sang something similar to our texts of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* throughout his career, or that the "same poems" were "memorized," although not written down, then sung by other and later poets during their own careers. It would then be possible for different people in different places at different times to have written down the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*, as the medieval French *Chanson de Roland* exists in several distinct versions. According to the Parry/Lord model, however, our *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are unique versions that came into being at a single time when under unusual circumstances a poet dictated his song to an amanuensis. We earlier discussed the impossibility of passing beyond the barrier of the Alexandrian vulgate to find the "true text" of Homer, but we can be absolutely sure that such a text did once exist.

We can only speculate about earlier or later forms of oral songs about the anger of Achilles or the homecoming of Odysseus, but we can be sure that, whether sung by Homer or someone else, they bore scant resemblance to our *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Because of their enormous length, about 16,000 lines for the *Iliad* and 12,000 lines for the *Odyssey*, these poems remain a transcendent mystery in the history of literature. The average length of an oral song, according to Parry's studies and modern field studies, runs about 800 lines, roughly the length of a single book of the *Iliad*. As we will see in the second part of this book, the poems are made up of just such shorter elements that may in some form have once stood alone. The oral singer is limited, after all, by the attention span of his audience and by his own powers of voice and bearing.

What can such gigantically long written poems have been for? In spite of hundreds of years of modern study, we must admit that we do not know. Nor can we well imagine. Certainly not for readers who read for edification or pleasure, because there can have been none when Homer lived, whose world is ignorant of writing. Yet the poems seem to have existed in writing from the dawn of alphabetic literacy in the eighth century BC.

No doubt as a professional *aidos* the historical Homer sang the anger of Achilles and the homecoming of Odysseus many times, but our textual versions appear to be determined by the conditions under which the stories were transferred from the invisible and ephemeral realm of oral song into the visible and material realm of a written text. Their extraordinary length and clear ambition, annoying to a modern reader, constantly to prolong the narrative divorces them as works of entertainment from real songs sung in real time to real audiences. The form and length of the poems must depend on the unique circumstances under which the texts were created. In the experience of Parry and Lord, the process of dictation encouraged a longer and more elaborate poem. Freed from the challenge and restraints of live performance, now without musical accompaniment, slowed down by the scribe's slow pace, the *guslar* could spin out the tale as he chose. As we have seen, Parry prodded Avdo Međedović, his favorite singer, into dictating a song as long as the *Odyssey*. There is no writing in Homer, yet he was written down, as Wolf complained 200 years ago.

#### Remnants of Oral Composition in Homer's Texts

The very irregularities on which the old Analysts based their arguments are the indelible stamp of the oral composition of these poems and the

making of their text through dictation. For example, Zeus storms from the clouds, only for a slave-girl to come outside and remark how odd that there should be thunder from a cloudless sky (*Od.* 20.102–119). Deiphobus kills Hypsenor, who goes on groaning (*Il.* 13.402–423). At the end of *Iliad* 16, Apollo mysteriously strikes Patroclus on the back and shoulder so that his armor flies away, leaving him naked and defenseless. After killing him, Hector comes up and “stripped Patroclus of his glorious arms” (*Il.* 17.125). Equally surprising is Zeus’s later statement that Hector “snatched the armor indecently from his [Patroclus’] shoulders” (*Il.* 17.205). The Trojan soldier Melanippos is killed three times over nine books. Menelaus kills Pylaemenes, leader of the Paphlagonians (*Il.* 5.576–579), but eight books later Pylaemenes carries his dead son from the field of battle (13.643–659). The prophet Theoclymenus sees an omen on the shore (*Od.* 15.495–538), but when he recalls it, claims he was on board ship (17.160–161). Odysseus elaborates a complex plan whereby at a signal Telemachus will remove the armor from the hall, making excuses to the suitors and leaving only weapons for the two of them; but when the moment comes there is no signal, they remove all the armor (soon to their regret), then make excuses to the maid. Most studied of all is the embassy to Achilles, where after Agamemnon sends three heroes and two heralds to the tent of Achilles, the party suddenly is referred to by “dual” grammatical forms (*Il.* 9.165–198; Greek has a dual number, when just two things are referred to, as well as singular and plural: see below, p. 121).

Such oddities (there are numerous others) are exactly the kind of dislocations that we find in collecting oral song in the field in modern times. We count around 1,000 personal names and 500 place names in the Homeric epics, a remarkable feature to his style, and we would be surprised if Homer had been able to keep them all straight. By studying the text we can see the discrepancy between where Theoclymenus was and where he said he was, but in oral delivery no one would notice such disagreements, or care about them. In the case of the embassy, apparently in an earlier version only two heroes, Odysseus and Ajax, went to Achilles’ tent. Homer has not modernized his duals to fit the new version he is telling.

Extraordinary about such inconsistencies is that later editors, including the Alexandrians, never corrected them. Copiers who wished to preserve the received text have faithfully passed down the original autograph. A similar reverence for the received text is clear from the archaic grammatical forms, which belong in the eighth century BC. Attic scribes have

given a superficial dusting to the vulgate text, but by no means have they modernized or Atticized the diction where they might have. The archaic grammatical forms that every student of Greek must learn in order to read Homer prove that oral poems became texts at a very early time; had they remained oral into the Classical Period (as is occasionally argued), archaic forms would have fallen away, as they do in other oral traditions.

But when, exactly, did Homer create his poems? To this much-contested question, we can give a sort of answer.

### The Date of Homer’s Texts

What outside sources first mention Homer, or otherwise imply his existence? Herodotus, as we have seen, mentions Homer several times and quotes eleven of his verses. He is also the first to speak of “rhapsodes,” in connection with an incident in the town of Sicyon (in the northern Peloponnesus) in about 570 BC. Rhapsodic performance was not live oral composition but based on memorization of a written, fixed text (if that is what Herodotus means), so evidently in the early sixth century BC the oral tradition is already being replaced by the reperformance of written texts.

A generation earlier than Herodotus, the iconoclastic, monotheistic Xenophanes (c. 560–478 BC) of Colophon, a Greek colony on the coast of Asia Minor, deplores Homer’s immoral polytheism: “Homer and Hesiod have ascribed to the gods all that is reproach and blame in the world of men, stealing, and adultery, and deception” (frag. 10 Diels-Kranz), proving Homer’s prominence in Greek education as early as the sixth century BC, an influence that Xenophanes thinks should be resisted. Certainly full texts of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* existed in the sixth century BC when Hipparchus, son of the Athenian leader Pisistratus (605?–527 BC), instituted a definite order in the presentation of the episodes in the poems at the reformed Athenian patriotic festival of the Panathenaea (still more on this later).

The *Homeric Hymn to Apollo*, probably in its present form a reworking of the texts of two earlier anonymous dictated poems, appears to have been performed on Delos in 522 BC, under the sponsorship of the famous Polycrates, tyrant of Samos. The long hymn of 545 lines, about the length of a book of Homer, tells the myths, first, of Apollo’s birth on Delos and, then, the establishment of Apollo’s cult at Delphi. The hymn claims to be by “the blind man of Chios,” which all take to refer

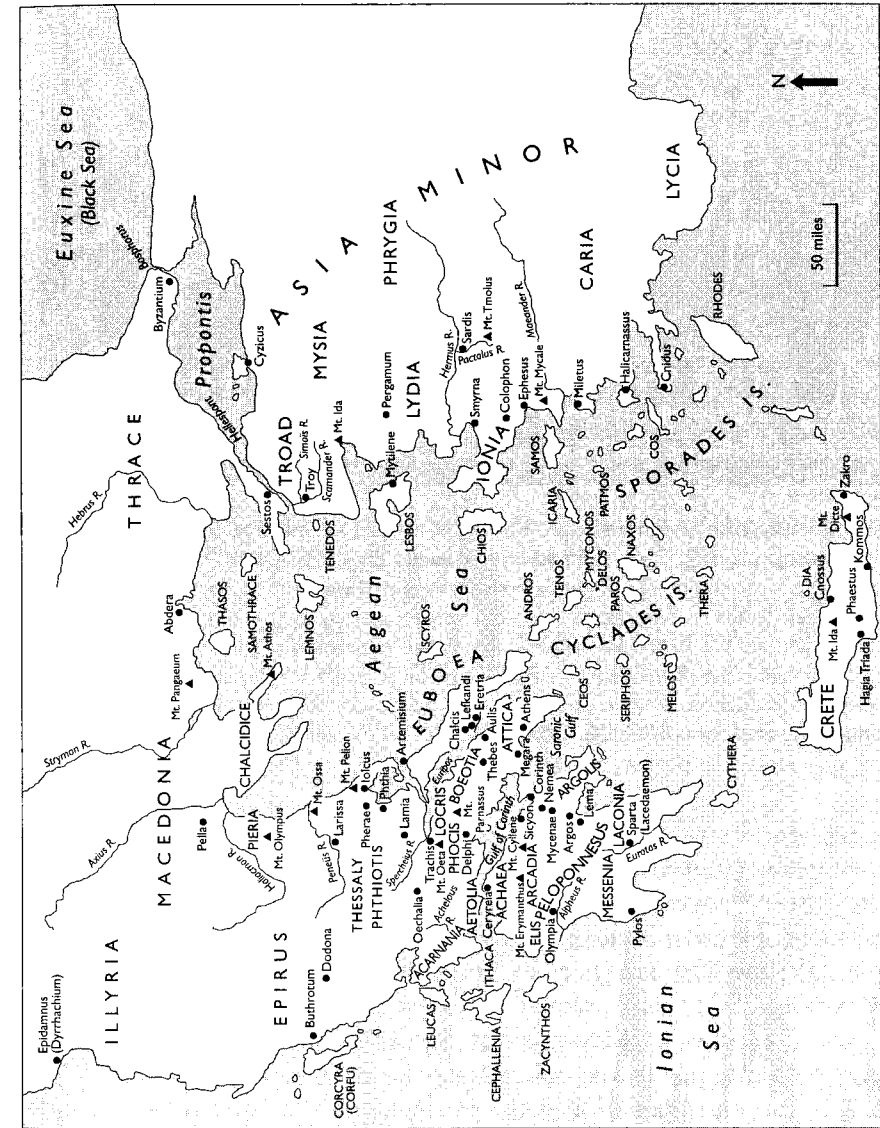
to Homer. The myth of Homer's blindness comes from the blind poet Demodocus in the *Odyssey*. The *Hymn* is much too late to be by Homer, but its boastful claim proves again Homer's classic status in the sixth century BC.

The archaic poet Callinus from Ephesus in Asia Minor seems to be the first to mention Homer by name, if we believe the words of Pausanias (second century AD) that "the Thebans had poems on this topic [the war of the Seven Against Thebes], and that when Callinus came to speak of these poems, he ascribed them to Homer" (9.9.5). Callinus lived in the mid-seventh century BC. Pausanias must be referring to the *Thebais*, a poem of uncertain authorship, now lost (perhaps it *was* by Homer). Callinus lived only 150 years from the date of the invention of the Greek alphabet around 800 BC, the technology that made Homer possible.

Although handbooks call Homer an Ionian poet, who lived and worked in Asia Minor, recent analysis of textual and historical evidence place his activity on the long island of Euboea that hugs the east coast of mainland Greece (Map 2). Certain technical features of his dialect may also mark it as the "West Ionian" spoken on Euboea, as opposed to the "East Ionian" dialect of the Asia Minor coast. Euboeans were the most advanced and wealthiest of Greek communities during the Greek Dark (or Iron) Ages c. 1150–800 BC, between the collapse of the Bronze Age and the invention of the Greek alphabet. According to recent archaeological finds at Lefkandi, a modern name for an ancient settlement at the edge of the much-contested Lelantine Plain (Map 2), the Euboeans alone of mainland Greeks maintained contact, directly or through middlemen, with Cyprus and the Levantine coast and even Egypt during the Dark Ages. Within an enormous long narrow structure with an apse at one end, built around 1000 BC, unparalleled anywhere in Greece, archaeologists found an extraordinary warrior's cremation burial, along with sacrificed horses and gold ornaments in the nearby inhumation burial of a woman. We are not sure of the function of this unique building, but in just such an environment, if it was the great chief's house, we imagine the *avoidoi* to have plied their trade in this illiterate age.

The Euboeans were the earliest and most aggressive of Greek colonizers, and the *Odyssey* is a poem tailor-made to fit their historical experience in the western Mediterranean in the "Wild West" days of the late ninth and early eighth centuries BC, the age that every other sign identifies as Homer's own (Figure 8).

By the second quarter of the eighth century BC the Euboeans had permanent posts in southern Italy, including one at Cumae on the Bay



Map 2. Greece, the Aegean Sea, and Western Asia Minor

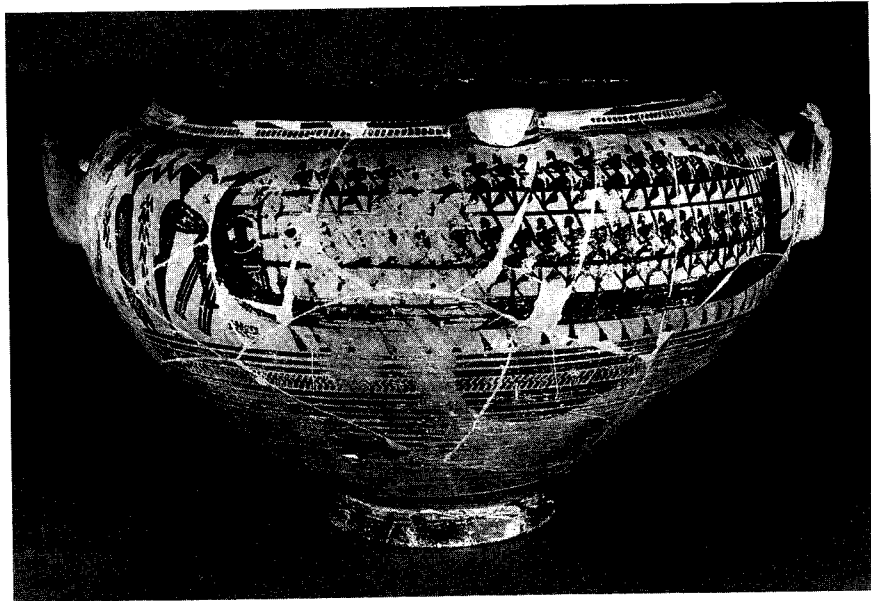


Figure 8. Attic Late Geometric deep bowl, c. 730–720 BC, made at the same time as our earliest “long” Greek alphabetic inscriptions (more than a few letters). Rows of rowers sit on either side of the boat (shown above each other by convention), oars in their hands. In such boats Euboeans rowed to Italy in the early eighth century BC or earlier. At the stern, on which are mounted two steering oars, a man grips a woman by the wrist in the same gesture found in wedding scenes; the scene evidently portrays an abduction, but we cannot be sure that a specific story inspired it, for example the abduction of Helen. © Copyright The Trustees of The British Museum

of Naples, where Vergil’s hero Aeneas descends into the underworld: Cumae was the first Greek colony on mainland Italy. At the same time Euboeans maintained permanent posts in northern Syria near the Orontes estuary (in modern Turkey) not far from the Bronze Age emporium of Ugarit (in modern Syria), home to West Semitic traditions of culture and writing. The oldest example of Greek alphabetic writing appears to be part of a name, EULIN, recently discovered, to everyone’s astonishment, on a clay pot in Latium in Italy, dated by stratigraphy to c. 775 BC. But Latium is near Euboean Cumae on the Bay of Naples and the Euboean settlement on the island of Ischia in the bay, where other very early pieces of writing are found. Sherds with pieces of names are found from about the same early date of 775–750 BC on Euboea itself. The Greek alphabet seems to have been invented on the island of Euboea or

somewhere in the Euboean circuit, but most likely on Euboea, where the wealth was, and the international connections.

As we have seen, the Greek alphabet’s obsession with phonetic representation (so unlike earlier systems of writing) is internal evidence that it was invented to notate hexametric verse, plausibly the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, which belong to this era, because phonetic verisimilitude is not a goal of other writing systems, including our own. Certainly the Greek alphabet’s Phoenician model was incapable of notating such Homeric words as *aaantos*, “invulnerable,” which in Phoenician script might be written as *ts!* Although vowel clusters are common in Greek, such extravagant examples are found only in verse, where the complex rhythm resides in the sequence of vocalic sounds. You do not need phonetic verisimilitude to make a written record of just any Greek, as the Mycenaean Greek Linear B script proves, which provides only a rough approximation of the sound of any spoken word.

Our earliest inscriptions of more than a few signs support the theory that the need to record hexametric verse inspired the invention of the Greek alphabet. Still probably the oldest “long inscription” of more than a few letters was found in 1871 in Athens, called the Dipylon Vase inscription (Figure 9). More by far has been written about this inscription than about any other Greek inscription. Someone has scratched the signs with a sharp object, ripping through the glaze of a pot (probably given as a prize) made in a shop just outside the Dipylon Gate in Athens c. 740 BC. Reading from right to left, the signs preserve a perfect dactylic hexameter followed by some signs of unclear meaning, perhaps a garbled portion of an abecedarium (that is, the signs of the whole alphabet in a row, but here beginning in the middle with LMN . . .).

Another “long inscription” comes from a child’s grave on Euboean Ischia in the Bay of Naples, scratched into a Rhodian drinking cup, made c. 740 BC, about the same time as the Dipylon Vase inscription. Called the “Cup of Nestor inscription,” the first line seems to be prose, but the second and third are again dactylic hexameters. In translation:

I am the cup of Nestor, a joy to drink from.  
Whoever drinks from this cup, straightway that man  
the desire of beautiful-crowned Aphrodite will seize.

The find excited wide attention because the cup appears to refer to the very cup of Nestor described in Book 11 of the *Iliad* (632–635), when Patroclus comes to Nestor’s tent to ask about a wounded companion:

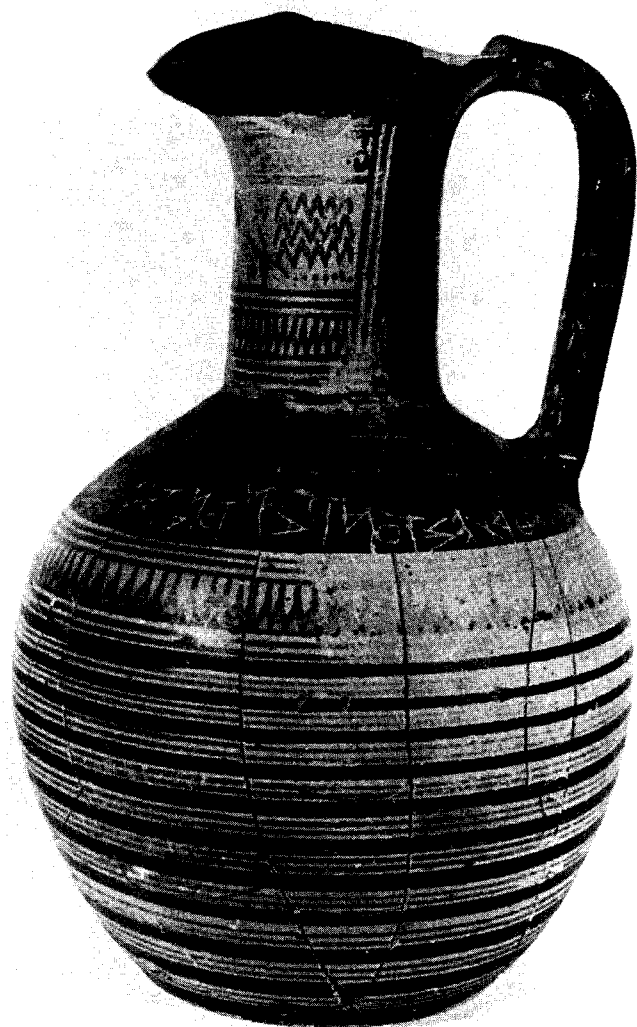
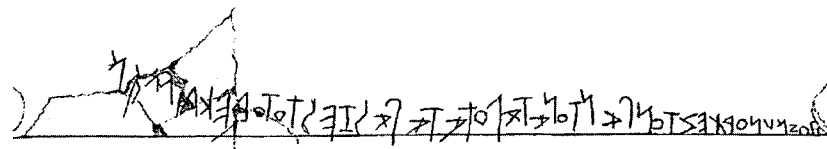


Figure 9. The Dipylon Vase and its inscription, c. 740 bc. National Archaeological Museum, Athens / photo Archaeological Receipts Fund – TAP Service; transcription and drawing from B. B. Powell, *Homer and the Origin of the Greek Alphabet*, Cambridge, UK, 1991, No. 58

The maid first drew before the two a fine table with feet of well-polished lapis lazuli and set on it a bronze basket and with it an onion, a relish for their drink, and pale honey and ground meal of sacred barley and beside them a beautiful cup that the old man brought from home, studded with



HOSNUNORXESTONPANTONATALOTATAPAIZEI  
TOTODEK{M}M{N}-

Whoever of all the dancers now dances most gracefully . . . .

bosses of gold; there were four handles on it and about each two doves were feeding, while below were two supports. Another man could scarce have lifted that cup from the table when full, but old Nestor raised it easily. (*Il.* 11.628–637)

The father of Greek Bronze Age archeology, Heinrich Schliemann (1822–90), found a cup in one of the shaft graves at Mycenae that resembles Homer's description, suggesting that the cup may be a Mycenaean heirloom. The extraordinary "Cup of Nestor inscription" is a joke and probably reflects a capping game played in a drinking-party on Ischia in the eighth century bc. Somebody jested that this humble clay Rhodian cup was "the cup of Nestor" famous from the *Iliad*. An attested form of early alphabetic inscription is the "curse formula," which begins "whoever steals this cup . . ." to him something bad will happen. The second diner begins just such a curse ("whoever drinks from this cup . . ."). Now the third diner pronounces his own doom: to suffer a pleasant sexual encounter! Pretty good joke.

We should fall from our chairs in astonishment to realize that one of the two oldest "long" Greek inscriptions in the world, in the technology destined to change human life forever, is not the record of military conquest, nor of a measure of grain, nor of a fateful omen, but the alphabetic encoding of a drunken joke expressed in hexameters (with a lead-in in prose) that plausibly refers to the same version of the *Iliad* known to us today. The oldest inscription in the Western world is a literary allusion, as though we were living in a dream.

These drunken literate sailors two thousand miles from home, at the edge of the world, evidently knew their Homer well, because the joke depends on the disparity between Homer's heavy, fancy cup, and the

modest Rhodian example. If the “cup of Nestor” of the inscription is the same as the cup described in *Iliad* 11, a text of the *Iliad* must have existed before the inscription was made around 740 BC, a “time before which” (*terminus ante quem*) for the composition of the *Iliad*. Although some think that the Cup of Nestor was a traditional motif on the lips of many poets, the only cup of Nestor we know anything about is the one described in the vulgate text of the *Iliad*.

The Greek alphabet was therefore used from the earliest times to notate epic verse. Because Homer’s texts cannot predate the Greek alphabet, and because no object described in the Homeric poems postdates 700 BC, and because the Cup of Nestor inscription may refer to a text of the *Iliad*, and because of the social and historical conditions reflected in the poems (see next chapter), and because of the many archaic grammatical forms, the first texts of Homer must belong to the eighth century BC. When in the eighth century? Many scholars place him in the second half, to give the alphabet a chance to “ripen” and become sophisticated enough to fashion our texts. But the alphabet did not begin as a primitive device that became more sophisticated in time. The Greek alphabet appeared within a tradition of taking down texts by dictation perhaps 1000 years old in the days of Homer. Placing Homer in the second half of the eighth century does not adequately take account of Homer’s ignorance of the tradition of writing that made his texts possible, to which he never refers. Because oral poetry rapidly reflects changed conditions, and because writing is highly useful in constructing plots (and figures repeatedly in post-Homeric literature), Homer’s texts must have come into being close to the invention of the alphabet around 800 BC, before the importance and utility of writing became common knowledge. Greek legend said that a man named Palamedes invented the Greek alphabet, and maybe he did. In myth, Palamedes was a Euboean who lived in Nauplius, “ship-town” (not the Nauplion in the Peloponnesus). Because legends often preserve real names, Palamedes may be the name of Homer’s amanuensis, although we cannot prove it.

Someone of great wealth and power stood behind the creation of these texts in the early eighth century BC. The cost of the papyrus alone was great, and the whole project was an insane ambition, as sometimes happens at the beginning of a new technology. For example, the most ambitious stone temple complex in Egypt, surrounding the step-pyramid of King Djoser c. 2600 BC, is also the earliest. The dictating of the poems was laborious and expensive, but Euboean merchants had the means and through their Eastern contacts they acquired the technology of writing.

It is likely that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, as well as the poems of Hesiod from nearby Boeotia, were written down on the island of Euboea, and were first in the possession of Euboeans.

What can have been our Palamedes’ motives for fashioning texts of such unprecedented length and complexity? What did our scribe, who had the backing of wealth and an unknown purpose, do with the texts once he had them? If he was also the inventor of the alphabet, he was the only man in the world able to read the first texts, until others could learn the secrets of his method. We know that Homer’s texts were the basis of Greek education by the sixth century BC; credibly they were the basis for Greek education from the moment of the alphabet’s invention.

## 2

## The Historian's Homer

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The philologist wants to know the origin of the first text of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* (but by no means the beginning of the tradition embodied in those texts, which must be very old). The historian shares the philologist's keen interest in the date when the written epics came into being, but wishes to extract from Homer's texts as much information as possible about how people lived then and what they thought. Homer sang the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, and someone created a text from his song. But how much of this long-ago world depends on poetic fancy and how much reflects a real world in which a real poet once lived? Here is the historian's challenge.

### Homer and the Bronze Age

Homer's relationship to the Bronze Age remains a persistent problem. Archeological research has revealed the rich and powerful world of the Mycenaean Greeks that flourished c. 1600–1150 BC and collapsed in a general conflagration in the Balkans, the Aegean Sea, Anatolia, Cyprus, and the Levant (but not in Mesopotamia or Egypt). The Trojan War, if there was a Trojan War, must have taken place in the Bronze Age. Heinrich Schliemann (1822–90), who discovered the Greek Bronze Age when he excavated Troy in Asia Minor and Mycenae on the Greek mainland in the late nineteenth century, appeared to prove that Homer's stories must somehow be based in fact, in history. After all, Mycenae and Troy were real places that really burned down. Homer was describing the Bronze Age, Schliemann thought, and until recently many have agreed. The powerful, even astonishing, walls of what Homer aptly calls "well-girt Troy," the overtly military style of the Mycenaean citadels

on the Greek mainland and the exquisite armor found in Mycenaean graves, including a gold death-mask that Schliemann thought belonged to Agamemnon, agreed with Homer's general descriptions of wealthy Greeks with a taste for aggression and wealthy Trojans in a position to resist it (Figure 10).

The citadel at Mycenae well accorded with the power of Agamemnon as described by Homer; in the Classical Period, by contrast, Mycenae was a miserable village. The later work of Parry and Lord appeared to validate the equation of Homer's world with Mycenaean Greece because it explained how through oral tradition Homer could inherit his knowledge of what happened 400 years earlier.

The more we learned about the Greek Bronze Age, however, the greater appeared the discrepancy between it and Homer's world. Homer knows nothing about the enormous Mycenaean "beehive" or *tholos* tombs, a sort of underground conical vault sometimes of huge dimensions, visited today by thousands of tourists every year outside the walls of Mycenae. In Homer's poems, bodies are always cremated, whereas in the Late Bronze Age they were interred in these beehive tombs (Figure 11).



Figure 10. The author before the walls of Troy, from level VI, c. 1250 BC. The finely built walls incline slightly inward and are reinforced by vertical batters at regular intervals. Photo © the author



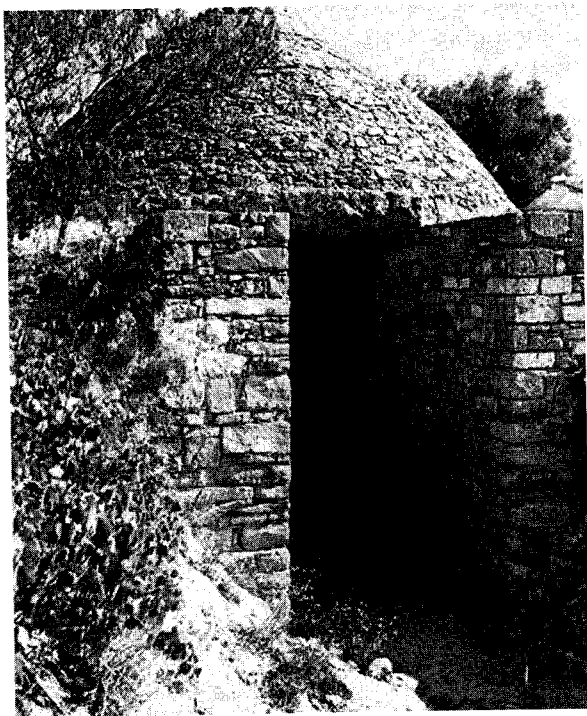


Figure 11. A tholos “beehive” tomb, near Pylos in the southwestern Peloponnese, c. 1300 BC. In the *Iliad*, the garrulous septuagenarian Nestor came from “sandy Pylos.” Photo by author

Homer knows nothing of the palace bureaucracies supported by the syllabic writing we call Linear B, engraved by professional scribes on clay tablets. Homer’s picture of independent warrior chieftains who live, like Odysseus, in rectangular pitched-roof halls with no decoration and packed earth floors poorly agrees with the regulated monarchies of Bronze Age Mycenae, Cnossus, Pylos, and Thebes where kings lived in square flat-roofed halls with stone floors and elaborate fresco decorations on the walls, from where they presided over an elaborate and hierarchical economic machine.

A once long list of Bronze Age elements claimed for the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* has since the mid-twentieth century shrunk to a few items. There is the Trojan War itself – assuming that some historical incident must have inspired stories about it. Weapons are always made of bronze, although Homer describes everyday tools as made of iron. There is

the helmet made of boars’ tusks sewn to a felt cap mentioned in Book 10 of the *Iliad*, the “Song of Dolon” (10.260–271). Illustrations of just such odd helmets appear on frescoes at Pylos c. 1200 BC in the southwest Peloponnese and, astonishingly, pictured on papyri from the capital of the Egyptian heretic pharaoh Akhenaten (c. 1367–1350 BC). Such helmets are found in Mycenaean graves from the 16th to the 11th centuries BC (Figure 12), but they are never illustrated after around 1200 BC, when they seem to have gone out of style. In fact Homer calls the helmet an heirloom, something from an earlier age, and gives its pedigree; even in Homer the boars’ tusk helmet is an antique.



Figure 12. Bronze armor and an intact boars’ tusk helmet from a grave in the Peloponnese, c. 1200 BC. Nauplion Museum / photo Archaeological Receipts Fund – TAP Service



Most shields in Homer are round, but several times Homer describes a shield “like a wall,” which Ajax carries (e.g. *Il.* 7.219). Hector’s shield is usually round, but once it is so large that it “bangs against his ankles and neck” (*Il.* 6.117–118), as if it too were “like a wall.” Homer seems to confuse two kinds of shield, the round shield common already toward the end of the Late Bronze Age, and another earlier one similar to the high, broad “tower” shields pictured on daggers from the shaft graves at Mycenae, c. 1600 BC (Figure 13). The Cretans from an early time had used tall body-shields in the shape of a figure of eight made of oxhide stretched over a wooden frame. The Mycenaean Greeks copied this style of shield from them, and Homer seems to know something about both kinds.

A similar confusion between old and new appears in Homer’s descriptions of fighting with spears. According to artistic representations, fighters in the Bronze Age used a single, thrusting spear, sometimes very long (see Figure 13). All figural illustrations disappear from Greek art around 1150 BC, but when warriors again appear in Geometric art of the eighth century BC, they now carry two spears, shorter and lighter. These must be the javelins that Homeric warriors throw at one another. Achilles, by contrast, greatest warrior of all, still fights with a single huge spear; yet this he throws, as if it were a javelin (*Il.* 22.273)!

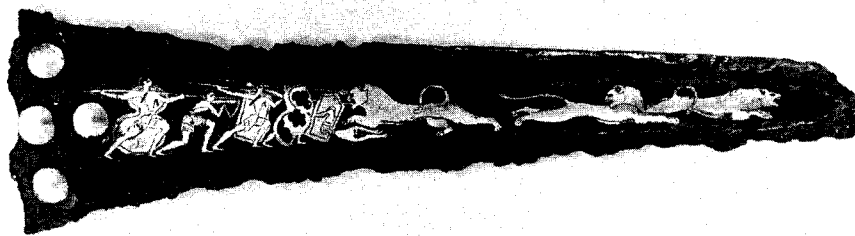


Figure 13. A dagger blade from a shaft grave at Mycenae, a kind of grave built earlier than the beehive tombs, c. 1600 BC. Using metal-working skills of extreme sophistication, the craftsman has represented in gold and silver inlaid in iron (called “niello”) four figures fighting a lion. From the left: a spearsman takes aim, his “figure-of-eight” shield slung over his shoulder; a bowman takes aim; a second spearsman takes aim, his “tower” shield slung over his shoulder; a third spearsman covers his body with a “figure-of-eight” shield, covered in spotted cowhide; a fifth fighter lies dead beneath the paws of the lion, his “tower” shield still standing. National Archaeological Museum, Athens / photo Archaeological Receipts Fund – TAP Service

Finally, three names in a Linear B tablet from Thebes also appear in the Boeotian entry in the Catalogue of Ships. These names are otherwise completely unknown, perhaps frozen in formulaic language and so passed on.

Evidently there are strata in such descriptions, as if a few things or practices from earlier times, from the Bronze Age itself, have been frozen in the highly stylized oral-formulaic language of the *oidoi*. Several metrical irregularities in the vulgate text are explicable on a reconstruction of word-forms that may have been current in the Bronze Age. The song tradition must therefore go back to the Late Bronze Age, and maybe much earlier.

Homer, of course, has no sense of history. Oral song speaks to the concerns and assumptions of contemporaries, who have no sense of history either. If you are an *oidos*, it is important to keep up with the times, to know the latest song. Telemachus, Odysseus’ son, snaps to his mother Penelope, who complains about Phemius’ song about the Trojan War:

“My mother, why do you oppose letting the good minstrel give pleasure any way he chooses? It is not *oidoi* that are to blame, but Zeus I think is to blame, who gives to men that live by labor to each as he wishes. No one can be angry if he sings of the evil doom of the Danaans, for men praise that song the most which comes newest to their ears.” (*Od.* 1.346–352)

### Homer’s World and the Classical Polis

Most scholars now agree that Homer’s world, while embodying artifacts from earlier times, from the Bronze Age and the Iron Age, is mostly the world of his own day, the early Archaic Period of the eighth century BC, now called the Greek Renaissance. Truly in the eighth century BC a new world was born in Hellas from the detritus of the Mycenaean civilization that collapsed 300 years before. If we can trust Homer’s testimony, the *polis*, usually translated “city-state,” the characteristic manner of political organization in the Classical Period, was even then coming into being.

The classical *polis* was a development of the *oikos* or “household” as an economic unit with a structure of authority. Homer well describes the *oikos* of Odysseus on Ithaca, where the master of the house has absolute authority even to kill members of his household or those who threaten it. He owns surrounding lands and orchards and herds by which he supports his family and slaves. Telemachus, seeking support outside the *oikos*

for violations within it, calls an assembly of neighboring *oikoi*, the first in twenty years (*Od.* 2.26–27), to complain about the suitors, but the assembly lacks the power to act. From such assemblies will later grow the full-blown legislative bodies of the classical *polis*.

The classical *polis* grew through consolidation, by whatever means, of many *oikoi* into a single unit. A *polis* included the free people living within a certain geographical area, both those within a city with its walls, buildings, and places of meeting, and those who lived in the outlying countryside, with its farms, slaves, and livestock. The *polis* was a kind of miniature state that unified its diverse members through common goals and myths and a place of assembly (*agora*) for all adult males to meet and make decisions affecting the group, not just the elite such as Odysseus, Achilles, and Agamemnon.

A *polis* is focused on a god or gods who embody its strength and spirit and sponsor its success. The gods are ritually flattered in having their own precincts or temples. There is one such freestanding temple in the *Iliad*, where Homer describes (*Il.* 6.297) the Trojan queen at the head of a procession to place a robe on the knees of Athena. The image is within a temple served by a priestess with a key, the only clear reference in the poems to a cult practice common in the classical *polis*. The centerpiece of the Panathenaic Festival in Athens was the giving of a new robe to Athena's statue in the Parthenon. But in no sense is Troy, ruled by a hereditary king, a Greek *polis*, and the giving of the robe may depend on an Eastern literary exemplar. For 2,000 years before Homer, Mesopotamians and Egyptians had paid daily attention to, and regularly changed the clothes of, statues in shrines. Still, the detail nicely accords with the earliest free-standing temples to appear in Greece, in the early eighth century BC (in Perachora near Corinth and on the island of Samos).

There are other hints in Homer that the *polis* is coming into being. When Hector declares that “he has no dishonor who dies fighting for his country, for then his wife shall be saved, and his children, and his houses and buildings shall not be damaged” (*Il.* 15.496–498), he declares loyalty to a public sphere as well as a private one. In the *Odyssey*, Alcinous, king of the Phaeacians, rules over a walled city built on a peninsula, where there are no temples, but special places set aside for the gods.

The sure sign of the evolved *polis* was the hoplite line, or *phalanx*, of the fifth century BC when the citizens stood side by side in a rigorous formation of rows many ranks deep. With the shield in his left hand, the warrior protected his neighbor's right flank while presenting his single thrusting spear to the enemy, who stood in a similar formation. Several

times Homer refers to a *phalanx* of fighters (e.g. *Il.* 6.6, 11.90), the same word used for the formation of hoplite fighters in the classical *polis*, but he cannot mean the same thing. In the classical *phalanx* the hoplite warrior does not fight for himself, but for the protection of the man beside him and the glory of the *polis* that the formation of the *phalanx* represents. The whole spirit of the *polis* was embodied in the classical *phalanx*. In Homeric free-for-all fighting, by contrast, the individual hero stands before the crowd, eager to win acclamation and personal glory, although sometimes the assembled fighters fall into dense formations.

The shift between the glory-hungry heroes of Homer's Trojan War and the glory-hungry *polis* of the Classical Period is radical, and the hoplite *phalanx* is the sign that we have crossed the divide. We can probably date this shift to the early seventh century, to judge from shields dedicated at the shrine of Zeus at Olympia. Earlier shields, like those in Homer, were carried by a strap across the shoulder, a *telamon*, but the hoplite fighter carried his small round shield by means of a loop affixed in the center of the shield through which he passed his arm to grip a fixture at the edge of the shield. Thus the hoplite fighter could use his shield as a weapon in close encounter. We cannot trace the evolution of the hoplite line as such, and it may have been an invention that appeared suddenly at one time.<sup>1</sup> Against Homeric-style fighters, an organized line would be devastating, and once someone tried it, other communities would follow or perish.

### Homer and the Age of Colonial Expansion

The *Iliad* is a traditional tale about heroic behavior, hence more stylized than the *Odyssey* and less interested in Homer's contemporary world. The *Odyssey*, by contrast, with its theme of travel to distant lands, gives a vivid picture of an exciting and dangerous world inspired by contemporary Euboean adventure in the far west in the eighth century BC. In this dangerous world men sail for long distances on open boats, encounter storms and other more fantastic dangers, and sometimes return home laden with booty. In the following passage, in a “lying tale” that Odysseus tells to the swineherd Eumaeus when he returns to Ithaca, he describes the

<sup>1</sup> In historical times the great Zulu leader Shaka of the nineteenth century (d. 1828) created a style of fighting similar to the ancient Greek *phalanx* in armor and tactics and quickly overwhelmed all who came against him.

restless, aggressive spirit that was changing the political and economic structure of peoples living around the Mediterranean Sea during the Greek Renaissance of the eighth century BC:

“Ares and Athena gave me courage, and strength that breaks the ranks of men. And whenever I picked the best warriors for an ambush, sowing the seeds of evil for the enemy, never did my proud spirit fear death, but always I was first to leap forth and kill with my spear whoever of the foe gave way in flight before me. Such a man I was in war, but labor in the field was not to my liking, nor the care of a household, which rears fine children. Oared ships were ever dear to me and wars and polished spears and arrows – grievous things, at which others shudder.” (*Od.* 14.216–226)

A sailor of wide experience, he goes on to explain how he attacked even Egypt, was captured, then turned over to Phoenicians who planned to enslave him. The Phoenicians sail from somewhere in the Levant and drive before the wind toward Libya, but are storm-wrecked on southern Crete. Odysseus improbably lands in Thesprotia, a territory far to the north of Crete on the mainland opposite Ithaca.

At the end of the Iron Age, in the late ninth and early eighth centuries, the Phoenicians were ethnic and cultural antagonists to the Greeks, or lived with them cheek by jowl as both groups exploited the mineral and other wealth of Africa, Sicily, Sardinia, Italy, Spain, and France. Phoenicians built the city of Kition in southeastern Cyprus some time in the ninth century BC in close proximity to the Greek city of Salamis to the northeast. Phoenicians were living at Kommos on the south coast of Crete from the mid-ninth century BC too – perhaps on the same route that Odysseus describes in his false tale. In the eighth century BC they built a tripartite stone temple at Kommos in the Semitic Levantine style. Very early Phoenician inscriptions, perhaps from the late ninth century BC, are found on Sardinia. Phoenician jewelers were living near Cnossus around 900 BC to judge from material finds and one long inscription. From the archeological evidence, the Phoenician expansion began in the early ninth century BC, no doubt in response to pressure by the powerful Assyrians under Ashurnasirpal II (ruled 883–859 BC), who at this time defeated the Aramaeans of north Syria (Aram = Damascus), then marched via Carchemish on the Euphrates to the Mediterranean and occupied the Levantine ports.

Homer’s descriptions of Phoenician/Greek rivalry and hostility, yet occasional intimacy (Eumaeus’ nurse was a Phoenician woman), accords closely with the archeological evidence that Phoenicians and Greeks lived

together on the island of Ischia in the Bay of Naples in the eighth century BC. Of course the Greeks are adapting their writing from that of the Phoenicians. Whereas we cannot follow Odysseus’ famous and fantastic wanderings on a map, already in his *Theogony* Hesiod places Circe’s residence on an island off the Italian coast (*Theogony* 1015–1016), and the dangerous Strait of Messina between Sicily and Italy stands behind the mythical Scylla and Charybdis, according to Thucydides (4.24). Thucydides also (1.25) identifies Phaeacia with Corcyra. Ithaca is the jumping-off place for travel from East to West.

Odysseus has the sure evaluating eye of the experienced colonist at a time when the earliest Greek colonies are about to spring up in southern Italy and Sicily. The earliest colony was on Ischia c. 775 BC; most other western colonies followed in the last third of the eighth century BC. The bestial Cyclopes are like the foreign peoples who lack Greek crafts, skills, and imagination, monstrous in their way of life as they are monstrous in appearance. Of the island that lies across from the Cyclops’ cave, Homer says:

Now there is a level island that stretches at an angle outside the harbor, neither close to the shore of the land of the Cyclopes, nor yet far off, a wooded isle. There live wild goats beyond counting, for the tread of men does not scare them away, nor do hunters come there, who endure labors in the woodland as they course over mountain peaks. Neither do flocks dwell there, nor is the land plowed, but unsown and untilled all the days it knows nothing of men, but feeds the bleating goats. For the Cyclopes have at hand no ships with vermilion cheeks, nor are there ship builders in their land who might build them well-benched ships that would perform all their needs in passing to the cities of other people as men often cross the sea in ships to visit one another – craftsmen who would have made of this isle also a fair settlement. For the island is in no way poor, but would bear all things in season. In it are meadows by the shores of the gray sea, well-watered meadows and soft, where vines would never fail, and in it level plow land whence they might reap from season to season deep harvests, so rich is the soil beneath, and in it, too, is a harbor giving safe anchorage, where there is no need of moorings, either to throw out anchor-stones or to make fast stern-cables, but one may beach one’s ship and wait until the sailors’ minds bid them put out, and the breezes blow fair. (*Od.* 9.116–139)

Odysseus may here have the eye of a man of colonial enterprise, but Odysseus’ fictional character in the story he tells to Eumaeus is a man

of violence, who rejects home and family. He is a pirate, a killer, and a thief, who becomes wealthy through depredation, hence respected in his Cretan home where no moral opprobrium attaches to his behavior. Not only in the general climate of the *Odyssey* do we seem to perceive the realia of Greek life in the eighth century BC, but in the cutthroat behavior of its relentless, brave-hearted men.

### Homer and Art

Homer's fascination with objects of art that are vivid and lifelike provides a good example of the problems we face in trying to establish a relationship between a real historical world and the story Homer tells. He must be inspired by objects he has seen, but through poetic invention has transformed them into something new. In Book 18 of the *Iliad* Homer describes Hephaestus crafting a shield for Achilles. It is a beautiful, extraordinary object, a living thing. The narrative on the shield is not, however, set in the heroic age where Homer's own story plays out, where gods converse with men, but in an everyday world that must be Homer's own.

On the shield are two cities, one at peace and one at war. In the city at peace is a wedding and the public resolution of a homicide, a pre-*polis* post-Bronze Age world in which kings do not adjudicate, as elsewhere in Homer, nor courts, as in the classical *polis*, but "judges," men acclaimed for wisdom and fairness:

But the people were gathered in the place of assembly, for a conflict had arisen, and two men were in strife about the blood-price of a man who was killed. The one declared that he had paid all, proclaiming his cause to the people, but the other refused to accept it, and each hoped to win the dispute on the word of a referee. The people were cheering both sides, showing favor to this side and that. Heralds held back the people, and the elders sat on polished stones in the sacred circle, holding in their hands the staffs of the loud-voiced heralds. With these they would spring up and give judgment, each in turn. In the midst lay two talents of gold to be given to him who among them should utter the most righteous judgment. (*Il.* 18.497–508)

In the city at war, an army prepares a siege from one side while from the other an ambush from the city leads to an all-out battle. There is

Strife and Tumult and Fate, but no Apollo or Ares or Hera. There are also scenes of plowing, harvesting, feasting, herds and lions who attack them, the tending of grapes, and a dancing floor.

To judge from the tools Hephaestus uses, the designs in Achilles' shield were worked in repoussé, a technique of hammering and pressing designs in relief, not the Mycenaean metalwork of exquisite inlay. A half dozen surviving Phoenician metal bowls and dedicatory shields from the eighth and seventh centuries BC are similarly worked in repoussé. They show elaborate scenes, in an Egyptianizing style, of dance and feasting and kings sitting on thrones. There are also cities under siege and hunts. Homer and his audience must have seen objects like these, found in Nimrud in Assyria, on Crete, on Cyprus, and in Italy.

Homer never describes mythical events on objects of art, but by the end of the first quarter of the seventh century, around 675 BC, Greek artists begin to make pictures of Greek myths. Almost simultaneously on the Aegean islands of Samos and Myconos and from Etruscan Caere in Italy are found pictures of a team of men blinding a one-eyed giant, one of the oldest certain artistic representations of a Greek myth (Figure 14).

The representation of myth in art is a radical shift in the history of art. Narrative art in pictures is familiar to us because of the Greek tradition, but is without good analogues in earlier Near Eastern and Egyptian art, which was almost entirely political, commemorative, decorative, or magical. Although Mesopotamians made pictures of monsters, mostly on tiny seals, to which Greek art owes a good deal, we are never sure of the names of these monsters or their deeds. By contrast, all agree that several men blinding a huge man with a stake represents the story of Odysseus blinding Polyphemus.

Have the Polyphemus artists of c. 675 BC in some way been exposed to the text of Homer's *Odyssey*, presumably through rhapsodic presentation? It is hard to explain otherwise why no one ever made a picture of a team of men blinding a one-eyed giant until then, when artists from one end of the Mediterranean to the other suddenly do so, but in different ways, unless they are all subject to the same stimulus. As in the case of the Cup of Nestor, to which the Ischia inscription refers, the only evidence we have for the existence in ancient Greece of the Polyphemus story is Homer's poem, and many scholars believe it to be, in this form, Homer's own invention. It is plausible that copies of *Odyssey* Book 9, excerpted from the *Odyssey*, circulated independently in the early seventh century among Greek travelers. Represented even in far-off Italy, the poem inspired artists to make these pictures.

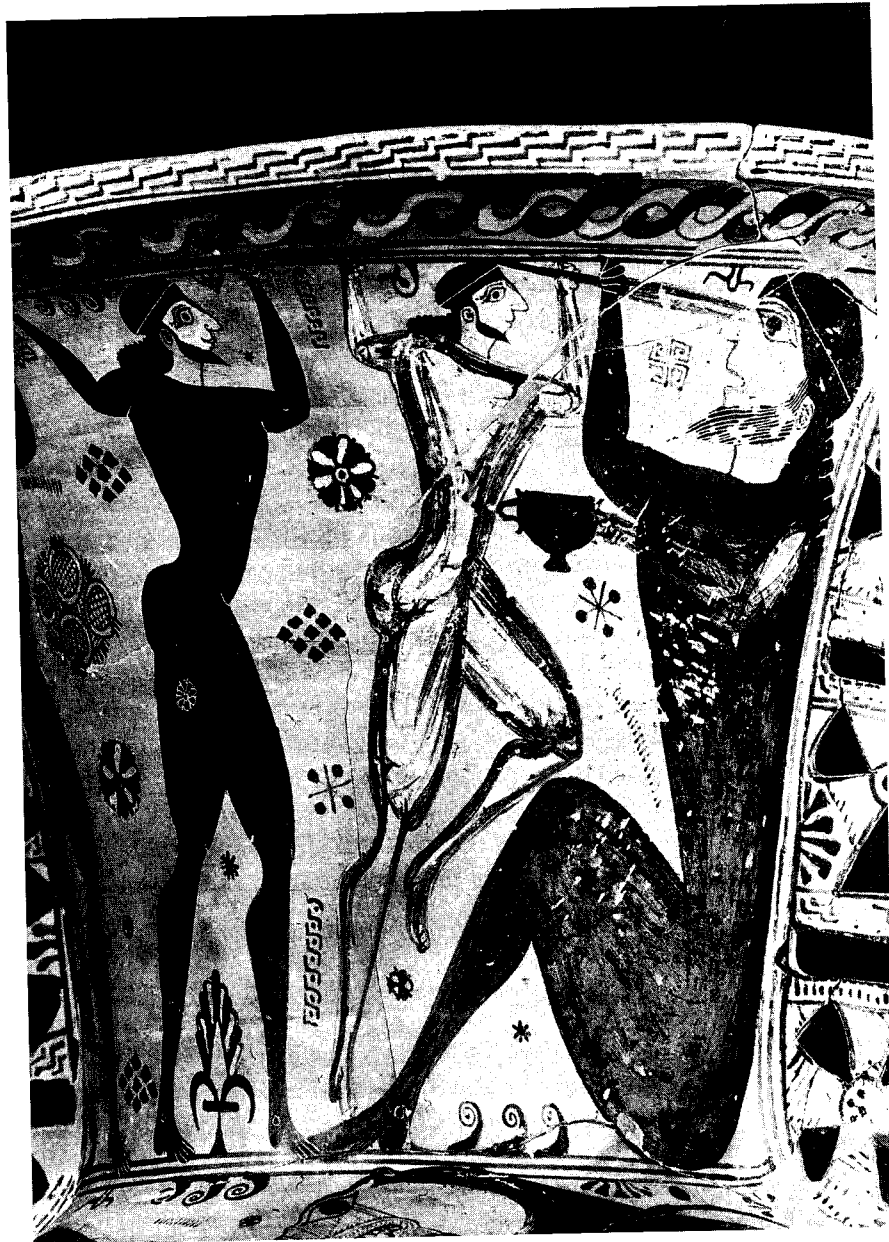


Figure 14. Odysseus and his men blind Cyclops. Odysseus, shown in white to distinguish him from his men (usually white denotes a female), rams the stake into Polyphemus' eye. The giant holds the wine-cup by which Odysseus made him drunk. From the neck of a large amphora at Eleusis, c. 675 BC. Eleusis Museum / photo Archaeological Receipts Fund – TAP Service

After 675 BC and the Polyphemus pictures, “mythic” representations begin to flood into Greek art. Most myths illustrated in Greek art in the seventh and sixth centuries BC are not, however, taken from the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* but from epic poems now lost. These poems are called the Cyclic Poems because they appeared to be composed “in a circle” around the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, filling out what came before and after the Trojan War. Texts of the Cyclic Poems were no doubt far better known than the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* because they were far shorter, thus more portable, easier to store, less expensive to reproduce, and easier to recite. Texts, reproducible and memorizable, of once oral poems were spreading the knowledge of Greek epic, once the possession of the elite, into every corner of Greek society. The spread of such texts must stand behind the revolutionary change of subject matter in Greek art in the seventh century. The province of the *noidos*, with his storehouse of myth, was the hall of the numerically few rich and powerful; rhapsodes declaimed before the people whenever they got the chance.

#### Homer and the Near East

Homer's poems are regarded as the beginning of classical Greek civilization, the *fons et origo* of Western culture. As the first texts in the Greek alphabet, which became the basis for Greek and Roman education, they are just that. On the other hand, as the Greek alphabet was based on a preexisting all-phonetic writing 1000 years old in the days of Homer, so Homer's stories, and much of his imaginative world, were taken from earlier Eastern and especially Semitic peoples. Many are surprised that the basic stories of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are not Greek in origin. In recent decades we have learned how Homer is part of a cultural continuum traceable to the fourth millennium BC in the ancient Near East. We must understand Homer in the context of the greater and earlier world beyond.

Our best source of information about pre-Greek legend is in the Akkadian epic *Gilgamesh*, which survives in its most complete version on twelve tablets found at the Assyrian capital of Nineveh, destroyed in 612 BC by a coalition of Babylonians and Persians. But the poem is much older; pieces of it survive from as early as the third millennium written in the Sumerian language in cuneiform script. Other portions turned up in the Indo-European Hittite capital of Hattusas, destroyed c. 1200 BC, and in other scattered settlements around the Near East. Such texts are

never dictated transcriptions of oral songs, however, but scribal compositions created in the scribal workshops to impress, amuse, and instruct other scribes.

The story of Gilgamesh, whose close friend Enkidu dies through Gilgamesh's arrogant behavior, parallels the story of Achilles, whose friend Patroclus dies because Achilles will not live by the rules. The theme of the long journey and return home, which governs the structure of the *Odyssey*, also informs the second half of *Gilgamesh*, when after Enkidu's death Gilgamesh journeys to the end of the world to solve the mystery of death.

Not only does Homer borrow such general themes from earlier Mesopotamian tradition, but specific details are also traceable to the East. Odysseus is a naked unkempt man when Nausicaa discovers him emerging from the bushes beside the sea on the island of Phaeacia and, in a scene of sexual tension, leads him into town; in *Gilgamesh* a harlot seduces and tames the naked wild man Enkidu whom she meets by a waterhole, then takes him to town. The never-never land of Homer's Phaeacians has much in common with the magical land of the wise Utnapishtim in *Gilgamesh* who, like Noah, survived the Flood and now lives beyond the waters at the edge of the earth. Odysseus also crosses the waters that surround the earth to consult with the wise Tiresias. His savage appearance before Nausicaa echoes Gilgamesh's wildness when he comes on Siduri, the ale-maid at the edge of the waters. Returning from Aeolus' island, Odysseus falls asleep and loses Ithaca, just as Gilgamesh falls asleep outside the house of Utnapishtim. The Odyssean *Nekuia*, "descent to the land of the dead," has much in common with a separate poem about Gilgamesh called "Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and the Underworld," which includes the detail of a man who died by falling off a roof. As Odysseus' men perish when they kill the cattle of the sun, so does Enkidu die after he and Gilgamesh kill the Bull of Heaven. In both cases a god threatens to invert the upper and lower worlds unless the gods' will prevails.

A wide range of small details in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are also paralleled in Eastern sources: for example, Menelaus' fathering of a child on a concubine; the splendor of Alcinous' palace; Menelaus' transportation to a paradise at the ends of the earth; Penelope's refusal to eat; the four streams of water on Calypso's island; Calypso's special food of ambrosia and nectar; a simile about the wind and the chaff; Nausicaa compared to a date palm; the metal dogs in front of the palace of Alcinous; the disappearance of the island of the Phaeacians; the sacrifice spurned by the gods; the use of protective plants (*moly* in the *Odyssey*); Odysseus'

necromancy on the shores of Ocean; the name of the Sirens; the suitors' reluctance to kill one of royal stock; Penelope's bed covered with tears; the punishment by amputation of ears and nose; the radiance surrounding a divinity; birth "from oak or stone"; the bow that only the hero can draw; the archery contest; the contemptuous hurling of a leg of beef (at Odysseus); Laertes' fainting at his reunion with Odysseus – to name but a few.

A remarkable example of narrative dependence on Eastern models is found in *Iliad* 5 (330ff.) where Diomedes has wounded Aphrodite in battle. She then flees to her family in heaven for comfort. Weeping, she falls into the lap of her mother Dionê ("Mrs. Zeus"). Dionê comforts her with mythical examples, while Hera and Athena make sarcastic remarks. Zeus calls his daughter over to him and gently advises her to stay out of battle. She should worry, rather, about love and marriage. In *Gilgamesh*, after Gilgamesh has killed the monster Humbaba, he washes his hair and polishes his weapons and is so handsome that Ishtar, seeing him, asks that "you grant me your fruit as a gift." Gilgamesh rudely spurns the sex-goddess and recites a long list of lovers whom she has destroyed. "When Ishtar heard this, she went in a rage to her father Anu, to her mother Antu. Her tears were flowing. 'My father, Gilgamesh has insulted me, he has numbered my insults, my insults and curses!' Anu opened his mouth, and he spoke to great Ishtar, 'You did incite the king of Uruk, therefore Gilgamesh numbered your insults, your insults and curses'" (Tablet VI, 80–91). In each scene an offended daughter complains before a consoling mother and a somewhat distant and bemused father. The characters are the same: the goddess of love Aphrodite = Ishtar; the god of the sky Anu = Zeus; and his wife Antu = Dionê. Here, and only here, in all of Greek literature is Dionê Zeus's consort. Dionê is a feminine form of Zeus, just as Antu is a feminine form of Anu.

Twice as many Eastern poetic motifs are found in the *Iliad* as in the *Odyssey*. There can be no doubt that Homer inherited a tradition of storytelling that crossed linguistic and cultural lines. There must have been not only bilingual speakers, but bilingual singers. In the mixed population of Euboeans and Phoenicians, or coastal Syrians, archeologically attested in Italy, Crete, and Euboea, such bilingual singers must have appeared. A scribe (not a poet) literate in West Semitic writing, familiar with the ancient West Semitic tradition of creating poetic texts through dictation, tried his hand at recording Greek epic. In making suitable changes to the West Semitic writing, he invented the technological basis for the texts of the Homeric poems and for Western civilization.

### Religion in Homer

The Homeric gods are a gang of ill-tempered, often ridiculous beings whose petty jealousies are unconstrained by the seriousness of human life. They are *athanatoi*, the “deathless ones,” whose members have staked out spheres of interest. Yet their immortality cheats them of the seriousness that attends human decisions and human behavior. Our acts count because we are going to die, but the gods are free to be petty forever.

The anthropomorphic and human-all-too-human behavior of the Homeric gods was already the object of Xenophanes’ criticism in the sixth century BC, as we saw earlier. Nor do the Homeric gods fit modern notions of what a god should be. They squabble, scheme, seduce, deceive, betray, and exercise violence against one another. In the *Iliad*, they take sides in the war as much as the human combatants (although Homer is vague on why they divide as they do). They have favorites and enter into battle themselves, but without serious consequences.

But the principal setting for the gods’ behavior is the banquet hall, a projection into poetry of the houses of Greek aristocrats of the Iron Age. In such banquet halls – the best evidence for which is Homer’s own descriptions – there was plenty of food when food was scarce and valuable, plenty of wine and the tipsiness it brings, and the enchanting song of the *aidos*. As the *aidos* Demodocus in the *Odyssey* sings for the royal court of the Phaeacians, so does Apollo sing for the gods, and Homer for a society for which little material evidence remains. The banquet was the good life in heaven as on earth, but on earth clouded by the certainty of death. A central theme of the *Odyssey* is the perverted banquet, when the good life becomes a pretext for rapine and a setting for mass murder. Forever like brattish children the gods dine idly on Mount Olympus, a sometimes dysfunctional extended family in a happy-go-lucky never-never land mountain-top of unending sensual pleasure:

Olympus is the abode of the gods that stands fast forever, neither shaken by winds or wet with rain nor does snow fall upon it, but the air is spread out clear and cloudless, and over it hovers a radiant whiteness. Here the blessed gods are happy all their days. (*Od.* 6.42–46)

Every modern reader of Homer wonders, “Did the Greeks really believe in such inconsequential gods?” Let us first ask how the Homeric heroes themselves approached the gods in their own religion. Several examples show how Homeric religion did not so much depend on mutual

relationships with the gods as it depended on the proper performance of traditional ritual. For example, when Odysseus comes in disguise to the hut of his faithful swineherd Eumaeus, Eumaeus kills a pig in sacrifice (*Od.* 14.420–453). “And he did not forget the immortal gods, because he was of a good mind.” First he cuts hair from the piglet and throws it into the fire, “for all the gods.” After butchering the animal, he cuts out thick fat pieces from all its limbs and, as an offering, puts them on the fire, and barley on top of them. When the meat is divided, he sets aside a portion “for the nymphs and for Hermes.” Finally, before eating, he burns “first offerings for the immortal gods.” Homer never tells us which gods exactly are intended for most of the offerings, or why only a single portion is reserved for Hermes and the nymphs, or why these gods are appropriate in this occasion or how exactly they are to receive the portion set aside for them.

Similarly, in the opening scene of the *Iliad*, to appease Apollo’s anger and stop the plague, the Greeks give up Apollo’s priest’s daughter Chryseis to her father Chryses, then sacrifice and purify the army at Troy (*Il.* 1.313–317), and again they sacrifice and dance and sing the *paian* (a hymn to Apollo) at Chryse (*Il.* 1.430–487). “And the god heard them and rejoiced,” and he sent a fair wind, although we learn from Thetis that at this very time Zeus and all the other gods are dining among the blessed Ethiopians (*Il.* 1.423–424). The smoke of sacrifice is wafted “to heaven,” as if it were inconsequential where Apollo really was. Religion is action and sacrifice is the form of action that religion takes among the Greek heroes, while the precise relationship of gods to the ritual remains vague or contradictory. Again, when Agamemnon returns Achilles’ concubine Briseis, he swears that he has not touched her and to prove his oath sacrifices a pig (19.250–256). We are not told to which god he sacrifices; it’s the act that counts.

On the one hand, then, is the religious behavior of the heroes, and no doubt Homer’s contemporaries, which consists in the killing of animals to establish good relationships with the invisible powers that surround us, whoever they might be. Specific forms of sacrifice are local, but sacrifice to assuage the spirits may be universal in early human religions (the appeasing power of sacrifice remains a central dogma of Christianity).

On the other hand, Homer offers us an entirely literary vision of the family of gods who live on a mountain and conduct themselves as aristocratic humans, except they cannot die. This literary vision of the divine world is Eastern in origin. In Mesopotamia the storm-god Enlil



rules (like Zeus) over a family and court in which the clever water-god Enki (like Poseidon and Hermes) sometimes subverts his pleasure, as the goddess of sex and war Inanna/Ishtar (like Aphrodite and Athena) exercises her wiles and power, and in one story challenges the power of her sister Ereshkigal, goddess of death (like Persephone). The Greek gods enter into battle with humans, and in the West Semitic Ugaritic Baal Epic, the goddess Anat (= Inanna/Ishtar/Astarte)

begins to smite her adversaries in the valley,  
to attack them between the two cities.  
She smites the peoples dwelling on the seashore,  
wreaks destruction on the humans dwelling to the east.  
Under her are heads like balls,  
above her are hands like locusts,  
heaps of fighters' hands are like heaps of grasshoppers.  
She attaches heads around her neck,  
ties hands at her waist.  
Up to her knees she wades in the blood of soldiers,  
to her neck in the gore of fighters.

William W. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger, Jr., eds.,  
*The Context of Scripture: Canonical Compositions from  
the Biblical World* (Leiden, 1997), p. 250

In describing the gods, Homer is therefore using traditional strategies for storytelling inherited from an older non-Greek civilization. The gods' childlike behavior, and the general lack of seriousness in Homer's stories about them, reflects their foreign origin as something separate and unrelated to real religious practice. We should not underestimate, however, Homer's original reshaping of such traditional narrative material to create, as a literary theme in the *Iliad*, a curious tension between the gods' carefree world and the heroes' world of violence and pain. With skill he introduces scenes from Olympus to comment on the mortal dilemma and, in the admixture of the two worlds, impart totality to the Homeric world.

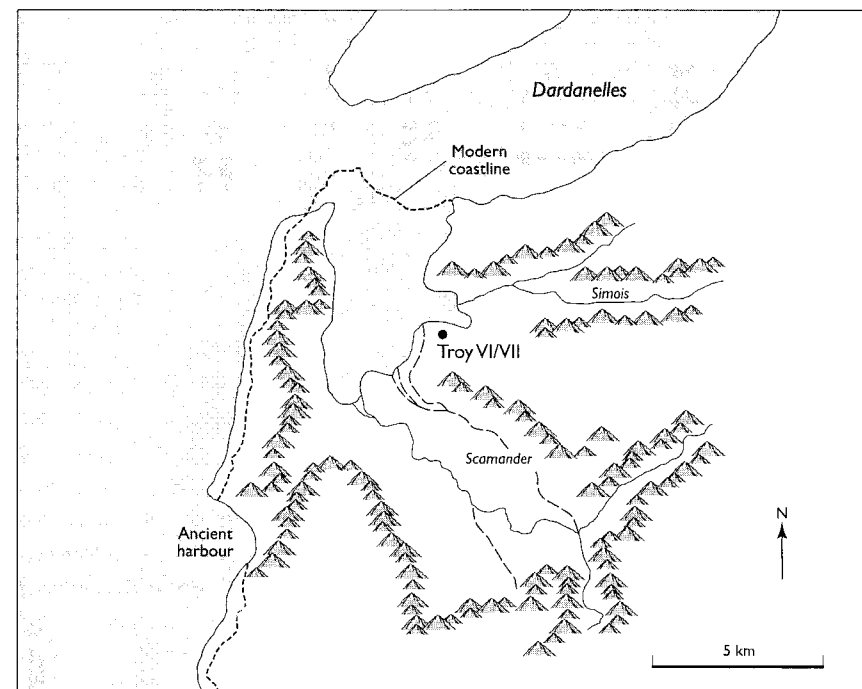
### Homer and Archeology

Was there a Trojan War or wasn't there? Yes, or very probably, but you need to be clear what you mean by Trojan War. We have discussed Homer's relationship to the Bronze Age in general terms, but what else do we

learn from archeological investigation, from things we find in the earth, about the historicity of the Trojan War?

Troy was built on the Dardanelles, where the Hellespont meets the Aegean, the only maritime passage between the Black Sea and the Mediterranean and on a principal land route between Anatolia, and its Mesopotamian hinterland, and Europe (Map 3). The coastline of the Troad, the area around Troy, has changed substantially since the ancient world; effluent from the Simois and Scamander rivers, mentioned repeatedly in the *Iliad*, have silted up a large bay that once reached inland to near the ruins.

The strait has always been a zone of conflict, from the invasions of the Persian king Xerxes (reigned 485–465 BC) and Alexander the Great (356–323 BC) to Winston Churchill's blundering Gallipoli campaign of 1915 (where 133,000 men died in several months, for nothing). It remains heavily militarized today. Truly at the crossroads of international commerce,



Map 3. The Troad in the Late Bronze Age. Once a large shallow harbor lay below the city, but ships (the Achaean fleet?) seemed to have docked at an inlet southwest of the city



the ancient citadel of Troy stood between the powerful and highly organized Hittites to the east and the seafaring Mycenaeans to the west.

According to over a century of intense archeological investigation, there were nine phases of settlement at Troy, one superimposed on top of the other like layers in a cake (Chart 1, Figure 15). The first seven levels are prehistoric, and the eighth and ninth levels are Greek and Roman. The final two prehistoric phases of Troy VI (c. 1800–1250 BC) and VIIa (c. 1250–1180 BC) are most often connected to Homer's story of the Trojan War. In Troy VI, the time of the city's greatest topographical extent and furthest foreign contact, the citadel was fortified with sloping walls of solid stone, twelve feet thick and thirty feet high (see Figure 10). Earthquake appears to have destroyed Troy VI, c. 1250 BC. The survivors rebuilt, but the new city, now Troy VIIa, was soon destroyed again c. 1180 BC,

Chart 1 Chronology of Trojan settlements (dates are approximate)

City	Year	Event
Troy I – settlement on a promontory near the sea	3000–2500 BC	
Troy II – royal citadel	2500–2200	• 2200 BC: great fire, city sacked
Troy III	2200–2100	
Troy IV	2100–1900	
Troy V	1900–1800	
Troy VI – great walls and towers (see Figure 10)	1800–1250	• 1500 BC: first contacts with Mycenaean world • 1250 BC: destruction of Troy VI (Trojan War?)
Troy VIIa	1250–1180	• 1180 BC: destruction of Troy VIIa (Trojan War?)
Troy VIIb	1180–1100	• life among the ruins
Troy VIII – Greek Iliion; archaic and classical settlement as a small market town	950–133	• 950 BC: site perhaps completely abandoned • 750 BC: Greek colony of Iliion founded by immigrants from Lesbos
Troy IX – Roman Iliion; population 3,000 or 4,000	133 BC–AD 500	• 85 BC: sack of city in war between Rome and the Eastern king Mithradates

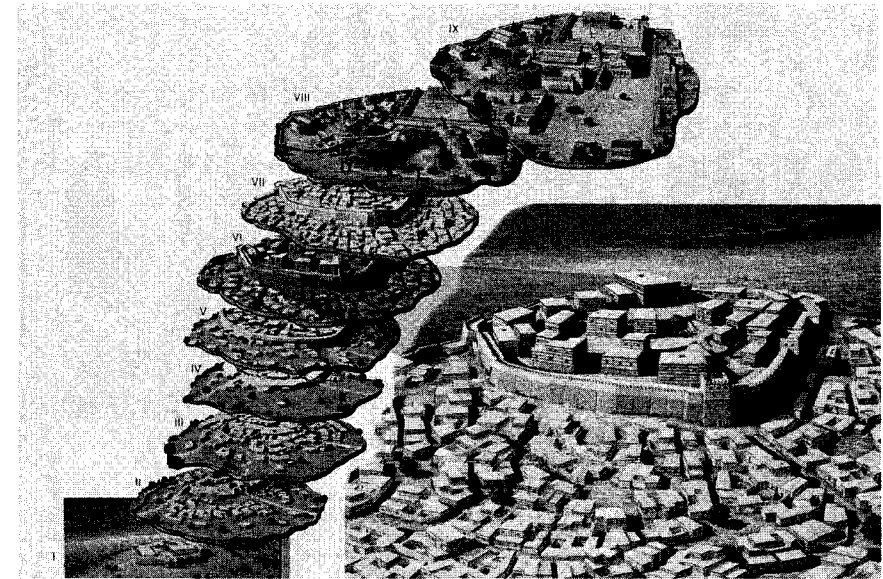


Figure 15. Conjectural drawing showing the superimposed settlements of Troy. Troy VI (c. 1800–1250 BC) and VII (c. 1250–1100 BC) belong to the Late Bronze Age and may have looked something like the models in the lower right. Troy VIII is the Greek city (c. 750–133 BC) and Troy IX is the Roman city (c. 133 BC–AD 500). After a drawing by © Christoph Haußner

this time by human agency; in Troy VIIb squatters lived among the ruins. Was the destruction of c. 1180 BC “the Trojan War”?

In the 1870s, on the advice of a British expatriate living in the Troad, the German Heinrich Schliemann (who also held American citizenship) set out on his legendary search for Homeric Troy at the place still known as Hissarlik (= Turkish “fortress”), an outcropping from the high inland Mount Ida very near the Dardanelles (Figure 16).

Schliemann's sensational finds were heralded across the planet: a city destroyed by fire deep within the mound and a cache of gold and silver objects, quickly dubbed Priam's Treasure. But the burned city that Schliemann found, we now know, belonged to Troy II, c. 2500–2200 BC, far earlier than the Late Bronze Age world of Greek heroic myth, the age of Mycenae's greatest power. Also, there are doubts about the integrity of the treasure that Schliemann found and the circumstances of its discovery. Schliemann's architect, Wilhelm Dörpfeld (1853–1940), exposed the walls of the later citadel of Troy VI in the 1890s and argued that these must be the walls that Homer memorialized. However, in the



Figure 16. The Scamander plain from the top of Hissarlik, the citadel of Troy, looking northwest. The Dardanelles flow just beyond the edge of the land at the top of the picture. Photo by author

1930s, the University of Cincinnati's Carl W. Blegen found signs of crowded housing where people had seemingly retreated after a great earthquake c. 1250 BC. In this level, Troy VIIa, destroyed in turn c. 1180 BC, Blegen found installations for stockpiles of food, as if the inhabitants had anticipated attack. Blegen also found sling stones and bronze arrowheads and spearheads in destruction debris at the west gate, blocked after the earthquake of c. 1250 BC. Blegen's final report on his work at Troy from 1932 to 1938 concluded that the citadel yielded "actual evidence that the town was subjected to siege, capture, and destruction by hostile forces at some time in the general period assigned by Greek tradition to the Trojan War, and that it may safely be identified as the Troy of Priam and Homer."

Since 1995 a German expedition under Manfred Korfman (who died in 2005) has continued the excavations that Schliemann began in the nineteenth century and Blegen continued in the twentieth. According to Korfman, the famous outcrop of Hissarlik excavated by Schliemann and Blegen was only the upper city in a much larger settlement of perhaps 10,000 inhabitants. Immediately outside the citadel, a ditch and

palisade protected a lower city by providing an outer line of defense far beyond the citadel wall, perhaps to inhibit the approach of chariot-borne armies.

Bronze Age Troy, built on a common Anatolian design, must have been an important commercial center, perhaps a royal residence, and cannot have been ignored by the great Bronze Age power of Hattusas in central Anatolia, the kingdom of the mighty Indo-European Hittites (Map 1). The first piece of writing ever found at Troy, in 1995, is a bronze seal inscribed in an Anatolian "hieroglyphic" syllabic script (so-called Luvian) recording a Hittite dialect (Figure 17).

The Hittite archives appear to refer directly to Troy, calling it something like "Wilusa" (= Ilios) and "Taruwisa" (= Troia). From the often difficult contents of the tablets we learn that Wilusa, a territory, was the remotest "Arzawa land," evidently northwest Anatolia, and that it lay

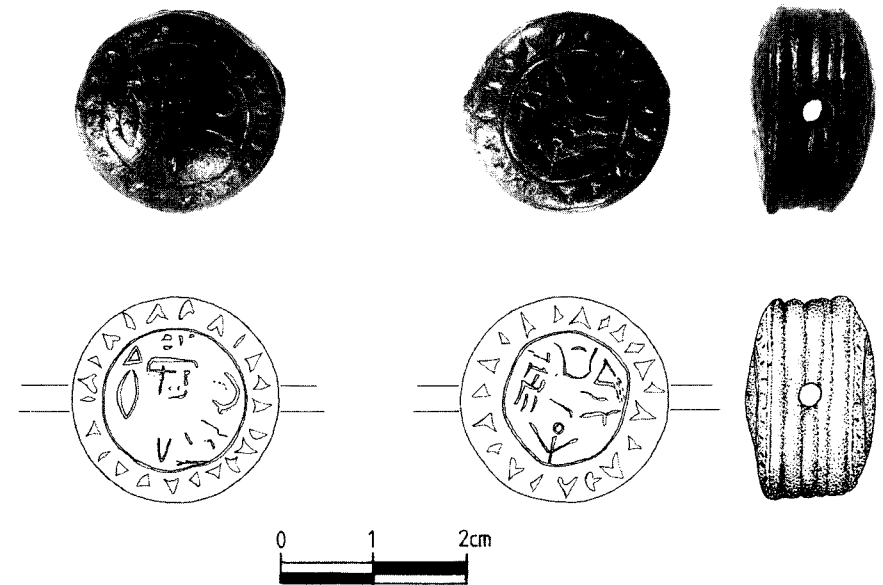


Figure 17. Bronze Hittite-style biconvex seal with Luvian (Hittite) inscription in an Anatolian "hieroglyphic" script, from Troy, c. one inch diameter, c. 1130 BC. Found in a house from the Troy VIIa period, the inscription preserves the incomplete names of a scribe and of a woman. Officials carried such seals as a ring made from a wire threaded through a hole in the seal, or worn on a thong. When "signing" a papyrus document, an official impressed his seal into the clay ball that covered the knot in the string that tied the papyrus roll. Such seals are common all over the Mediterranean, but most are made of stone. Troia-Projekt, University of Tuebingen

on the coast. It would be normal for a large settlement to have the same name as the territory in which it lay, so that the identifications Wilusa = Ilios and Taruwisa = Troia are plausible. In fact these identifications are old, going back to scholarship of the 1920s, but to most at the time they seemed fanciful. We must remember that such comparisons are difficult because the Mesopotamian cuneiform script normally used by Hittite scribes in writing these tablets (unrelated to the so-called “hieroglyphic” script that records a related language, Luvian) does not inform us of the real sounds of names, but only provides hints; such forms as “Taruwisa” and “Wilusa” are scholarly reconstructions and to some degree imaginary. By contrast, we understand the sounds of the Greek names because of the Greek alphabet. Nonetheless, modern reconstructions of political divisions in ancient Anatolia, based on the Hittite tablets, leave little doubt that the empire of Hattusas knew about Troy and had dealings with the Trojans.

Was the Trojan dynasty even a Hittite dynasty? If so, it was politically independent from Hattusas. A Hittite king named Muwatilli concluded a treaty in 1280 BC, the time of Troy VI, with a certain “Alaksandu of Wilusa,” a Hittite form of the Greek *Alexandros*, meaning in Greek something like “defender of men.” Homer calls Paris of Troy “Alexander”! Did a Greek prince wield power at Troy during the Bronze Age?

On numerous occasions the Hittite king complains of a region called “Ahhiyawa,” a powerful territory that lies beyond the almighty reach of Hittite power. The Hittite king strongly disapproves of the behavior of the king of Ahhiyawa, but seems unable to do anything about it. Ahhiyawa must lie across the sea. The Greek *Achaioi*, Homer’s Achaeans, appear to take their name from this very land. A long letter from a Hittite king, named Hattusili, who ruled circa 1267–1237 BC, to the king of Ahhiyawa implies that the two powers had serious differences over Wilusa. In Egypt records of the pharaoh Amenhotep III from the fourteenth century BC refer to a people called the *tnyw*, perhaps the Greek *Danaoi*, Homer’s Danaans. Although the evidence is meager, the historical backdrop of Homer’s description of the Trojan War is accurate enough: a powerful wealthy kingdom on the shores of the Hellespont and an overseas kingdom of Mycenaean Greeks that is not always on friendly relations with Asian power.

The decipherment by British architect Michael Ventris in 1952 of the Linear B script, found in Crete and the mainland, proved that the Mycenaeans (who may have lived in Ahhiyawa, according to Hittite archives) were Greeks; hence there is cultural continuity between the Mycenaeans

and Homer. Whereas the specific issues of responsibility and behavior in the Homeric poems must belong to the eighth century BC, the time of their composition, the poet assumes a remarkable familiarity with the poem’s personnel and the background of the Trojan War. Without question the tradition is very old, and by no means Homer’s invention. The larger story may well preserve authentic historical elements. Hittite and Egyptian knowledge of an important Aegean power; the names Wilusa, Taruwisa, *tnyw*, Alaksandu, and others; the fact of cultural continuity; and the great age of the Homeric hexameter make it likely that reports of an Achaean campaign against an Asian stronghold in the late Bronze Age reflect a real event, inspiring the framework that Homer inherited, within which he placed his contemporary stories of moral crisis and homecoming.

After the destruction and gradual abandonment of Troy VIIb around 1100 BC, the site lay unoccupied for over 200 years. A new city, Troy VIII, now called Ilion, was founded c. 750. Our earliest historical evidence for the identification of Hissarlik with Priam’s citadel involves the curious curse of the Locrian maidens. A favorite scene from the Trojan War among classical Greek vase painters was the rape of Cassandra by the lesser Ajax (the more famous greater Ajax was unrelated), from the district of Locris in central Greece.<sup>2</sup> According to the legend, Ajax the Locrian dragged Priam’s daughter from the cult statue of Athena during the sack of Troy (Figure 18). Their land cursed by Athena, the Locrians, on the advice of the Delphic oracle, sent two virgins from noble families to Ilion in the immediate aftermath of the war, according to Locrian traditions, and every year thereafter to clean and maintain the sanctuary of Athena Ilias there, in repentance for the heinous crime of the lesser Ajax. Inscriptions from Locris and the testimony of historians such as Polybius, writing in the second century BC, agree that the Locrians did in fact send tribute to Ilion (Troy VIII) in the Archaic and Classical Periods (but hardly earlier than that, when Troy was a ruin). When Xerxes stopped at Ilion on his way to invade Greece in 480 BC, he sacrificed 1,000 cattle to Athena Ilias at the same shrine. The locals told him the story about Priam’s citadel and the war fought there long ago.

2 There are two Ajaxes in the poem, one the son of Telamon and often called “the greater Ajax,” the other, the son of Oileus, called “the lesser Ajax.” Just “Ajax” is the son of Telamon. Homer often refers to the “two Ajaxes,” using the dual grammatical number, but he seems sometimes to mean by this (1) the greater and the lesser Ajax or (2) the greater Ajax and his half-brother Teucer, the archer.



Figure 18. Lesser Ajax attacking Cassandra on a red-figure Greek vase, c. 470–460 BC. Stripped nude, Cassandra clings to the statue of Athena while the lesser Ajax pulls her away. To the right (half-shown), Neoptolemus, son of Achilles, is about to murder Astyanax, son of Hector and Andromache. The Altamura Painter, Mixing bowl (calyx krater) with scenes from the fall of Troy (detail) Greek, Early Classical Period. Place of Manufacture: Greece, Attica, Athens. Ceramic Red Figure. Height: 48 cm (18 7/8 in.); diameter: 49 cm (19 5/16 in.) Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

One hundred and fifty years later, Alexander the Great found “armor from the Trojan War” inside the shrine to Athena Ilias, and also “the lyre of Paris.” Other cities, sanctuaries, and alleged relics fueled legend. In the beautiful temple to Athena in the city of Lindos on the island of

Rhodes you could view the helmet of Paris, the gold bracelets of Helen, and the quiver of Pandarus. Athenians commemorated the sack of Troy on the Acropolis at Athens as late as the second century AD: likenesses of the war heroes Menestheus, who Homer says led the Athenian contingent, and the sons of Theseus, Athens’ special hero, peeped out from inside the belly of a colossal bronze statue of the Trojan horse set up on the Acropolis. At Ilium itself, Greek and Roman coins illustrate the resonance of Troy for those who sought to connect Ilium to the heroic past. When the renegade Roman legate Fimbria captured Ilium in 85 BC in the Roman war against the savage and wily Mithridates, king of Pontus in northern Anatolia, he boasted that in only eleven days he had captured a city that withstood for ten years Agamemnon and his thousand ships. The Ilians replied, “Yes, but our city champion was no Hector.”

#### Conclusions: Homer and History

Still, even if there was a historical basis to legends about war at Troy, we cannot take Homer’s *story* about this war as historical in any sense whatever. Strong comparative evidence comes to us from medieval Europe. The *Chanson de Roland*, to which we have already referred, committed to writing in several versions around AD 1100, is the earliest in a large corpus of heroic songs called *chansons de geste*, “songs of deeds,” composed orally by singers called *jongleurs*, “jugglers,” because they also had acrobatic skills (in Book 8 of the *Odyssey*, Homer’s *aoidos* Demodocus plays while acrobats perform). The written *chansons de geste* are not, however, dictated texts, as were the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, but seem to have been fashioned by wandering scribes working with the *jongleurs*.

A contemporary Latin account *Vita Caroli Magni* (“Life of Charlemagne”) by a member of Charlemagne’s court named Einhard gives us details about the real battle celebrated in the much later *Chanson de Roland*. The battle was fought in AD 778. According to Einhard, while Charlemagne (c. 742–814) returned from campaign against the Muslims of Spain, local Basques attacked his baggage train and rear guard “high in the Pyrenees” between modern France and Spain. A noble named Roland fell in the battle. So much is history. Of the elements of the plot in the poem there is not a trace in Einhard’s account: the rivalry between Roland and a treacherous knight named Ganelon, supposed stepfather to Roland and brother-in-law to Charlemagne; Ganelon’s betrayal to the Muslims (called Saracens); the battle at a place now called Roncevaux as

one between Muslims and Christians; Roland's friendship with a cautious knight named Olivier; the trial of the vile Ganelon – all poetic fancy. In fact most elements in the poem are from a demonstrably later time, and the social milieu and deeply Christian ethics of the poem belong not to the eighth century AD, but to the twelfth century when the written version came into being, as we would expect. While based in a real event, then, the *Chanson de Roland* does not represent that event, but is a product of generations of poetic recreation that makes use of traditional motifs while reinforcing the intellectual and moral issues of the day.

We find an exactly similar process in the songs that Parry and Lord studied. Twentieth-century *guslari* sang about the real historical battle of Kosovo, fought in AD 1389. In such songs every historical detail is wrong or unverifiable, including the outcome of the battle, claimed by the poets as a great defeat; in actual fact it seems to have been a draw. The medieval Middle High German epic *Nibelungenlied*, “song of the Nibelungs,” about kings of Burgundy from the fifth century AD, similarly distorts history beyond recognition. A powerful desire, since Schliemann's excavations, has motivated efforts to find history in Homer, but we must confess that there is none there to be found, even if Helen really lived, even if she fled with Paris, and even if Achilles died on the windy plain of Troy. If any of these things happened, we cannot know it. True, some event must have begun the tradition of the Trojan War, because *aoidoi* do not celebrate their patrons by tales of imaginary wars. In that sense there “really was a Trojan War.” But the Homeric epics are literary creations, fictions made from diverse elements from different times and from different literary traditions. They do not report a historical event of the Bronze Age, when there may have been war at Troy, but they do report, if we look closely, a great deal about early eighth-century Greece, when these poems came into being as dictated texts probably on the island of Euboea.

In the *Iliad*, Homer intends to create “epic distance,” a feeling in the audience that all this happened long ago in a world more noble than our own. To create epic distance, the poet consciously archaizes. All weapons are bronze (though everyday implements in the similes are iron). In this world the gods appear as humans as a matter of course, and conflicts in heaven parallel conflicts on earth. Men were stronger then: even two today could not lift a stone that one threw easily then. Achilles shouts and armies fall. Horses talk. The *Iliad* is *saga*, where men are grander, gods personally and sometimes visibly intervene, and everything is a little old-fashioned, a stylized world that never existed in just this form.

The *Odyssey*, for its part, is *folktale*, with literary conventions of fulfilled prophecy, themes symbolizing the struggle with death, conflict of the sexes, disguise, trickery, temporary defeat, recognition, and revenge. The *Iliad* has a taste for the surreal, for example when the river spirit rises up and attacks Achilles; but there are no monsters or dreamlike symbols of resurrected life, which densely populate the *Odyssey*. In its representation of “reality” the *Odyssey* moves across a scale with the fairyland of the Cyclopes at one end, the half-magical Phaeacians in the middle, and the dung-heaped palace on Ithaca at the other end. We can never get real “history” out of the Homeric poems, but can learn what Greeks in the eighth century BC thought about the world and about themselves. It turns out they were a lot like us.

## 3

## The Reader's Homer

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The philologist wants to know where the texts of Homer's poems come from, and what they might have looked like in their original form. The historian wants to know what in Homer might "really have happened" and what is poetic fantasy. The reader's pleasure makes such topics important, because the texts of Homer have been read and studied from the moment they came into existence in the eighth century BC, and never more so than today. Superb translations in modern European languages are easy to find and widely read in secondary and university education.

The ordinary reader has no direct consciousness of the problem of text because the reader responds directly to symbolic markings on the page according to patterns of behavior learned at an early age. The text is part of "reading" and not something you think about. Nor does the reader's pleasure derive from understanding historical elements as such, but from the swift concatenation of events, the moral depth of conflict, the beauty of expression, and the logic of the plot. Let us in this chapter consider how Homer manages such literary elements.

### Ancient and Modern Readers

A modern reader's experience of the *Iliad*, in any language, is different fundamentally from what an ancient Greek might have known. We are able to read through the whole text in a few days and to see clearly its structure and the story that Homer is telling. This can never have been true in the ancient world. The first texts of Homer were not designed for a reader's pleasure, but to aid those initiated into the mysteries of alphabetic writing to recreate and memorize an aural version of the poet's actual words. In the eighth and seventh centuries BC complete texts of

the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* must have been monstrous curiosities, of inordinate expense to reproduce and clumsy to store or consult, very rare and hard to find. That's why the later much shorter poems of the "epic cycle" were far better known in the Archaic Period than the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, to judge from artistic representations of Greek myths. It is unthinkable that in the eighth, seventh, and sixth centuries BC anyone ever sat down and "read" the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* as we read them today.

The first time the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were publicly performed in the ancient world, as far as we know, was at the Panathenaea in the sixth century BC, when according to pseudo-Plato (above, p. 20) a succession of rhapsodes performed portions, "one man following on another as they still do now" (the poems are too long to have been performed entirely at this festival). Our only evidence for earlier presentation of the poems is the spate of pictures of the blinding of Polyphemus in the early seventh century BC (see Figure 14), suggesting that an excerpt from the *Odyssey* was circulating widely. Ordinarily a Greek might be exposed to such excerpts in his education, the basis of Xenophanes' complaint in the sixth century BC.

Today, by contrast, we may read the poems silently in Greek or in English. If in Greek, the reader, no matter how experienced, will puzzle constantly over strange forms and unknown vocabulary, difficulties for which elaborate commentaries for the dutiful reader exist: every few lines contains a word never again repeated. Homer himself seems not always to have understood the meaning of his words and of some grammatical constructions, but passes something on that has come to him with the oral-formulaic style. Reading Homer in Greek, even for the experienced, is slow and silent.

When we read in English, our eye speeds in silence over the page, taking advantage of the line breaks and the capitalizations and the word breaks and the periods and commas to take in a poetic impression whose rules have been created for the printed page. Such an experience can be thrilling, but it bears little relationship to the experience of a member of Homer's living audience, where there were intimate relationships, or of a rhapsode's audience, where the actor's art is paramount.

### Homer's Style

Everyone is struck by Homer's odd style (although translators often obscure it). It is highly repetitive: one out of every eight lines is repeated at

least once. Exact repetition of messages and other instructions are a related feature and reflect the poems' origins as oral dictated text. A conspicuous example is when in *Iliad* 2 Zeus prepares a false dream to send to Agamemnon, and then the dream repeats exactly Zeus's instructions to Agamemnon. Then Agamemnon tells the other kings still again (*Il.* 2.11–15 = 2.28–32 = 2.65–69). Similar repetitions appear in Mesopotamian literature, although they are not oral dictated texts.

Above all are the recurrent repeating epithets that so puzzled Milman Parry:

Then with a mighty burst of anger spoke to him *swift-footed* Achilles: "You have fooled me, you *god that works from afar*, most cruel of all gods . . ." (*Il.* 22.14–15)

As we have seen, such usages, and similar formulaic expressions and passages, are part of the special language of the *aioidos*, assisting the singer to compose extemporaneously as he works with semantic units larger than the printed "word." The practical advantage of the repetitive, formulaic style is that it allows the poet to compose in a steady stream, while slowing the pace of the narrative by increasing the ratio between the number of "words" spoken and the unit of semantic communication. "Swift-footed Achilles" takes longer to say but just means "Achilles" (yes, he is a great athlete, but being reminded of it does not tell me anything I didn't already know or that is specifically relevant in this context). The epithet no doubt recalls a broad tradition of tales about Achilles, and so gains force, but it never advances the narrative.

Slowing the narrative in this way does not prevent the pace of the story from being swift as lightning, as it is in the opening of the *Iliad*, but Homer never feels under pressure to leave anything out. He drags his story out, as if he had all the time in the world. This predilection was grist to the mill of the old Analysts, who saw deviations from a clean uncluttered ideal narrative as the result of accretion, interpolations, or later revisions. Modern readers, schooled on TV, are impatient with such narrative devices and find the battle books in the *Iliad* tedious and too long. Only through sheer love of narrative in any form does the reader enjoy the series of false tales that Odysseus tells in the second half of the *Odyssey*. Whoever wrote down these poems was not putting pressure on the poet to compress his narrative – just the opposite!

The exaggerated leisure by which the poet can tell his story is combined with a distaste for suspense, a favorite device of modern storytellers. For

example, when Penelope sets out the contest of the bow, the lead suitor Antinous declares that no man present is the equal of Odysseus but hopes secretly that he himself can string the bow. We do not need to wonder whether he will succeed, or what will become of the arrogant Antinous, because Homer tells us what will happen:

So he spoke, but the heart in his breast hoped that he would string the bow and shoot an arrow through the iron. Yet truly he would be the first to taste an arrow from the hands of noble Odysseus, whom he was dishonoring as he sat in the halls urging on his comrades. (*Od.* 21.96–100)

Similarly, in a famous scene the old nurse Eurycleia discovers the tell-tale scar on Odysseus' thigh that reveals his identity. Homer attaches to this scene of recognition the longest aside in either poem, an explanation of how he got the scar in a boar-hunt, and even how his maternal grandfather gave him his name. While Eurycleia holds his leg, and Homer explains the origin of the scar, we do not wonder breathlessly if she will recognize the beggar as her master, because the first thing Homer tells us is that she does:

So she drew near and began to wash her lord. At once she recognized the scar of the wound which long ago a boar had dealt him with his white tusk . . . (*Od.* 19.392–393)

It is not the question "What happens next?" that holds the attention of the audience but the patient reenactment of a whole world: the people who live there, what they think and say, the choices they make, their pain and joy, and the events that befall them. The poetry takes us into an alternative world, where we want to be.

Not surprisingly so leisureed a style is friendly to minute descriptions of objects and events. For example, when in *Iliad* 24 Priam prepares to visit the Greek camp, servants prepare his wagon:

Down from its peg they took the mule-yoke, a boxwood yoke with a knob on it, well-fitted with guide rings, and they brought out the yoke-band nine cubits long and the yoke too. The yoke they set with care on the polished pole at the upturned end and they cast the ring upon the thole pin and bound it fast to the knob with three turns to left and right, and after that made it fast to the post and bent the hook under. (*Il.* 24.268–274)

In the battle books of the *Iliad* appear many detailed descriptions of gory death:



For the son of Telamon, darting upon him through the throng, hit him from close at hand through the helmet with cheek-pieces of bronze and the helmet with horse-hair crest split under the spear-point, struck by the great spear and the strong hand, and the brain spurted out of the wound along the socket of the spear all mixed up with blood. (*Il.* 17.293–298)

Homer's audience has a taste for gore that a precise description satisfies, but a distaste for reference to bodily functions or explicit descriptions of sexual behavior, unfitting to the heroic world and its admiration for manly quality.

Taken to extremes, Homer's desire to say everything encourages the list, of which there are many in both poems. A common form of list is the genealogy, where a hero lists his ancestors to prove his own worthiness. In battle scenes a list of victims can intensify and magnify the action, as in *Iliad* 11 when a cornered Odysseus feels his mettle:

But first he hit peerless Deiopites from above in the shoulder, leaping upon him with his sharp spear, and then he killed Thoon and Eunomus, and then Chersidamas as he leaped down from his car he stabbed with his spear in the navel beneath his bossed shield. He fell in the dust and clutched the ground with his palm. These he left alone and struck Charops son of Hippasus with a thrust of his spear, brother of wealthy Socus. (*Il.* 11.420–427)

Where are the 1,000 names that appear in these poems coming from? Homer appears to take them from a general storehouse of names (we never hear of most of these people before or after), part of the *oidos*' repertoire. In the greatest list in the two poems, the celebrated Catalogue of Ships in *Iliad* 2, Homer organizes real geographical information according to a complex pattern. The list has important Near Eastern parallels. For example, nearly one quarter of the Mesopotamian creation epic *Enuma elish* "when on high . . ." which tells of the triumph of the world-builder Marduk over the forces of chaos, is given to a list of Marduk's names. No doubt in an oral society the list was a way of organizing information, taken over by literate Near Eastern scribes in the same way they took over other stylistic features of oral song.

Another striking feature to Homer's style is his predilection for "ring composition," that is, he presents information [a], [b], [c] then answers it in reverse order [c], [b], [a]. For example, when Odysseus meets his mother in the underworld he asks:

"What fate of painful death overcame you [a]? Was it a long disease, or did the archer, Artemis, strike you with her gentle shafts, and kill you [b]? And tell me of my father [c] and my son [d], whom I left behind. Does the honor [*geras*] that was mine still remain with them, or does some other man now possess it, and do they say that I shall no more return [e]? And tell me of my wedded wife, of her purpose and of her mind. Does she remain by her son, and keep all things safe? or has one already wedded her whoever is best of the Achaeans [f]?" (*Od.* 11.171–178)

When Odysseus' mother answers (180–284), she does so in reverse order: Penelope remains steadfast in the house [f]; no other man possesses his *geras* [e]; his son holds his own [d]; his father lives in the country [c] (she goes on a good length about his sufferings). As for her own death, it was not Artemis [b] who killed her, but longing for her own son, Odysseus [a]. Many scholars have worked out complex patterns of ring composition in the poem taken as a whole and in its various parts. This is precisely how we ourselves organize information when we are speaking publicly and off the cuff. The prevalence of ring composition at the level of style and in larger patterns reflects, again, the oral origins of these poems.

### Similes

A striking feature of Homer's leisured style deserving special attention is the simile. Far more common in the *Iliad* than in the *Odyssey*, the simile is a way of stopping the action, of withdrawing from it and commenting on it, enriching it, and sometimes judging it. As in Homer's description of the shield of Achilles, itself a kind of extended simile, Homer shows us an everyday world inhabited by common people in common enterprise: shepherds who protect flocks, milk cows, and harvest wheat, or humble women who weave:

Then speedily the son of Oileus [= lesser Ajax] forged to the front, and close after him ran good Odysseus. As close as is the shuttle to the breast of a fair-girdled woman, when she deftly draws it in her hands, pulling the spool past the warp, and she holds the rod near her breast, even so close behind ran Odysseus. (*Il.* 23.758–763)

Ordinarily, the simile makes contact at only a single point with the situation it describes. In this case, in a foot race Odysseus' closeness to Ajax = the shuttle's closeness to a woman's chest. Otherwise the scenes



are deliberately utterly dissimilar. On the one hand, heroic behavior on the windy plain; on the other, the protected calm and peaceful realm of creative female behavior.

Many similes appeal to the natural world and especially to the predations of great cats, which in their dangerous aggression are easy to compare with warriors. Still, the point of contact will be simple. Achilles attacks Aeneas like a ravaging lion:

And on the other side the son of Peleus rushed against him like a lion, a ravaging lion that men are eager to kill, a whole people gathered together, and at first the lion ignores them and goes his way, but when one of the youths swift in battle hits him with a spear, then he gathers himself with open mouth and foam swirls around his teeth, and in his heart his courageous spirit groans and with his tail he lashes his ribs and his flanks on this side and on that and rouses himself to fight and with glaring eyes rushes straight on in his fury, either to kill some man or himself be killed in the foremost throng. Even so was Achilles driven by his fury and his spirit to go up against great-hearted Aeneas. (*Il.* 20.164–175)

A driving “fury” is all that brings together Achilles’ situation and that of the lion: Achilles has not been wounded (the lion has) and Achilles has not been at first indifferent, then angry toward the enemy.

Sometimes, however, the situation in the simile can parallel that which it describes. When Odysseus sees the maidservants going off to sleep with the suitors, his heart growls and he thinks of killing them right then:

And as a bitch stands over her tender whelps, growling when she sees a man she does not know, and is eager to fight, so his heart growled within him in his anger at their evil deeds. (*Od.* 20.14–16)

The point of contact is “growling,” but their situations are roughly parallel. The bitch growls because her loved ones are threatened; Odysseus growls because his possessions, the maids, are taken by strangers.

In general, readers have seen in the similes the most personal touch of the poet Homer himself, as we think of poets in modern times, because in them his use of language and imagery is so sensual and extraordinary that we feel close to a poet’s personality. Whereas he inherited the simile as a historical device of style, common but undeveloped in Mesopotamian literature (and strikingly almost nonexistent in non-Western “epic”), Homer the man appears to have developed it into a means for astonishing stretches of thought, as in the following simile from a dueling scene, where Homer

compares the two armies pulling at a corpse from either side to villagers tanning a bull’s hide:

And as when a man gives to his people the hide of a great bull for stretching, all drenched in fat, and when they have taken it they stand in a circle and stretch it, and right away its moisture goes out of it and the fat enters in under the tugging of many hands, and all the hide is stretched to the utmost, even so they on this side and they on that were hauling the corpse back and forth in a small space and their hearts were full of hope, the Trojans that they might drag the corpse to Ilios, but the Achaeans to the hollow ships. (*Il.* 17.389–397)

Even more rarefied:

The Danaans poured in among the hollow ships, and a ceaseless din arose. And as when from the high crest of a great mountain Zeus who gathers the lightning moves a dense cloud away, and clear to view appear all the mountain peaks and high headlands and meadows and from heaven breaks open the infinite air, even so the Danaans, when they had pushed back from the ships consuming fire, had rest for a little time, although there was no ceasing from war. (*Il.* 16.295–302)

What is the point of contact? Evidently the brevity of the Danaans’ respite from war. Homer does not say that the dark cloud will soon return to cover the mountain, but we must presume it. First the mountain is dark, then sunlit, then dark again. Even so the Danaans are immersed in war, get a breather, then are immersed again. Homer’s sophisticated audience appreciates original imagery and has a taste for refined thought.

### Homer and Plot

Formulas and formulaic phrases, repetition, detailed descriptions, hostility to suspense, and elaborate similes exist to support the story Homer is telling, the underlying structure of plot, the bones behind the flesh of narrative style. We take plot for granted in modern entertainment, in novels and feature films, but there is little evidence for it in pre-Hellenic literatures. A critical exception is *Gilgamesh*, which does have rudimentary plot, at least in the version preserved on the twelve tablets from Nineveh. Our sense of plot goes back directly to Homer, but in this matter as in many others he built on earlier achievements.

Narrative literature can seem like life, but in life there is no plot; verisimilitude in literature is an illusion. What is plot, that drives Homer's poems? Aristotle (c. 384–322 BC) was the first to analyze elements of plot, which he calls *muthos* (our “myth”). He is thinking mostly about Greek tragedy, where principles established by Homer were refined into the modern plot so familiar today:

the proper arrangement of the incidents . . . is the first and most important thing in tragedy. We have laid it down that tragedy is a representation of an action [*mimesis praxeos*] that is whole and complete and of a certain magnitude, because a thing may be a whole and yet have no magnitude. A whole is what has a beginning and middle and end. A beginning is that which is not a necessary consequence of anything else but after which something else exists or happens as a natural result. An end on the contrary is that which is inevitably or, as a rule, the natural result of something else but from which nothing else follows; a middle follows something else and something follows from it. Well constructed plots [*muthoi*] must not therefore begin and end at random, but embody the formulas we have stated. (Aristotle, *Poetics* 1450b, trans. W. Hamilton Fyfe, modified)

A plot, then, has three elements: a beginning, a middle, and an end. These elements are not interchangeable but have individual characteristics. Such elements, Aristotle saw, first appeared in Homer's poetry:

In writing an *Odyssey* he did not put in all that ever happened to Odysseus, his being wounded on Parnassus, for instance, or his feigned madness when the host was gathered (these being events that did not necessarily or probably lead one to the other), but he constructed his *Odyssey* around a single action [*praxis*] in our sense of the phrase. And the *Iliad* is the same. As then in the other arts of mimesis a single mimesis means a mimesis of a single object, so too the plot, being a representation of an action [*mimesis praxeos*], must represent a single piece of action and the whole of it, and the component incidents must be so arranged that if one of them were transposed or removed, the unity of the whole is dislocated and destroyed. For if the presence or absence of a thing makes no visible difference, then it is not an integral part of the whole. (Aristotle, *Poetics* 1451a, trans. W. Hamilton Fyfe, modified)

Aristotle's words are some of the most studied in literary criticism. He seems to mean that, first, literature is not life but a “representation” (*mimesis*). A representation of what? Of a single “action” (*praxis*) and the whole of it (which has three parts). The action of the *Odyssey* is the

homecoming of Odysseus. The action of the *Iliad* is not “the war at Troy,” which would not be a single object, but the anger of Achilles. In the two poems we learn all about these actions, from beginning to end, in three parts that are not interchangeable with one another.

Such remain the elements of plot in modern storytelling, whose most important form by far is the feature film. Plots in feature films are rigorously formulaic, divided into three parts separated by a “plot point,” an incident that changes the direction of the story. In a 120-minute film, primary plot points appear at minutes 30 and 90 and a subordinate plot point at minute 60, the midpoint of the film.

The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are each eight or nine times longer than a feature film, but fall into the same tripartite structure. In the first part of the *Iliad*, Achilles quarrels with his commander, who takes from him his concubine. That is plot point one, turning the action to the very long middle section, Books 2–16, where the fighting goes against the Greeks. This middle section is broken into halves at the midpoint by the fruitless embassy to Achilles in Book 9, a secondary plot point. The death of Patroclus in Book 16 is the second primary plot point, turning the story to its third portion in which Patroclus is avenged and, at last, Achilles abandons his anger.

Like the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey* has a tripartite structure. The beginning is devoted to Telemachus: chaos at home and a son trying to find his father. In plot point one Odysseus escapes from the island of Calypso and the story changes direction as we explore Odysseus' efforts to return to his home. The revelation of his identity on Phaeacia is the midpoint of the plot, after which Odysseus describes his journeys, a newborn on the verge of entering his ancient home. The third and final section plays out on Ithaca. The son meets the father, plot point two, and together they resolve the conflict between those who behave against justice, taking what is not theirs, and those who defend their homes and wives against outrage.

### Homer and Genre

Many of the words we use to describe, or discuss, ancient literature had no counterparts in ancient languages, including most modern literary-critical terms (for example, “intertextual,” “metatheatrical”); and words of Greek origin have taken on different meanings for us. “Epic” is one such word, which we use to designate a major genre of ancient literature that

began with Homer. But the Greeks had no word for “oral stories” and they did not divide the stories they told into types or such genres as “epic.” In modern entertainment, genre is carefully defined; if you go to a horror movie, you don’t expect to see lovers holding hands in the meadow (unless a monster rises up and slices them in half!). Genre, then, is what the audience expects, namely something quite different from Pindar, who praises athletes in complex verse suitable for dancing, and from Homer, who explores vast worlds with unparalleled scope, which we take as a hallmark of “epic.”

Certainly Greek audiences had different expectations on different occasions and in different settings, but they did not have a category as such for “epic” poetry. The term comes from Greek *epos* “word,” but in Homer *epos* in the singular refers only to ordinary conversation. In the plural, *epea* in Homer can be a synonym for *muthos*, which means “an emphatic utterance” in Homer (but “plot” in Aristotle). In Aristotle, *epea* “words” has come to refer to anything in dactylic hexameter verse, a purely formal definition, because all manner of compositions were cast in dactylic hexameter, including Hesiod’s didactic/calendrical poem *Works and Days* and even scientific treatises. Aristotle distinguishes between *epea*, literary works in dactylic hexameter, and *tragoidia*, “goat-song,” that is, tragedy, where the meter is different from dactylic hexameter; but his distinction is like our own between film and the novel, one of media and not of genre. Only later, in the Hellenistic and Roman Periods, does Homer’s stature, his role as definer of Hellenism to the Hellenes, lead to equating the character of Homer’s own poems with a generic form of poetry definable as such. We begin to hear of *epikē poiēsis*, “epic poetry,” meaning “an extended narrative poem in elevated or dignified language, celebrating the feats of a legendary or traditional hero.” The extrapolation from Homer to a general literary category has caused considerable consternation among scholars who go to modern Africa or India or North America in search of “oral epic”: what they find is never at all like Homer.

### Homer and Myth

We saw earlier how Aristotle used the Greek word *muthos* to mean “plot,” a tripartite structure found in Homer and in tragedy. For us, however, “myth” is a traditional story, passed down and around not by writing, but by word of mouth. We have reached our definition through modern

scholarly analysis. In our study of Homer we take myth to be the background of orally transmitted tales, shared in some way with the audience of aristocratic males, though hardly in the detail that the poet can provide.

Whereas poems have authors, as Homer created the *Iliad*, myths have no authors. This is true even if someone must have told the story for the first time. Because myths have no authors, there is no authorial intent, no original purpose to telling the story. But when Homer tells a myth, the story acquires a purpose for that telling. Homer is an author, a single intelligence with a single design.

Myths survive only when they can be retold, hence can be adapted to changing circumstance. Because there is no original story, we need to understand myth as a tradition with variation; that is, there is no “original” form to a myth, as there was of the text of Homer, but rather myth is always a system of variants. Failure to understand the difference between myth and Homer’s poems has sadly misled some commentators into thinking that Homer’s poems, too, are “just tradition” and that Homer is “a symbol for that tradition.”

Ironically, we can never see myth directly, because it exists only in specific variants, whatever you encounter at any one time; and in our study of the ancient world, such variants always exist in writing. Yet myth, a story with a structure, lies behind all such variants. Consider, for example, the myth of Oedipus. Homer tells us (*Od.* 11.348–360) that Oedipus married his mother and killed his father, but says nothing about Oedipus’ self-blinding, of climactic importance to Sophocles’ celebrated telling of the story. Both versions are “the myth of Oedipus,” in spite of their differences.

In the only example of two variants of a single myth in all Homer, we learn in Book 1 (586–594) of the *Iliad* that an angry Zeus once seized Hephaestus by the foot and cast him from Olympus; perhaps this is the origin of his lameness (Homer does not say so). In Book 18 (394–397) we discover that the mother of Hephaestus, Hera, cast him from heaven, disgusted by his lameness. Neither is the true myth of “the casting out of Hephaestus,” but each is a variation that the poet has drawn from a “pool of tradition,” which he personifies as the Muse: the source of all he knows and says. Yet every oral poet constantly adds to this pool, or changes its features, if he is great and has influence. The tradition is real, yes, but it exists only in the mouths and minds of the poets who represent it, and nowhere else.

Modern critics conventionally divide myths into three types, according to their content and the nature of the actors. *Divine myths* concern

gods and their doings; *legends* concern the deeds of great men and women long ago; and *folktales* are about ordinary humans or animals. Legends are different from the other two categories because they claim to be historically true. The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are legends, and the Greeks always accepted them as historical, although they incorporate some divine myth and some folktales. The story of Hephaestus' being cast from heaven is a divine myth. The *Iliad* has very little folktale in it, whereas the *Odyssey* as a whole, by contrast, is a variant of the folktale *type* that scholars call "The Homecoming Husband" (there are hundreds of folktale types in world folklore). The central folktale *motif* in the story is "Husband arrives home just as wife is about to marry another." This wonderful folktale type is found over a vast geographic range, from Iceland to Indonesia, and has received many literary treatments. Several variants, with remarkable similarity to Homer's *Odyssey*, appear in the South Slavic tradition studied by Parry and Lord. Later we will have more to say about myth in Homer's poems.

#### Summary: The Achievement of Homer

Ordinarily when we study a work of literature we have some information about when it was conceived, where it was composed, and how it was promulgated. In Homer's case we have none of these. He stands at the beginning of Western alphabetic literacy, but how and why? His poems are far too long to have been ordinary or usual. After two and a half thousand years of intense examination we still cannot say what these poems were for.

The greatest obstacles to understanding have come from every generation's expectation that Homer behaved as we behave, and as those around us behave. He sat at his desk and he wrote two long and complex poems; people read them, imitated them, quoted them, and loved them. But overwhelming evidence reveals that nothing of the kind took place. Homer came from a world about which we can only speculate, which lies at the edge of Greek alphabetic literacy.

According to a plausible explanation, he dictated his poems to someone, perhaps on the island of Euboea in the late ninth or early eighth century BC. Certainly he was heir to a very old tradition of oral song-making with roots in Mesopotamia. For hundreds of years such songs had been taken down, after a fashion, in the West Semitic or Phoenician script; now Homer's words were taken down in the brand new Greek

alphabet, the first technology capable of preserving a rough outline of the phonetic qualities of human speech. The poems, or portions of them, were thereafter the basis of Greek, then Roman education. Even today Homer is central to humanistic education.

Once we place the man Homer in time we can take him as a witness for how Greeks lived at that time, but to do so we must first strip away the literary artifice by which he has made his stories interesting: plot, character, beautiful expression, myth, fantasy, emotional and moral conflict, and the resolution of conflict. If Homer lacked such literary artifice, he would of course cease to be so interesting; or we might say he would not exist at all, because Homer's greatness as an *oidos* must lie behind someone's taking the trouble to generate texts from his song in the first place.

Whereas philological, historical, and literary overviews of Homer's poems are of immense interest, we must now examine more closely the elements of literary artifice to see how these poems mean what they mean, proceeding from scene to scene and sequence to sequence. Let us follow the poet's exposition, remarking as we go on issues that have attracted the attention of literary historians, some from the earliest times. Herein, if anywhere, we will find Homer's lasting achievement.

here he summarizes the story of the return of Odysseus. Amphimedon thinks that Penelope was in the plot from the beginning (as she may have been in other versions), but we know she was not.

In the meanwhile Odysseus has found his aged and ailing father Laertes in the orchard. Odysseus torments him with reminiscence about his lost son, tells a brand new lying tale, claiming now to be from Sicily, then reveals himself through the scar and through the memory of trees that Laertes gave him. And just in time, for the townspeople now know what has happened.

Many critics have complained about the slack end of the *Odyssey*, but a slack ending is Homer's style. So is the ending of the *Iliad* slack – “Thus they buried horse-taming Hector.” You cannot kill the flower of the islands without consequence, and when the families of the dead suitors, led by the father of the main suitor Antinous, attack Odysseus and now nine other men, Laertes, invigorated by his son's return, puts a spear through the man's brains. The gods can stand behind events, and at Athena's urging Zeus drops a thunderbolt between the two groups. That brings them up short. Odysseus has returned. He is husband to Penelope. He is lord of Ithaca, a bad land for horses. The story is over.

## 6

## Conclusion and Summary: Homer's Complementary Poems

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Modern literatures do not begin with Homer, because Homer comes from somewhere. He could not have existed without a Mesopotamian tradition of story-telling that was thousands of years old by the time of the Greek Iron Age. He owed much, too, to native Greek traditions and to the social power of a warrior aristocracy, who valued the past as an exemplar for the present and who saw the past as a time when their own ancestors fought in the Trojan War or in the War Against Thebes. After all, Greek aristocrats obtained their power in society through martial prowess and superior “virtue” (Latin *virtus* = “manliness”). When a warrior goes directly against the enemy, to die or kill, his friends know about it and respect him for his manliness. When the only certainty to life is its end, perhaps gruesome, at least a man can act like a man and face the death that is sure to come. All warriors are bound by the same understanding. No one knows what the common man thinks, except perhaps for the scurrilous outburst of the reprehensible Thersites, ridiculed and beaten as an example for anyone else with a similar repulsive desire to “strive against big men [*basileis*]” (*Il.* 2.247). No such loose and internally egalitarian aristocracy as the Greek warrior class existed in the ancient Near East, where the staggering wealth generated by irrigation agriculture along the Tigris and Euphrates and Nile had long before created a society of intense class division.

The *Iliad* is about men at war. From the beginning of the species, whenever that was, war has been the male's prerogative. There is no thought that there might be a world without war – that would be absurd – but its suffering stands in contrast to the gentle ways of peace, when Trojan women washed their linen at the troughs that run hot and cold, past which Achilles chases Hector to his death. War is what men do, where they die in ghastly ways, while the women await their own fates

as widows or taken by the rough hands of captors, who will rape and enslave them. Zeus, as Achilles recalls in the "Ransom of Hector," gives to some all evil, but others receive some good along with the evil. In its hardheaded no-holds-barred pessimism about mortal struggle the *Iliad* was about real life, and is still about real life.

We enjoy studying the poem because we recognize the world it portrays. Fear is the enemy of all, as we learn in numerous pep talks in the *Iliad*, but the warrior overcomes his fear. He is a realist. In the *Iliad* this heroic code, as it is called, has run afoul of the emerging state where power, and respect, do not depend entirely on manliness, but on the common agreement that centralized power is for the common good. On Agamemnon's argument were built the monstrous modern tyrannies of Stalin, Hitler, and Mao. Certainly Achilles doesn't like what the emerging state means to him: his humiliation.

We may agree that Agamemnon is first among equals, but he acts like a thief to establish his manliness at the expense of another, when his authority as statesman must depend on a different basis. Agamemnon's behavior is otherwise intolerable. He gives in to anger when trapped into giving back his war-captive; statesmen should not give in to anger. He throws his weight around recklessly, like a madman, smashing things left and right. Only calm could save Achilles, but Achilles too is a man of anger. His character equals his fate. He claims that he could choose another course, a long obscure life with family back in Phthia instead of glory and an early death and song in the ears of men, but he has no choice and he never did.

That is why Agamemnon's hideous behavior shakes Achilles to the foundation. Achilles stands for freedom. Agamemnon takes away his glory through the arbitrary power of the nascent state. Achilles cannot kill him (though tempted to do so), if he wishes ever to reestablish his *timé*, and Athena assures him of this. While Agamemnon behaves in a disgraceful fashion, Achilles' so-called friends stand around and gawk. They are as guilty as Agamemnon in a conspiracy to take away every shred of purpose from Achilles' life.

As a man of anger Achilles pursues Hector and kills him. Not until Priam comes to his tent does he abandon his anger, the story's resolution. He might have killed Priam and even should have done so: here is the father of the man who killed his friend. He doesn't kill him because he sees that in their sorrow they are the same. They weep together, eat together, and at least for that moment, the anger is gone. The story comes to an end. It's not the moral, "don't be angry," that thrills us, but the

spectacle of a man who has achieved understanding about the unity of human life.

In the *Iliad* aristocrats clash in the game of honor, but in the *Odyssey* one male, alone, goes up against the world and against death itself, which will swallow Achilles in an instant. And Odysseus survives. Odysseus never gives in to anger, but swallows his furious resentments, planning through stealth to gain victory. And gain it he does.

With astonishing sophistication and skill Homer blends together the folktale hero who fights monsters and resists beautiful women with the Trojan-fighter who through martial prowess destroys the enemy. He manages this conflation by placing in Odysseus' own mouth tales of his folktale encounters, setting them at one remove in the narrative. Antinous explicitly compares him to an *aoidos* who holds the audience entranced. A pervasive theme in the *Odyssey* is the greatness of song and its central place in culture whereas, except for the obscure Thamyris mentioned in the "Catalogue of Ships," there seem to be no *aoidoi* in the *Iliad* (Achilles sings of the "glorious deeds of men" to the accompaniment of a lyre (*Il.* 9.189), but Achilles is no *aoidos*).

The adventures take place in fairyland where things do not work just as they do here. On Circe's island you cannot tell where the sun rises and sets. The land of the Phaeacians, where the *aoidic* Odysseus sings his song, stands on a middle ground, still a fairy kingdom with lifelike metal animals standing before the doors and magic ships that steer themselves, but gone are the cannibals and monsters and brash seducers. Finally, Ithaca is what we might call the real world (although there is still room for goddesses in disguise). In broad terms, Odysseus' journey takes him into the world of symbols and the world of ghosts, then back through a halfway house to the humdrum barbarities of Irus the beggar, the lowlife Melantheus, and the crude appetites of young men without wisdom.

A central theme in Odysseus' journey to the middle of the ocean and back to hearth and kin is the death and rebirth of the hero, as we have seen, but by extension his journey is that of all males. Odysseus goes into caves, falls asleep, and is allured by song and woman. His victory, marked by recognition and the pronouncing of his name, is always new life. In the end he takes his wife and rules his house.

Achilles awaits death's extinction, the logical consequence of the choices he makes. He is obsessed with the meaning of his behavior and thus indifferent to the material world, to the prizes of Agamemnon or the ransom of Priam. Odysseus defies death and is out to get rich. Treasure is life, and he brings home an enormous quantity of it from

the Phaeacians, more than he might have brought from Troy. Although anxious to return, Odysseus would gladly have spent an extra year on Scheria, he once says, if that would increase his haul. Yet he places the treasure in a cave and forgets all about it. The greatest treasure is still ahead, the house, its flocks and slaves, and the delights of family life and the power of social control. In such securities Achilles had only theoretical interest.

Truly, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* form a sort of whole, the one questioning the basis for values we accept without question, the other affirming the values of property and family and continuing life. Constantly the *Odyssey* fills in holes in the narrative of the *Iliad*, gives us the end of the story. We learn what happened to Agamemnon and Menelaus and Nestor and the lesser Ajax (son of Oileus) and the greater Ajax (son of Telamon). We learn about the death of Achilles and even speak with him at the pit of blood. We hear the story of the Trojan Horse and how the war came to an end. We see Helen settled back at home, still in control with her charm and her drugs. Once scholars thought that the “*Odyssey* poet” was influenced by the “*Iliad* poet,” and consciously set out to complete his tale. The poet best able to do that was Homer himself. He gives us in his two poems an integrated vision of human life in all its terror, sweetness, and complexity.

## Part III

### Homer's Reception

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## The Homer of Philosophers and Poets

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Homer's universal vision has made Homer *the* "classic," the one story, the two poems, that everyone agrees are worth studying. But the qualities we seek, and enjoy, in Homer are rather different from what the ancients themselves found in the poet. In this final chapter let us take a swift glance at Homer's influence and the way that some later thinkers and poets in the ancient world understood and interpreted his poems.

### Homer and the Philosophers

We already referred to the criticisms of the intellectual Xenophanes in the sixth century BC, beginning a tradition of philosophical obsession with Homer that would last two thousand years. Perhaps fifty years after Xenophanes, Heraclitus of Ephesus (c. 535–475 BC) observed that "men make mistakes with reference to the knowledge of manifest things . . . [even] Homer, who was the wisest of the Greeks" (frag. 56 Diels-Kranz). In the view of the early philosopher Heraclitus "Homer should be thrown out of the contests and whipped – and Archilochus along with him." Homer, with Hesiod, stood for the old-fashioned, backward, and immoral culture against which the New Thought of early philosophy was struggling. Heraclitus refers to "contests," that is the poetic competitions where rhapsodes would recite memorized texts of hexametric poetry in competition with lyric poets like Archilochus (c. 680–635 BC). In such an environment the ill influence of the poets was great, Heraclitus believed.

One hundred years later Plato (c. 427–347 BC), using Socrates as spokesman, refined philosophic objections to Homer, but focused on Homer in the classroom rather than in the public contest. Certainly stories that present death as an evil or show exemplary leaders overcome by unmanly emotion will not inspire leaders that the state requires to prosper (*Republic* 386a–389a). Secondly, Homer's picture of reality is quite false and his



theology pernicious (*Republic* 376e–383a). From his attitude toward Homer grew Plato's hostility toward mimetic (“imitative” or “representational”) art: the world that our senses report to us already stands at a remove from the real ideal world behind it, of which the sensual world is a projection. Imitative art, which replicates the illusory sensual world, is still one more remove away from reality – as if one made a movie by filming a movie. How can one ever come to truth through such art, whether it is poetry or painting or sculpture? It is imperative to remove the beguiling but truthless Homer from the school curriculum, Plato thought, a testimony to his importance in that curriculum.

Remarkably Plato's Socrates is first to seek philosophical interpretations for seemingly innocuous phrases in Homer's text, thereby “saving” the text from its false seeming (but still the poems must be removed). For example, in the *Theaetetus* (152e) Socrates explains Homer's line “Oceanus, source of the gods, and mother Tethys” (*Il.* 14.201, 302) as meaning that “everything springs from flow and motion,” a principal teaching of Heraclitus, that “everything flows” (*panta rei*), so you can never step in the same river twice. Plato appears to humor his predecessor, who wanted to throw Homer out of the contests, by finding Heraclitus' own philosophy in Homer's verse! His argument is similar to many that circulated in the fifth century BC that the words of the poets contained an “underthought” (*hyponoia*) which one could expound; by c. 525 BC a certain Theagenes of Rhegium (at the toe of Italy) had already explained Homeric descriptions of battles as allegories of meteorological disturbances.

Aristotle (c. 384–322 BC) did not continue Plato's denigration of Homer, but was first to assemble a collection of “Homeric Questions” or problems, directed toward difficult words, phrases, and points of plot, together with a “solution” for each problem. The work is lost, but some of it may survive as marginal remarks in the scholiasts. Aristotle created a new genre of study, of which this book is a remote descendant, the Homeric commentary.

Zeno of Citium (in Cyprus, c. 333–264 BC) founded the philosophical school called the Stoa (hence its followers were called Stoics), because Zeno taught in Athens while walking up and down the Painted Stoa just off the agora. Either he or his followers much refined the allegorical explanation of Homeric poetry. They took Homeric and other epic poetry, especially the names of epic characters, as the repository of deep truths about reality and the human condition, which allegorical explanation could reveal. For example, when Apollo kills the Greeks with his arrows in Book

1 of the *Iliad*, really the scene describes the effect of plague (= the arrows) diffused by the heat of the sun (= Apollo). Homer gives us a “philosophical expression of a physical phenomenon” (according to a writer from the second century AD, also named Heraclitus, 16.5). The shield of Achilles, forged by Hephaestus, is an allegory for the creation of the universe. The gods also represent moral qualities: Athena is reason, Ares is courage, and Aphrodite is desire. The etymology (“true explanation”) of names can reveal their inner nature, according to Stoic teaching:

Iris [from *eiro* “to say”], the messenger and envoy of Zeus, symbolizes the language “that speaks,” just as Hermes [from *hermeneuo* “to interpret”] is the language “that interprets.” Both are the messengers of the gods, and their names mean nothing other than the faculty of expressing thought by means of speech. (Heraclitus, 28.2, second century AD)

Of course such means of interpretation obliterate the literal meaning, enabling us to eliminate any trace of immorality from the poems, so that in both works we can hear a voice that speaks with moral authority.

But the often fanciful Stoic exegesis did not really counter the Platonic objections to Homer, because Plato did not want to admit these false/imaginary stories about gods to his school curriculum “whether they're allegorical or not” (*Republic* 378d).

#### Homer and the Poets

We cannot trace in detail the interaction between Homer and the hexametric and lyric poets who followed him in the seventh and sixth centuries BC. First, the remains of these poets are exiguous, tiny but often delicious pieces. Second, we are never sure what reference to “Homer's poems” means at this time, because to Homer were attributed numerous poems besides the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, for example some of the *Homeric Hymns* (real authorship unknown) and some other epic poems.

We know that the early Xenophanes (who wrote in verse) took Homer to task for his absurd theology, as we have seen, and the earliest (or nearly earliest) Greek prose writer Herodotus (484–424 BC) was already trying to sort out fact from fiction in traditions about Homer. He denied Homer's authorship of the Cyclic poem enigmatically called the *Cypria*, “poem of Aphrodite”(?), about the events leading up to the *Iliad* (Hdt. 2.117).

Other sources in any event attribute the *Cypria* to a Stasinus of Cyprus (early seventh century BC?). Herodotus also denied Homer's authorship of a poem about the sack of Thebes called the *Epigoni* ("followers," so called because they belonged to the generation after those who fought in the catastrophic Seven Against Thebes: 4.117). No less than Aristotle attributes to Homer a lost burlesque poem of hexameters mixed with iambic lines called *Margites* ("Dopey,") after its idiot hero (*Poetics* 1448b). Such pseudepigraphy and false attributions grow directly from Homer's central role in Greek education, probably from the moment of the alphabet's invention, when texts of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, or excerpts, seem to have formed the basis of study. Because the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were the first alphabetic texts, and they were hexametric, other hexametric texts, but by no means all, were naturally attributed to "Homer." Mostly the six Cyclic Poems were attributed to others: the *Cypria* to Stasinus, while Arctinus of Miletus composed the *Aethiopis* (story of the hero Memnon) and the *Sack of Troy* (c. 650 BC?); Lesches composed the *Little Iliad* (c. 675 BC?), which seems to have elaborated stories about the end of the city; Agias of Troezen (in the Peloponnesus) composed the *Returns* (*Nostoi*, c. 600 BC?), including the story of Agamemnon's murder; Eugammon of Cyrene composed the *Telegony*, which picks up where the *Odyssey* leaves off (c. 560 BC?).

We don't know very much about the Cyclic Poems. Summaries survive in a fifth-century AD Neoplatonic philosopher (Proclus, c. AD 412–485), but otherwise only scattered lines come down to us. Above all we do not know in what relation these poems stood to the *texts* of the Homeric poems. Although they appear to fill in gaps left by the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* in telling the whole saga of Troy, and although the Greeks themselves understood the Cyclic Poems in this way, it is probable that some or all of these poems were taken down independently of any knowledge of the texts of Homer's poems. One poem, the so-called *Little Iliad*, may have repeated events in the extant long *Iliad* and we can be sure of overlaps with other Cyclic Poems. We have too little information for reliable conclusions about the relationship between the texts of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, which exist, and texts of the Cyclic poems, which do not.

We get our best information about Homer's standing in the early fifth century BC from Pindar (c. 522–443 BC), from whose once massive corpus survives a still substantial collection of poems composed for choral dance in celebration of athletic victors. Pindar is three hundred years away from the invention of the Greek alphabet and in his generation, or near it, disappeared the last of the *avoidoi*. In Pindar's day poetry had for long

been created in writing on wax tablets and on papyrus. The written copy on papyrus was reproduced into multiple copies from which the members of a chorus, which could be as many as fifty, learned the song. But Pindar's education, like any Greek's, was in reading "Homer's poetry."

Pindar refers to Homer three times by name and once refers to the Homerids, his descendants, the first time we hear about them. Unfortunately we know nothing further about the Homerids and from the name we cannot tell if they are the blood descendants of Homer or simply named after him. Most imagine that they possessed early copies of the complete texts of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Pisistratus may have obtained copies from them in the mid-sixth century BC for his rejuvenated Panathenaic festival, where the poems were recited.

In one poem (*Nemean* 7, 20–30) Pindar continues the tradition of Homeric criticism by explicitly correcting the Homeric account. Odysseus has more fame than he deserves "thanks to Homer and his sweet words," and were it not for the power of "cleverness" (*sophia*) to mislead the "blind heart" of human beings, the arms of Achilles would have gone to Ajax, who deserved them, and not to Odysseus. Pindar refers to an incident told in the *Little Iliad* and mentioned in the underworld scene in *Odyssey* Book 11: Odysseus' eloquence won him Achilles' armor over the mightier Ajax. The power of poetry, to which *sophia* "cleverness" refers, and its ability to obscure the truth is already announced in Hesiod's *Theogony* (26–28), when the Muses claim this very power. Pindar's point is that athletic prowess, which he is praising, should come before cleverness with words, which he is using to praise athletic prowess!

Taken down by dictation from *avoidoi* in the seventh and sixth and maybe even fifth centuries BC, the shorter Cyclic Poems with Trojan themes or poems built around the sack of seven-gated Thebes were better known to Greeks of the Archaic Period than either the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey* and inspired many standard scenes on illustrated Greek pottery. When Aeschylus (c. 525–456 BC) said that his plays were "slices from the banquet of Homer" (Athenaeus 8.347e), he meant that he was stealing plots from these poems, not from the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, in which Aeschylus had little interest. In one trilogy (group of three plays), Aeschylus did stage the story of Achilles' quarrel, the bestowal of his heaven-sent armor, and the ransoming of Hector, but of his eighty plays not one other depended on the *Iliad* or *Odyssey*. Sophocles and Euripides, too, took their plots from the Cyclic Poems and the Theban cycle, not from the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. For one thing, the long epics already had their special place in the festival of the Panathenaea; for another,

these long poems contained few stories suitable for dramatization, as Aristotle was first to notice (*Poetics* 1451a).

Imitation is a prerogative of a fully literate tradition, and the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are too vast, too gigantic to encourage direct imitation. Why would you? For a long time, no one did. When one imitates in literature, the reader is meant to understand that is what you are doing. A fancy word for purposeful imitation is “intertextuality,” which means that when you read one book, you think of another. There is no “intertextuality” in the oral tradition because there are no texts. We first find intertextuality in fifth-century Athens, where entertainment was orally experienced but based in texts that circulated in the schools, where such texts were studied and memorized. Hence Aristophanes, the giant of Athenian Old Comedy, could parody a line of Euripides spoken in a play performed a single time years before and still expect to get a laugh from his audience.

In the third century BC Apollonius of Rhodes, author of the *Argonautica*, the story of Jason, lived in a very different world in Alexandria, Egypt. Mud-brick walls surrounded the aristocratic courts where Homer played his lyre and composed his song by means of the oral-formulaic technique. The rhapsodes did not play an instrument, but recited at public festivals while holding a staff, a *rhabdos* (see Figure 7). Apollonius composed in privacy on wax tablets or with stylus and ink, then, we think, read aloud from an inscribed papyrus his epic poem to small circles of a wealthy, very powerful, and highly educated elite. He was the first man, as far as we know, who in five hundred years set out to imitate Homer's poems in a conscious way.

In the days of Apollonius conditions of life in the Mediterranean had changed utterly since Homer. Following the conquests of Alexander (356–323 BC), the intellectual leaders of the Hellenic tradition lived in a foreign land. The *aidoi* were gone forever, as were the village aristocracies they had served. Alexandria was capital of one of the most powerful monarchies ever to have existed, drenched in wealth and driven by cultural ambition. Vast, inexhaustible power had fallen into the hands of single men, and the Ptolemies of Egypt were happy to spend it on cultural decoration. Within one hundred years of its founding around 334 BC Alexandria had become the largest, richest, and most cultured city in the world. Hence the great poets of the Hellenistic period moved there and took positions at the Mouseion, the “temple of the Muses.”

Apollonius of Rhodes, head librarian at the Mouseion probably between 270 and 245 BC, of course learned his poetry from books and

knew nothing whatsoever about the oral origins of Homer's poems. He faced the transmitted texts as literary classics worthy of hard study, close attention, and admiring imitation. Such Hellenistic librarians as Apollonius' teacher, the great scholar and poet Callimachus (c. 305–240 BC), created at this time modern categories of literary genre: “tragedy,” “comedy,” “epic,” “lyric,” “choral,” “mime,” and so forth. Most of these genres we still recognize. The librarians at Alexandria needed to organize on their shelves papyrus rolls filled with diverse literary texts that came to them from all over the Greek-speaking world, purchased by the king's largesse, so they required categories into which they could group these texts.

For Apollonius, Homer had defined the genre of epic: a long poem about adventure and war in which the gods intervene and heroes wear ornamental epithets in a twelve-bar line made of dactyls and spondees. Apollonius' *Argonautica*, about 6,000 verses long, is divided into four books. The poem tells the story of Jason's journey to Colchis at the eastern end of the Black Sea to recover the Golden Fleece, his love affair with the witch Medea, and his problems in returning home. We do not know why Apollonius might have written such a poem, or exactly how it was circulated, but the mythic theme of Jason's wanderings in strange lands, on the model of Homer's *Odyssey*, surely took on new meaning to Greeks now living in the alien land of Egypt, where they were subject to danger and temptation.

Apollonius thought of himself as writing in a Homeric style, and, read aloud, his verse does sound “Homeric,” but his epithets are merely ornamental and of course do not reflect oral composition. They are stylistic devices meant to recall Homeric usage and heighten poetic expression, an appeal to learned experience. Everything in Apollonius is thought through and contrived. He uses Homer's archaic language, then invents new archaisms of his own. Here is an example of the new, self-conscious, modern, intertextual epic of Apollonius of Rhodes, from the scene where Jason comes upon the great dragon that guards the Golden Fleece:

But right in front the serpent with his keen unsleeping eyes saw them coming and stretched out his long neck and hissed terribly, and the sound echoed all along the high banks of the river and through the endless wood. Those who lived in the land of Colchis very far from Titanian Aea [where the fleece was] heard it, near the outflowing of the Lycus, the river that splits from loud-roaring Araxes and blends his holy stream with the Phasis, and the two of them flow on together as one and pour their waters into

the Caucasian Sea. And through fear young mothers awakened, and around their new-born babes, asleep in their arms, they threw their hands in terror, their small limbs shaken at the hissing. (*Argonautica* 4.128–138)

Perhaps we are meant in this description to remember when Achilles shouted from the wall so loudly that twelve men fell dead (*Il.* 18.230), but Homer would never allow a dragon into his poems: even the fantastic elements of Odysseus' journey are told at one remove from the author's voice, and we never find such exaggerated effects. Homer liked lists, whose names would be obscure to a modern reader in Alexandria, so Apollonius lists three obscure and distant rivers and one sea, appealing to arcane knowledge about little-known geography. For Apollonius it is not Pontus (the Black Sea) but a more "poetic" Caucasian Sea, because the Caucasus Mountains rise at the eastern edge of the Black Sea, as Apollonius' learned audience will recognize. The sudden shift from the description of the faraway rivers, where the dragon's hissing was heard, to the terror of mothers protecting their children reminds us of Andromache and Astyanax, but in its reaching for deeply sentimental feeling, and for exaggerated effect, this typical passage is highly unhomeric.

Apollonius introduced modern narrative themes, too, in his portrayal of Jason's unheroic weakness and Medea's unfeminine strength. Whereas Homer in a famous elaboration describes the shield that Achilles receives from heaven so that he may kill Hector, Apollonius elaborately describes Jason's cloak (*Argonautica* 1.721–767), which he will use to cover himself and the queen of Lemnos as they make love!

#### Homer in Italy

Homer's poems appear to have been known in Italy already in the eighth century BC, within decades or even years of their being dictated to a scribe, probably in Euboea in Greece. The Euboeans immediately carried westward the new alphabet, which was their invention, and passed it to the native Italians. Only in this way can we understand that the very oldest Greek inscription, c. 775 BC (of a few letters), was found in Latium in Italy (part of a name?), and that the oldest Etruscan inscriptions written in the Greek alphabet from north of Latium go back to 700 BC. From the Euboean mining outpost on the island of Pithecoussae (modern Ischia) comes the "Cup of Nestor" inscription, c. 740 BC: as we have seen, not only the oldest Greek inscription of some length (together



Figure 23. Wall painting of the Laestrygonians hurling boulders and tree trunks at Odysseus' men, trapped in the bay. The picture is murky, but you can make out five boats from the left center to the upper middle center and a sixth capsized at the right. A series of similar paintings illustrated scenes from the *Odyssey*, from a house on the Esquiline Hill in Rome, c. 1 BC. Notice the large trireme in the center of the picture. Vatican Museums. © 1990, Photo Scala, Florence

with the Dipylon Vase inscription – see Figure 9), but the first literary allusion in the Western world and the first example of intertextuality. The meaning of the inscription is not just in what it says, but in its apparent relation to a preexisting *text* that the audience can be expected to know.

Etruscan tombs from the Archaic Period (sixth–fourth centuries BC), built to resemble real dining halls, sometimes have paintings in them of Homeric scenes around the walls. Archeologists have found just such paintings in great Roman houses from the time of Augustus and there may be direct continuity from the Archaic representations (Figure 23). The Etruscan paintings must reflect stories told in the symposium hall, but whether in the Greek language or in Etruscan we cannot know. Nearly a revolution in Roman studies in the last generation has shown that the Romans too were from the very beginning deeply imbued with Greek

literary culture, and in this case that means the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, the Cyclic Poems and the Theban cycle. There never was a time when, suddenly, the Romans discovered Greece and everything changed, for long a traditional view.

Nonetheless our sources report that in the third century BC the Roman Livius Andronicus (c. 284–204), a south Italian Greek probably enslaved to a Roman named Livius after the capture of Tarentum in 272 BC, first translated the *Odyssey* into Latin. It must have been a greatly abridged version; we know it fit on a single roll. Andronicus used a loose Latin meter called a Saturnian, presumably so called because it was old like Saturn. We are uncertain about the origin and even functioning of the Saturnian verse. Only a few lines survive, but Livius Andronicus' translation of the *Odyssey* is the first poem in Latin, as far as we know, though Andronicus was a Greek and the poem derives from a Greek original. We can only speculate why Andronicus might have done such a thing, but certainly the legend of Odysseus was closely involved with legends about early Italy, where his adventures were thought to lie. Several places in southern Italy claimed to be named after Odysseus' men. One Greek legend even told how Aeneas had sailed with Odysseus.

Scholars have been unable to reconstruct the prehistory of Roman literature – that is, what happened before Livius Andronicus – but Romans must have been reading Greek hexametric verse, to judge from the Etruscan paintings and other “Homeric” material in the artistic record. If we accept that the early Latin and Etruscan aristocracy understood Greek, probable on other grounds, we can explain their early familiarity with such material. In fact the Roman aristocracy seems always to have understood Greek, and the basis of their education in Greek would have been the same as in Greece itself, the study of the poet Homer, whose texts are the oldest in the Western world. Who was “the Roman Homer”? As one critic has put it, the Roman Homer turns out to have been Homer himself.

On the Latin side of the ledger in the aristocratic and bilingual society of the Roman ruling class, who learned their Greek from Homer and who spoke Greek and quoted Homer at every opportunity in their speeches and in their writings, stood the mighty poet Vergil (70–19 BC), who for two thousand years would epitomize achievement in the epic genre in the provincial Latin West, where direct knowledge of Homer eventually was lost. But Apollonius as much as Homer was Vergil's model for the Latin *Aeneid*, the story of Aeneas' journey to Italy after the sack of Troy and his founding there of the Roman race. The refined, learned, allusive,

meditative, philosophical, sometimes mystical poetic compositions of the librarian/scholars at Alexandria in the third and second centuries BC exerted a powerful influence on Roman poetry at every level through Greek teachers trained in Alexandria, who came to Rome to educate the Roman elite. The Roman Aeneas' love affair with the Phoenician queen of Carthage Dido evokes and is modeled on Jason's affair with Medea in Apollonius' *Argonautica*. Vergil also imitates Apollonius in his obsession with stylistic elegance, refined expression, and conscious demands on the education of his cultured audience. The first words of the *Aeneid* are *arma virumque cano . . .*, “of arms and the man I sing,” which deliberately invoke the *Iliad*, about war, and the *Odyssey*, whose first word in Greek is “man.” Vergil expects his audience to notice such allusions, the first of thousands in the poem, whose intertextual meaning is enriched by the whole of written classical literature that stands behind it as a backdrop and sounding board for the story of Aeneas' flight across water (= the *Odyssey*) and the conquest of Italy (= the *Iliad*). On the surface, and in English translation, the *Aeneid* and Homer's poems look somewhat alike, and one does depend on the other; they are both long poems on heroic themes. Yet the learned Alexandrian *Aeneid* is utterly different in what it means, and how it means.

Not so much Homer's prestige as Vergil's inspired such other Latin epics as the *Pharsalia* of Lucan (AD 39–65), about the Roman civil war, and the *Thebaid* of Statius (AD 45–96), about the legend of the Seven Against Thebes. During the Renaissance Vergil's powerful model inspired Italian epics and earned him the right to guide Dante into the underworld and up the mountain of Purgatory. In England, such works as Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667) imitate Vergil in style and convention.

In modern times the epic is a rare form, although we may speak of an “epic” film, like George Lucas's *Star Wars*, or an “epic” novel, like Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. That is only metaphor. The *Lord of the Rings* and other volumes by the extraordinary J. R. R. Tolkien may, however, belong to the genre (although there are no gods and the hobbit hero is purposely unheroic). Striking is how all of Homer's explicit imitators, except Vergil, are today never read for pleasure, or even read at all except by a handful of scholars in select universities. Homer, by contrast, is read avidly and never more widely than today, although torn from his oral roots, his language, and his environment. No doubt his greatness is a mystery, but one we are grateful for.

new text by M. L. West, *Homerus Ilias* (Munich/Leipzig), unfortunately not easy to obtain.

## Further Reading

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The bibliography on Homer is gigantic and no one reads it all. Much of it is technical or dull. In the following I will highlight books and sources in English, relatively easy to find, that will aid the beginning student to explore the endless maze of Homeric studies: first studies of general interest, then studies relevant to the two poems.

### Translations, Texts

Few today read all or even large parts of Homer in Greek. Fortunately, a new fashion in translation, begun in the mid-twentieth century at the University of Chicago, has generated numerous superior translations. Richmond Lattimore's from 1951 (*Iliad*) and 1965 (*Odyssey*) remain the most Homeric and best give the feel of Homer's formulaic Greek. Robert Fitzgerald's translations are livelier and freer and especially his *Odyssey* (1961) is delightful. Robert Fagles's translations of both poems (*Iliad* 1990, *Odyssey* 1999) have attracted many admirers. Other good translations of both poems include those by Stanley Lombardo (*Iliad*: Indianapolis, 1997; *Odyssey*: Indianapolis, 2000) in a vigorous, modern American style.

Two good books accompany translations and well educate the Greekless student in the complexities of the two poems: J. C. Hogan's *A Guide to the Iliad, Based on the Translation by Robert Fitzgerald* (New York, 1979) and R. Hexter, *A Guide to the Odyssey: A Commentary on the English Translation of Robert Fitzgerald* (New York, 1993).

The Greek texts are usually read in the Oxford Classical Texts *Homeric Opera* edited by T. W. Allen and later D. B. Munro and published in various editions between 1902 and 1920. In 1998–2000 appeared a fine

### General Studies

Two good general surveys, by a collection of experts, are *A Companion to Homer* edited by A. J. B. Wace and F. H. Stubbings (London, 1962) and *A New Companion to Homer* edited by myself and I. Morris (Leiden, 1995). The Wace and Stubbings volume reflects heavily what used to be called Homeric archeology, the relationship between archeological finds from the Bronze Age, taken to be Homer's world, and the poems. We now think Homer's world is the eighth century BC. Nonetheless these studies are interesting, and there are excellent essays on the Homeric Question and technical descriptions of Homeric language. The Morris and Powell volume is modern with an essay on almost every topic, with much less archeology and more literary, cultural, and historical studies. The recent *Cambridge Companion to Homer* (Cambridge, UK, 2004), edited by Robert Fowler, is very much less expensive, but of an uneven quality and with little historical or archeological information. The editor places Homer in the wrong century, giving the whole project a false perspective. There are good essays on literary features in Homer and his imitators in J. M. Foley's recent edited *A Companion to Ancient Epic* (Oxford, 2005), which includes superior examinations of the epic tradition outside of Greece, in the Near East and Rome. (I am indebted to Lowell Edmunds' essay in this collection, "Epic and Myth," for my discussion of folktale in Homer.)

Thorough if sometimes stodgy and now rather dated overview of Homeric criticism is G. S. Kirk's *The Songs of Homer* (Cambridge, UK, 1962), abbreviated as *Homer and the Oral Tradition* (Cambridge, UK, 1976). H. Fraenkel, *Early Greek Poetry and Philosophy*, translated by M. Hadas and J. Willis (New York, 1973), discusses the singers and their epics, language, verse, style, gods, and other topics. W. G. Thalmann, in *Conventions of Form and Thought in Early Greek Poetry* (Baltimore, 1984), places Homer into broader contexts of archaic poetry.

Many general studies offer plot summaries, but they follow similar lines. C. Whitman's *Homer and the Heroic Tradition* (Cambridge, MA, 1958) identifies complex patterns of ring composition and parallel presentations of themes within the *Iliad*, which he compares to Geometric pottery. C. R. Beye, in *Ancient Epic Poetry* (Ithaca, NY, 1993), brings wisdom

and experience to study of the Greco-Roman epic tradition. There is a succinct overview of the Cyclic Poems in M. Davies, *The Epic Cycle* (Bristol, 1989). P. Toohey, in *Reading Epic: An Introduction to the Ancient Narratives*, is good on genre and includes a chapter on Apollonius' *Argonautica* (London, 1992). Once widely read, but employing an inappropriate etymologizing method and misunderstanding oral theory, is G. Nagy's *The Best of the Achaeans: Concepts of the Hero in Archaic Greek Poetry* (Baltimore, 1979). The writings of Nagy and his followers suffer from an inaccurate model for the formation of the Homeric texts, rejecting historical authorship in favor of a mechanical "crystallization" of the poems out of an impersonal "tradition."

#### Commentaries

There are recent line-by-line commentaries in English for both poems. For the *Iliad* G. S. Kirk has served as general editor of a massive six-volume commentary, *The Iliad: A Commentary* (Cambridge, UK, 1985–1993) with volumes by Kirk, J. B. Hainsworth, R. Janko, M. Edwards, and N. Richardson. Each volume contains good introductory essays, although Kirk's notion of a "memorized" oral text is fantasy. For the *Odyssey* there is a good although sometimes curiously old-fashioned *A Commentary on Homer's Odyssey* (Oxford, 1988–1992) with contributions by A. Heubeck, S. West, J. B. Hainsworth, A. Hoekstra, J. Russo, and M. Fernandez-Galiano. W. B. Stanford's commentary, though old, is always useful: *Odyssey*, second edition (London, 1959), 2 vols. I. De Jong's *A Narratological Commentary on the Odyssey* (Cambridge, UK, 2001) is a line-by-line exploration of narrative art, character, plot, and the type-scene.

#### History of Text

M. Haslam offers a superb history of the early text in "Homeric Papyri and the Transmission of the Text" in Morris/Powell, *A New Companion to Homer*, 55–100. M. L. West's *Studies in the Text and Transmission of the Iliad* (Munich/Leipzig, 2001), by a foremost scholar, is a thorough up-to-date study. R. Janko's influential *Homer, Hesiod and the Hymns: Diachronic Development in Epic Diction* (Cambridge, UK, 1982) establishes

a date of around 730 BC for the *Iliad*, somewhat later for the *Odyssey* (both dates probably too late).

#### Homeric Question, Parry/Lord

F. A. Wolf's eighteenth-century Latin presents a challenge, but fortunately a modern English translation is *Prolegomena to Homer*, translated by A. Grafton, G. W. Most, and J. E. G. Zetzel (Princeton, 1985), with a good introduction that explains Wolf's debt to contemporary biblical scholars.

Adam Parry, son of Milman Parry, gathered his father's papers together in M. Parry (ed. A. Parry), *The Making of Homeric Verse: The Collected Papers of Milman Parry* (Oxford, 1971; reprinted New York, 1980). Milman Parry's writings are brilliant technical analyses of language, but you need to know Greek. A. Parry's introduction to this volume is probably the best short introduction to what Milman Parry was trying to say. The introduction is included in A. Parry's *The Language of Achilles and Other Papers*, with foreword by P. H. J. Lloyd-Jones (Oxford, 1989); this volume also contains A. Parry's important essay "Have We Homer's *Iliad*?" which shows how there can be no intermediary between the words of the song as Homer sang it and the text we have today.

A. B. Lord's seminal *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge, MA, 1960) is reissued with a terrific CD-ROM disk showing many pictures of guslars and even a film clip of Avdo Međedović singing (second edition, S. Mitchell and G. Nagy, eds.; Cambridge, MA, 2000). Numerous books by Lord's follower J. M. Foley illustrate the contemporary state of the oral/formulaic theory, for example *The Theory of Oral Composition: History and Methodology* (Bloomington, 1988) or *Traditional Oral Epic: The Odyssey, Beowulf, and the Serbo-Croatian Return Song* (Berkeley, 1990) or *Homer's Traditional Art* (University Station, PA, 1999).

*Archery at the Dark of the Moon* by N. Austin (Berkeley, 1975) argues against the impression that formulas are mechanical and without semantic connotation. M. N. Nagler attempts to deal with the conundrum of the indefinable formula in *Spontaneity and Tradition: A Study in the Oral Art of Homer* (Berkeley, 1974) by supposing that they ride on a subconscious *Gestalt*, much as does ordinary language.

Some of Parry's field material is published in M. Parry, A. B. Lord and D. E. Bynum, eds., *Serbo-Croatian Heroic Songs* (Cambridge, MA and Belgrade, 1953), including Avdo Međedović's *The Wedding of Smailagić*



*Mebo*, as long as the *Odyssey*. Descriptions of the guslars and transcriptions of conversations with them provide invaluable insights.

### Technological Background, the Alphabet

There is a straightforward history of papyrus in R. Parkinson and S. Quirke, *Papyrus* (Austin, 1995). The importance of clay as a substrate is emphasized in E. Chiera, edited by G. Cameron, *They Wrote on Clay: The Babylonian Tablets Speak Today* (Chicago, 1956), one of the best introductions to writing in Mesopotamia.

The classic study of writing, never surpassed, is I. J. Gelb's *A Study of Writing* (Chicago, 1963). A good recent overview is A. Robinson, *The Story of Writing* (New York, 1999). My own update on this material will appear as *Writing* (Oxford, 2008). The best book on West Semitic inscriptions is J. Naveh's *Early History of the Alphabet* (Jerusalem and Leiden, 1982), also typical in its confusion about the relationship of the Greek alphabet to the earlier West Semitic syllabic systems.

R. Carpenter established the means of dating the invention of the Greek alphabet in a landmark article, "The Antiquity of the Greek Alphabet," *American Journal of Archaeology* 37 (1933), 8–29. Many Semitists (e.g. Naveh), calling West Semitic writing "alphabetic," think that the transmission could have happened almost any time, even in the Bronze Age.

I have long been interested in the relationship between the history of the Greek alphabet and the date of the Homeric texts, best represented in my *Homer and the Origin of the Greek Alphabet* (Cambridge, UK, 1991), where I argue that the Greek alphabet was devised to create these texts. I came to this thesis independently, but was anticipated in part by the British scholar H. T. Wade-Gery, *The Poet of the Iliad* (Cambridge, UK, 1952), a short book with original interpretations. In my *Writing and the Origins of Greek Literature* (Cambridge, UK, 2002) I examine the place of the Homeric poems within the theory and history of writing.

### Homer and History

Important books that advocated the "Bronze Age Homer" are M. P. Nilsson, *Homer and Mycenae* (London, 1933) and T. B. L. Webster, *From Mycenae to Homer* (London, 1958). J. V. Luce, *Homer and the Heroic Age*

(London, 1975), astutely compares the poems with archeological data, with excellent illustrations. D. L. Page's brilliant (but often mistaken) *History and the Homeric Iliad* (Berkeley, 1959) combines archeological and documentary evidence with original philological investigation. The best summary of the problem is J. Bennet's "Homer and the Bronze Age," in Morris/Powell (1997, see above), 511–34. M. I. Finley, *The World of Odysseus*, second edition (London, 1977), pushed Homer's world out of the Bronze Age into the ninth and tenth centuries. I. Morris wrote an influential article that placed Homer's world still later, in the eighth century BC, in "The Use and Abuse of Homer," *Classical Antiquity* 6 (1986), 81–138, a conclusion accepted by most. J. Latacz, an eminent German philologist who worked with Manfred Korfman, the late excavator at Troy (died 2005), has summarized the relation between archeological finds and the historical question of whether there was a Trojan War in *Troy and Homer: Towards a Solution of an Old Mystery* (translated by K. Windle and R. Ireland, Oxford, 2004; first published as *Troia und Homer*, 2001).

A good collection of essays on the evolution of the polis is L. Mitchell and P. J. Rhodes, eds., *The Development of the Polis in Archaic Greece* (London, 1996), especially K. Raaflaub's "Evolution of the Early Greek Polis." There is a good essay on the age of colonial expansion in J. Graham, "The Colonial Expansion of Greece," *Cambridge Ancient History* vol. 3, second edition (Cambridge, UK, 1982), 83–162. J. Boardman's *The Greeks Overseas*, second edition (London, 1980), is a fine overview. I. Malkin's *The Returns of Odysseus* (Berkeley, 1999) places the poem in the context of Western colonization and argues for a late ninth-century date for Homer's poems, a date I also consider possible.

The Euboeans, Greece's earliest colonizers, had a special role in the formation of the Homeric texts. For the warrior burial at Lefkandi, see M. R. Popham, E. Touloupa, and L. H. Sackett, "The Hero of Lefkandi," *Antiquity* 56 (1982), 159–64. Evidence for Euboean dialect in Homer is found in M. L. West's "The Rise of the Greek Epic," *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 108 (1988), 151–72. D. Ridgway summarizes evidence for Euboean exploration in Italy in the eighth century BC, to which the *Odyssey* owes much, in *The First Western Greeks* (Cambridge, UK, 1992). O. Murray's *Early Greece*, second edition (London, 1993), is excellent in general for social and historical background and emphasizes the importance of the Euboeans as Greek cultural leaders in the early eighth century BC. Important, too, is the essay "Homer, History, and Archaeology" by J. P. Crielaard, in his *Homeric Questions* (Amsterdam, 1995), 201–88, which contains excellent essays by other scholars (but in French).



H. L. Lorimer's *Homer and the Monuments* (London, 1950), sympathetic to the Bronze Age Homer, is still an important study comparing Homer with material culture. She has a chapter on "Arms and Armour" (132–335), a detailed interpretation of the evidence up to 1950 and a starting point for much subsequent discussion in English. A. M. Snodgrass covers post-Bronze Age weaponry in *Early Greek Armour and Weapons: From the End of the Bronze Age to 600 BC* (Edinburgh, 1964), including separate chapters on different elements of the panoply and a discussion of literary evidence. Excellent on warfare generally is H. van Wees, *Status Warriors: War, Violence, and Society in Homer and History* (Amsterdam, 1992) and *Greek Warfare: Myth and Realities* (London, 2004), though he puts Homer's poems too late. For Homeric society, examined from different points of view, best to consult W. Donlan, *The Aristocratic Ideal and Selected Papers* (Wauconda, IL, 1999).

#### Homer and Art

K. Friis Johansen's *The Iliad in Early Greek Art* (Copenhagen, 1967) established the predominance of themes from the Cyclic poets in the seventh and sixth centuries BC over themes from the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. A. M. Snodgrass's *Homer and the Artists: Text and Picture in Early Greek Art* (Cambridge, UK, 1998) is a recent competent survey, but much too reluctant to tie art to text. In my own *Writing and the Origins of Greek Literature* (Cambridge, UK, 2002) I show how Eastern images inspired new myths in Greece, making for desperate complexity in sorting out the relationship between myth and art. D. Buitron and B. Cohen, eds., *The Odyssey in Ancient Art: An Epic in Word and Image* (Annandale-on-Hudson, NY, 1992) gather early images relating to the *Odyssey*, with valuable essays. Two complementary books are M. J. Anderson's *The Fall of Troy in Early Greek Poetry and Art* (Oxford, 1997), which takes account of poetic inspiration from many sources, and S. Woodford's *The Trojan War in Ancient Art* (Ithaca, NY, 1993), which summarizes complex evidence for this popular theme.

#### The Near East

Greece's indebtedness to Near Eastern literature is an old topic, but uniquely persuasive are W. Burkert's *The Orientalizing Revolution: Near*

*Eastern Influence on Greek Culture in the Early Archaic Age*, translated by M. E. Pinder (Harvard, 1992) and M. L. West's exhaustive *The East Face of Helicon: West Asiatic Elements in Greek Poetry and Myth* (Oxford, 1997), one of the most important books in Greek literary studies in the last generation. Excellent introductions to and translations of *Gilgamesh* are S. Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia* (Oxford, 1989) and B. R. Foster, *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (New York, 2001). Translations of Ugaritic myths can be found in W. W. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger, Jr., eds., *The Context of Scripture: Canonical Compositions from the Biblical World* (Leiden, 1997), and in the third edition of the classic collection edited by J. B. Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (Princeton, 1969). Many good recent books on the Phoenicians include M. E. Aubet, *The Phoenicians and the West*, translated by M. Turton (Cambridge, UK, 1993).

#### Religion

Basic background for Homer's religion can be found in W. Burkert's *Greek Religion*, translated by J. Raffan (Cambridge, MA, 1985), and there is important material in Burkert's *Structure and History of Greek Mythology and Ritual* (Berkeley, 1979). J. Griffin's *Homer on Life and Death* (Oxford, 1980) has sound chapters on religion as well as other interesting interpretative material.

#### Readers, Style, Similes

H. Clarke's *Homer's Readers: A Historical Introduction to the Iliad and the Odyssey* (Newark, 1981) describes the reception of the Homeric poems from antiquity to the present, primarily reception by critics, not creative artists. Most general books about Homer (see above) discuss style at some point. A well-known essay about Homer's style is "Odysseus' Scar," the first chapter of E. Auerbach's famous *Mimesis* (New York, 1954), 1–19, where he argues that Homeric style is characterized by externalized description, transparent meaning with the temporal setting in the foreground, no character development, legendary rather than historical sources, and a social perspective limited to the aristocracy. S. Weil's *The Iliad or the Poem of Force* is widely read as a study in destructive conflict, published in French in 1940 (translated by M. McCarthy, New York, 1945). Written

as Hitler's armies marched, the essay about Europe's first war poet smells of Europe's greatest war.

An original recent commentator on Homer's style, with a linguistic approach, is E. Bakker, although his work can be technical. One may consult his edited collection, with A. Kahane, *Written Voices, Spoken Signs: Tradition, Performance, and the Epic Text* (Cambridge, MA, 1997), which contains additional bibliography, or his excellent essay in the Morris/Powell volume cited above.

There is a good study of the simile in C. Moulton, *Similes in the Homeric Poems* (Göttingen, 1977), who argues that similes are more than ornamentation or relief, but actually further narration. Ruth Scodel's *Listening to Homer: Tradition, Narrative, Audience* (Ann Arbor, MI, 2002) is good on how these poems might actually have been performed.

### The Iliad

Many excellent studies have explored the literary aspects of the poem. H. Bloom's edited *Homer's The Iliad* (New York, 1987) collects essays by leading scholars. M. S. Silk's *Homer: The Iliad* (Cambridge, UK, 1987) is a brief and sensible introduction. E. T. Owen's *The Story of the Iliad* (Toronto, 1946) describes just what is happening in the narrative, not always obvious. M. Edwards's *Homer: Poet of the Iliad* (Baltimore, 1988) is a fine introduction with book-by-book commentaries and extensive bibliography.

G. Else's *Aristotle's Poetics: The Argument* (Cambridge, MA, 1963) thoroughly explores what Aristotle meant by plot. J. M. Redfield's *Nature and Culture in the Iliad: The Tragedy of Hector* (Chicago, 1975) follows Aristotle in focusing on action (the logical probability or necessity of developments in the plot) rather than character. The premises for interpreting action are based on nature, culture, and their interrelationship, he thinks, and Achilles and Hector suffer tragedies that explicate the vulnerability of the hero on the borderline between nature and culture.

A. W. H. Adkins' *Merit and Responsibility: A Study in Greek Values* (Chicago, 1960) is a powerful treatment of Homeric morality that laid the basis for further discussion. A broad review of major themes of the *Iliad* is found in S. Schein's *The Mortal Hero* (Berkeley, 1984). Essays edited by J. Wright well represent Anglo-American criticism: *Essays on the Iliad* (Bloomington, 1978). *Homeric Soundings: The Shaping of the Iliad* by O. Taplin contains many insights about structure and meaning.

R. Martin's *The Language of Heroes: Speech and Performance in the Iliad* (Ithaca, NY, 1989) has a discussion of speech used as a means to gain power in Homeric society. *The Rape of Troy*, by J. Gottschall (Cambridge, UK, 2007), presents a compelling argument tying Homeric behavior to biological patterns.

Those who enjoy fictional recreations of Trojan saga will find pleasure in C. Wolf's *Cassandra*, translated from German by J. Van Heurck (New York, 1984), a feminist rewriting of the *Iliad* told by the scorned prophetess; and in my own humorous mock-epic *The War at Troy: A True History* (Philadelphia, 2006).

### The Odyssey

In the ancient world the *Iliad* was far more popular than the *Odyssey*; three times as many papyrus fragments of the *Iliad* are found in Egypt as of the *Odyssey*. Perhaps modern taste prefers the *Odyssey* because of its strong theme of conflict and resolution between the sexes, and because it avoids long scenes of mind-numbing battle. In recent years many exceptional books on the *Odyssey* have appeared and continue to appear. J. Griffin's *Homer: The Odyssey* (Cambridge, UK, 1987), parallel to M. Silk's book on the *Iliad* (above), covers the basic ground. S. V. Tracy's *The Story of the Odyssey* (Princeton, 1990) is written in parallel to E. T. Owen's summary of the *Iliad* (above) and is as excellent.

Old but one of the best books on the *Odyssey* is W. J. Woodhouse's *The Composition of Homer's Odyssey* (Oxford, 1930), which focuses on folklore elements. D. L. Page's *The Homeric Odyssey* (Oxford, 1955) and *Folktales in Homer's Odyssey* (Cambridge, MA, 1973) reveal wonderful material, although as an Analyst Page never quite gets the point.

Other books of general interest include A. Thornton, *People and Themes in the Odyssey* (London, 1970), with many insights, and S. Murnaghan, *Disguise and Recognition in the Odyssey* (Princeton, 1987), a useful study of this central narrative device. J. S. Clay's *The Wrath of Athena: Gods and Men in the Odyssey* (Princeton, 1983) is strong on the relationships between divine and mortal in the *Odyssey*. C. Dougherty in *The Raft of Odysseus: The Ethnographic Imagination of Homer's Odyssey* (Oxford, 2001) ties the *Odyssey* to the rapidly changing social and economic life of the eighth century BC. S. Schein's *Reading the Odyssey: Selected Interpretive Essays* (Princeton, 1995) has essays by important critics, some translated into English for the first time.

The theme of sexual conflict has inspired worthwhile studies of sexual roles and relationships, for example B. Cohen, ed., *The Distaff Side: Representing the Female in Homer's Odyssey* (Oxford, 1995). Nancy Felson-Rubin, *Regarding Penelope: From Character to Poetics* (Princeton, 1994), combines audience-oriented criticism with psychological analysis to study Penelope's character.

The *Odyssey* has defined the West's self-image as the questing explorer of the unknown and inspired countless literary recreations. W. B. Stanford's *The Ulysses Theme: A Study in the Adaptability of a Traditional Hero* (Oxford, 1963) is a good account. For a more modern treatment, there is H. Bloom's much shorter *Odysseus/Ulysses* (New York, 1992).

### Epic after Homer

The best single discussion is D. Feeney's *The Gods in Epic: Poets and Critics of the Classical Tradition* (Oxford, 1991). For the reception of Homer, see the collection of essays in R. Lamberton and J. J. Keaney, eds., *Homer's Ancient Readers: The Hermeneutics of Greek Epic's Earliest Exegetes* (Princeton, 1992). I owe much on reception to R. Lamberton's explanations in this and other publications.

## Index and Glossary

Forms of names in direct Greek transliteration (that is, not romanized as in most dictionaries) are given in parentheses.

- Abantes, Homer's name for the Euboeans, 107, 108
- abecedary, an alphabetic repertory, 37, 49
- Achaean (a-kē-ans. Akhaians), a division of the Greek people, Homer's word for the Greeks at Troy, 78, 89, 91, 103-13, 116-19, 121, 124-35, 139-44, 158-63, 168, 169, 172, 176, 181, 188, 216
- Achilles (a-kīl-ēz. Akhilleus), greatest Greek warrior at Troy, 1, 22, 23, 25, 30, 43, 44, 58, 60, 64, 65, 68, 71, 80-3, 86-90, 93, 101-9, 113-15, 118-52, 167, 174, 175, 185, 186, 193-200, 205, 207, 210, 217, 222
- Acrisius (a-kris-i-us. Akrisios), father of Danae, killed accidentally by Perseus, 132
- Acropolis (a-krop-o-lis), hill in Athens on which the Parthenon is built, 81
- Aea (ē-a. Aia), "earth," land at eastern end of the Black Sea where the Golden Fleece was kept, 209
- Aegean (ē-jē-an) Sea, between Greece and Turkey, 54
- aegis (ē-jis), "goat skin," a shield with serpent border used by Athena and Zeus and, once, Apollo, 113, 134, 139, 144, 165
- Aegisthus (ē-jis-thus. Aigisthos), son of Thyestes, lover of Clytemnestra, murderer of Agamemnon, killed by Orestes, 156, 168, 193
- Aeneid* (ē-nē-id), poem by Vergil on founding of Rome, late first century BC, 22, 142, 147, 212, 213
- Aeolus (ē-o-lus. Aiolos), the wind king, 68, 171, 177
- Aeschylus (ē-ski-lus, es-ki-lus), Athenian playwright, fifth century BC, 207
- Aetolia (e-tō-li-a), district north of the Corinthian Gulf, 108, 122
- Africa, 35, 36, 62, 94, 170
- Agamemnon (a-ga-mem-non), son of Atreus, brother of Menelaus, leader of Greek forces at Troy, 25, 44, 55, 60, 71, 81, 86, 102-13, 118-27, 130-6, 139-43, 147-52, 156, 160, 161, 168, 174, 175, 182, 193, 195, 198-200, 206

- Agenor (a-jē-nor), Phoenician father of Cadmus and Europa, 144
- Ajax (ā-jaks. Aias), son of Telamon (the "greater Ajax"), Greek hero who committed suicide at Troy, 44, 58, 79, 80, 89, 109, 111, 113, 116, 117, 123, 127–35, 138, 144, 150, 161, 174, 175, 200, 207; son of Oileus (the "lesser Ajax"), who raped Cassandra at the altar of Athena, 79, 80, 89, 129, 161, 200
- Akkadians (a-kā-di-ans), Semitic people of Mesopotamia, 32
- Alcaeus (al-sē-us. Alkaios), lyric poet from Archaic Period, 11
- Alexander, another name for Paris, 78, 148
- Alexander the Great (356–323 BC), 73, 80, 208
- Alexandria, city in Egypt founded by Alexander the Great, 9, 11, 14, 21, 161, 208–10, 213
- Alexandrian scholars, 7, 10–15, 20, 22, 42, 213
- allegory, "saying something in a different way," 122, 205
- Allen, T. W., editor of the Oxford Classical Text of Homer, 6, 214
- ambrosia, food of the gods, 68
- Analysis, an approach to Homer that wishes to divide his texts into constituent parts that once had an independent existence, 16, 22, 25, 26, 46, 95, 224
- Analyst, a scholar who wishes to identify the small parts of which Homer's poems are made, 22, 29, 43, 86, 223
- Anat, wife/sister of Baal in Ugaritic myth, 37, 72
- Anatolia, "sunrise," the Asian part of modern Turkey, synonymous with Asia Minor, 35, 54, 73, 77, 78
- Antilochus, son of Nestor of Pylos, a suitor to Helen, killed by Memnon, 130, 138, 147
- Anu (a-nū), Mesopotamian sky god, 69
- aoidos* (a-oi-dos, pl. *aoidoi*), Greek word for such oral poets as Homer and Hesiod (contrast with "rhapsode"), 29, 30, 40–3, 46, 59, 67, 70, 81, 82, 86, 88, 97, 101, 104, 112, 121, 127, 156, 158, 167, 168, 175, 176, 184–6, 194, 199, 206–8
- Aphrodite, Greek goddess of sexual attraction, Helen's sponsor, 49, 69, 72, 110, 112, 119, 130, 132, 142, 144, 146, 168, 205
- Apollo, son of Zeus and Leto, god of music, medicine, reason, and prophecy and supporter of the Trojan cause, 44, 45, 65, 70, 71, 102, 104, 116, 117, 128, 133–9, 142–7, 150, 163, 168, 190, 204, 205
- Apollonius (a-pol-iō-ni-us) of Rhodes, author of the *Argonautica*, third century BC, 22, 208, 209
- apologue*, "speech," when Odysseus recounts his adventures at the court of the Phaeacians, 154
- Aramaic, a West Semitic dialect spoken in Aram (Damascus) and widely used by Near Eastern bureaucracies, employing a West Semitic script, 35
- Arcadia (ar-ka-di-a), mountainous region in the central Peloponnesus, 108
- Archaic Period, 207, 211; *see* Chronology, p. xi
- Archilochus (ar-kil-o-kus. Arkhilokhos), Greek lyric poet, seventh century BC, 106, 203

- Ares (ar-ēz), Greek god of war, 62, 65, 107, 112–14, 119, 131, 134, 140, 142, 144, 168, 205
- Argo, "swift," ship of Jason, built by Argus, 163, 172
- Argos, city in the Argive plain in the northern Peloponnesus, 16, 108, 111, 114
- Argus (Argos), "swifty," Odysseus' dog, 156, 185
- Ariadne (ar-i-ad-nē), daughter of Minos and Pasiphaë who helped Theseus, 175
- Aristarchus of Samothrace, Alexandrian scholar, c. 217–145 BC, 13, 14
- aristeia*, "moment of greatness," when a warrior kills many in splendid display, 104, 111, 112, 118, 126, 127, 136, 140
- Aristophanes (ar-is-tof-a-nēz), Athenian writer of comedies, fifth century BC, 15, 208
- Aristophanes of Byzantium, Homeric scholar in Alexandria, c. 257–180 BC, 13
- Aristotle, philosopher, 384–322 BC, 15, 92, 94, 204, 206, 208, 222
- Artemis (ar-te-mis), daughter of Zeus and Leto, virgin goddess of the wild, 89, 141, 142, 144, 164, 165
- Assyrians, a warlike Semitic people of northern Mesopotamia, 32, 62
- Astarte (as-tar-tē), Phoenician goddess, similar to Aphrodite, 72
- Asryanax (as-tī-a-naks), "king of the city," son of Hector and Andromache, thrown from walls of Troy, 80, 115, 116, 210
- atē* (a-tā), "madness, delusion," which clouds the minds of gods and men, 122, 137
- Athena (Athene), sprung from Zeus's head, virgin goddess of war and handicrafts, 60, 62, 69, 72, 79, 80, 103, 110–15, 118, 119, 134, 135, 139–47, 148, 157–66, 172, 179–87, 188, 190, 191, 193, 196, 198, 205, 223
- Athens, main city in Attica, 2, 14, 15, 20, 49, 50, 58, 60, 81, 129, 130, 151, 204, 208
- Atreus (ā-trūs), king of Mycenae, son of Pelops, brother of Thyestes, father of Agamemnon and Menelaus, 102, 104, 135, 156, 159
- Augeas (aw-jē-as), son of Helios, king of Elis, bargained with Heracles to clean his stables, 127
- Augustus (aw-gus-tus), first Roman emperor, first century BC, 211
- Aulis (aw-lis), port in Boeotia from which the Trojan expedition set sail, 120
- Autolykus (aw-tol-i-kus. Autolykos), rogue and thief, son of Hermes, father of Anticlea, grandfather of Odysseus, 188, 189
- Baal (bā-al), "lord," a Levantine storm-god, 18, 37, 38, 72
- Babylon, major city on the middle Euphrates, 18
- Babylonians, 32, 68
- basileus* (plural *basileis*), "big man, chief," 102, 153, 158
- Bellerophon (bel-ler-o-fon), Corinthian hero, grandson of Sisyphus, tamed Pegasus and killed the Chimera; bore the tablet with "baneful signs," 15–18, 33, 114
- Black Sea, also called Pontus, 73, 172, 173, 209, 210

- Blegen, Carl, 1911–1971, American archeologist, excavated Troy in the 1930s, 76
- Boeotia (bē-ō-sha. Boiotia), region north of Attica where Thebes was situated, 53, 108
- book division in Homer, 101
- Briseis, Achilles' war-prize, taken by Agamemnon, 71, 102–4, 120, 141, 150
- Bull of Heaven, monster sent by Ishtar against Gilgamesh and Enkidu, 68
- Burkert, Walter, German scholar, 220, 221
- Byblos, a port in the Levant, from where the Greeks took their word for papyrus (= *byblos*), 9
- Byzantium, Greek colony at the entrance to the Bosphorus (= Constantinople), 6
- caesura, “cutting,” a word-break, usually in the third foot, in dactylic hexameter verse, 24
- Calchas (kal-kas. Kalkhas), prophet of the Greek forces at Troy, 102, 130
- Callimachus (ka-lim-a-kus. Kallimakhos), Alexandrian poet, third century BC, 209
- Calypso (ka-lip-sō. Kalypso), “concealer, burier,” nymph who kept Odysseus for seven years on her island Ogygia at the navel of the sea, 68, 93, 156, 161–7, 183
- Canaan (kā-nan), the same as Palestine, the territory between the Jordan river and the Mediterranean, 34, 35
- Canaanite, a West Semitic dialect spoken in Palestine and recorded in a West Semitic script, 35
- Carthage, Phoenician city in modern Tunisia, kingdom of Dido, enemy of Rome, 213
- Cassandra (ka-san-dra. Cassandra), prophetic daughter of Priam and Hecuba, killed by Clytemnestra, 79, 80, 223
- Castor, son of Tyndareus and Leda, brother of Polydeuces (= Pollux), 109
- Cattle of Helius, eaten by Odysseus' men, 176, 177
- Caucasus Mountains, at the eastern end of the Black Sea, 210
- Cerberus (ser-ber-us. Kerberos), offspring of Echidna and Typhoeus, multi-headed monster who guards the entrance to the underworld, 185
- Charybdis (ka-rib-dis. Kharybdis), dangerous whirlpool, with Scylla, in the Straits of Messina, 63, 176–8
- Chimaera (ki-mē-ra. Khimaira), offspring of Typhoeus and Echidna, with a lion's body, snake's tail, and goat head protruding from the back, killed by Bellerophon, 17, 18, 114
- Chios (kē-os), Greek island near Asia Minor, often claimed as Homer's birthplace, 20, 45
- Christians, 82, 123
- Chryses (krī-sēz), father of Chryseis, a priest of Apollo whom Agamemnon insulted, 71, 102, 151
- Cicero, Roman politician and orator, 106–43 BC, 20
- Cicones (sik-o-nēz), tribe in Thrace raided by Odysseus, 169, 171, 181
- Cilicia (si-lish-a), region in southeastern Asia Minor, 35

- Cimmerians (si-mer-i-anz), live across the river Ocean, where Odysseus summons the spirits of the dead, 161, 173
- Circe, sorcerer and seductress of Odysseus, 172–3
- Clytemnestra (klī-tem-nes-tra. Klytemnestra), daughter of Zeus and Leda, wife of Agamemnon, whom she killed, then was herself killed by Orestes, 156, 168, 175, 182, 193
- Cnossus (knos-sus. Knossos), principal Bronze Age settlement in Crete, where labyrinthine ruins have been found, 56, 62
- codex, a book made of sewn pages, 9, 11, 13
- Colchis (kol-kis. Kolkhis), city at eastern end of Black Sea, where Jason sailed to find the Golden Fleece, 172, 209
- Corcyra (cor-sī-ra. Kerkyra), modern Corfu, an island off the northwest coast of Greece, identified with Scheria, land of the Phaeacians, in the *Odyssey*, 63, 154, 164, 178
- Corinth (kor-inth. Korinth), city on the isthmus between central Greece and the Peloponnesus, 16, 60, 114, 154, 178
- Cos (kos), Greek island near Asia Minor, 108
- creation, stories of, 88, 205
- Crete, largest island in the Aegean, 34, 36, 62, 65, 69, 78, 108, 109, 180, 188
- Cronus (krō-nus), child of Uranus and Gaea, husband of Rhea, overthrown by Zeus, 142
- Cumae (kū-mē. Kymai), site of earliest Greek colony in Italy, north of the bay of Naples, where Aeneas descended to the underworld, 46, 48
- cuneiform, “wedge-shaped” writing, a system of writing consisting of syllabograms and word-signs, widely used in the Near East, 33
- Curetes (kū-rē-tēz. Kouretes), “young men,” enemies of the Calydonians, 122
- Cyclopes (sī-klō-pēz. Kyklopes; sing. Cyclops), “round-eyes,” rude one-eyed giants, including Polyphemus, whom Odysseus blinded, 63, 66, 83, 161, 166, 169, 170, 172, 177, 181, 190–3
- Cyprus, large island in eastern Mediterranean, home of Aphrodite, 15, 18, 35, 46, 54, 62, 65, 126, 204, 206
- dactylic hexameter, the meter of Homer, six feet per line, 22, 49, 94
- Danaans (dā-na-anz. Danaoi), descendants of Danaus, one of Homer's names for the Greeks, 59, 78, 91, 104, 129, 134
- Danae (dā-na-ē), daughter of Acrisius, mother of Perseus, 132
- Dante Alighieri (al-i-gā-rē), 1265–1321, Italian poet, 213
- Dardanelles (= Hellespont), straits between the Aegean Sea and the Propontis (= Sea of Marmora), 73, 75, 76
- Dardanus (dar-da-nus. Dardanos), son of Zeus, early king of Troy, after whom the Trojans were called Dardanians, 142
- Dark Age, 46; *see* Chronology p. xi
- Deiphobus (dē-if-o-bus. Deiphobos), brother of Paris who took up with Helen after Paris' death, 44, 130, 131, 145, 161

- Delos (**dē-los**), tiny island in the center of the Cyclades, where Apollo and Artemis were born, 45
- Delphi (**del-fī**), sanctuary of Apollo at the foot of Mount Parnassus, where Apollo slew Python, 45, 163
- Demeter (**de-mē-ter**), daughter of Cronus and Rhea, mother of Persephone, goddess of the grain harvest, 133
- diacritical marks, in writing convey nonphonetic information, 8, 11
- Dido (**dī-dō**), Phoenician queen of Carthage, who loved Aeneas and committed suicide when abandoned, 147, 213
- Didymus, "the bronze-gutted," Alexandrian scholar, first century BC, 13
- Diomedes (**dī-ō-me-dēz**), son of Tydeus, Greek warrior at Troy, 69, 108-14, 118-20, 124-32, 136, 142, 147, 162
- Dione (**dī-ō-nē**), a consort of Zeus, 69
- Dionysus (**dī-ō-nī-sus**. Dionysos), son of Zeus and Semele, husband of Ariadne, god of wine, intoxication, and the life force, 114, 133, 151
- Dodona (**do-dō-na**), site of oracular shrine of Zeus in northwestern Greece, 108, 182
- Dolon, Trojan spy captured by Odysseus and Diomedes, 57, 124-6
- Dorians, a division of the Greek people, 108, 188
- ekphrasis*, "aside," a self-consciously elaborate description of a physical object, for example, the Shield of Achilles, 139
- El, "God," father of Baal in Ugaritic myth, 37, 143
- Eleusis, site of the mysteries to Demeter and Persephone, west of Athens, 66
- Elis, territory in the northwest Peloponnesus, 108, 127
- Elpenor (**el-pē-nor**), companion of Odysseus who died after falling from Circe's roof, 173, 174
- Enki, Sumerian clever god of the fresh waters, 72
- Enkidu (**en-ki-dū**), Gilgamesh's rival and companion, 68, 146
- Enlil (**en-lēl**), Sumerian storm-god, 71
- Ephesus (**ef-e-sus**. Ephesos), city in Asia Minor, 13, 46, 203
- epic, a long poem on a heroic topic, 34, 52, 67-9, 82, 85, 88, 90, 94, 101, 131, 138, 140, 150, 151, 159, 162, 163, 204, 205, 208, 209, 212-16
- epic distance, deliberate separation between fictional and real worlds, 82, 140
- Epigoni (**e-pig-o-nī**), "descendants," sons of the Seven Against Thebes, whose attack was successful, 206
- epithets, 22-6, 86, 172, 209
- Er, Plato's myth of, 165
- Erebus (**er-e-bus**. Erebos), "darkness," a region of the underworld or the underworld itself, 191
- Ereshkigal (**er-esh-kē-gal**), Sumerian goddess of the dead, 72
- Erinyes (**e-rin-i-ēz**), the Furies or Eumenides, 141
- Erymanthus (**er-i-man-thus**), mountain in Arcadia, haunt of the Erymanthian boar, 165
- Ethiopia, region in Africa, 138

- Etruscans (**ē-trus-kans**), inhabitants of Etruria, north of Rome, 210
- etymology, "true explanation," favored by the Stoics, 205
- Euboea (**yū-bē-a**. Euboia), long island east of Attica, site of vigorous Iron Age community where the alphabet may have been invented, 35, 46, 48, 49, 52-3, 69, 82, 96, 107, 108, 141, 210
- Eumaeus (**yū-mē-us**. Eumaios), Odysseus' loyal swineherd, 61-3, 71, 181-4, 185, 190-5
- Euripides (**yū-rip-i-dēz**), Athenian playwright, fifth century BC, 207, 208
- Euryclea (**yū-ri-klē-a**. Euryklea), Odysseus' nurse, who recognized his scar, 87, 188, 189, 194, 195
- Eurystheus (**yū-ris-thūs**), persecutor of Heracles, 141
- Eurytus (**yū-ri-tus**), famous archer, father of Iphitus, 192
- flood, 67, 117, 128
- folktale, 17, 83, 96, 114, 155-8, 161-6, 170-3, 176, 177, 199, 215
- folktale types, 96, 171
- formula, a building block in the formation of oral verse, 25, 30, 52, 217
- Gaza, a territory in southern Palestine in which were built the five cities of the Philistines, 32, 34, 36
- Genesis, biblical book of, 18, 30
- geras*, "prize," the outward and visible representation of a hero's *timē*, 89, 102-4, 120-3, 135
- ghosts, 137, 176, 191, 194, 199
- Gilgamesh, Mesopotamian hero, 33, 38, 68, 69, 91, 146, 156, 173, 221
- Glaucus (**glaw-kus**), Lycian fighter, gave armor of gold to his *xenos* Diomedes, 16, 113, 114, 129, 136, 162
- guslari(i)*, a South Slavic oral poet, who sings to the *gusle*, a one-stringed bowed instrument, 26-30, 43
- Hades (**ha-dēz**), "unseen," lord of the underworld, son of Cronus and Rhea, husband of Persephone, 120, 121, 134, 146, 163, 173, 185
- Hebe (**hē-bē**), personification of "Youth," married to Heracles on Olympus, 176
- Hebrews, the descendants of Abraham and Isaac and Isaac's son Jacob, 33, 34
- Hector, greatest of the Trojan warriors, married to Andromache, killed by Achilles, 17, 22, 44, 58, 60, 80, 81, 104, 109, 112-21, 125-54, 165, 174, 196-8, 207, 210, 222
- Helen, daughter of Zeus and Leda, wife of Menelaus, lover of Paris, 49, 81, 82, 101, 109, 110, 115-17, 121, 130, 145, 151, 160, 161, 165, 168, 175, 183, 200
- Helenus (**hel-e-nus**. Helenos), Trojan prophet, brother of Hector, 114, 130, 131
- Helicon (**hel-i-kon**), a mountain in Boeotia, 221
- Helios (**hē-li-us**), sun god, son of Hyperion, father of Phaëthon, 155, 172, 177

- Hellenes (**hel-ēnz**), the Greeks, inhabitants of Hellas, 94
- Hellenistic, referring to Greek culture between Alexander's death in 323 BC and the ascendancy of Rome, 20, 94, 208, 209
- Hellespont, straits between the Aegean Sea and the Sea of Marmora (= the Dardanelles), 73, 78, 104
- Hephaestus (**he-fē-stus**), Greek god of smiths, son of Zeus and Hera or Hera alone, husband of faithless Aphrodite (= Roman Vulcan), 64, 65, 95, 96, 105, 139–43, 150, 162, 205
- Hera (**hē-ra**), daughter of Cronus and Rhea, wife and sister of Zeus, 22, 65, 69, 95, 105, 110, 113, 118, 119, 130–4, 136, 141–4, 147, 148
- Heracles (**her-a-klēz**), son of Zeus and Alcmena, greatest of Greek heroes, 41, 127, 132, 141, 175, 176, 192
- Hermes, son of Zeus and Maia, Greek god of travel, tricks, commerce, and thievery, who leads *psychai* to the other world, 71, 72, 137, 142, 147–9, 157, 162, 168, 172–4, 195, 205
- Hermione (**her-mī-o-nē**), only daughter of Helen and Menelaus, whose marriage coincided with Telemachus' visit to Sparta, 160
- Herodotus (**her-od-o-tus**), Greek historian, fifth century BC, 10, 15, 45, 130, 205, 206
- Hesiod, Greek poet, eighth century BC, composer of *Works and Days* and *Theogony*, 2, 45, 53, 63, 94, 108, 130, 173, 203, 207, 216
- Hipparchus (**hi-par-kus**. Hipparkhos), Athenian leader, son of Pisistratus, sixth century BC, brother of Hippias, 20, 45
- Hittites (**hit-itz**), Indo-European Bronze Age warrior people in central Anatolia, 32, 74, 77
- Homeric Hymns*, oral dictated texts celebrating the gods, c. seventh–fifth centuries BC, 205
- Homeric Question, really “Homeric Investigation,” into the origin of Homer's texts, 8, 15, 18, 204, 215–19
- Humbaba (**hum-bab-a**), monster killed by Gilgamesh and Enkidu, 69
- humor, 113, 175, 194, 204
- Hyperion (**hi-per-ion**), a Titan, father of Helius, 155
- Ida (**i-da**), Mount, near Troy, 75, 118, 119, 128, 133
- Idomeneus (**i-dom-i-nūs**), grandson of Minos, king of Crete, fought at Troy, 109, 111, 117, 130, 131, 180
- Ilium (Ilion), another name for Troy, 74, 79, 81
- Inanna (**in-an-a**), Sumerian fertility goddess, 72
- Iolcus (**i-olk-us**. Iolkos), city in Thessaly, home of Jason, 108, 171
- Ion*, a dialogue of Plato, named after the rhapsode Ion, 42
- Iphitus (**if-i-tus**. Iphitos), son of Eurytus, thrown from a tower by Heracles, 192
- Iris (**i-ris**), “rainbow,” messenger of the gods in the *Iliad* (but not the *Odyssey*), 133, 134, 148, 205
- Ishtar, Akkadian fertility goddess (= Sumerian Inanna), 69, 72

- Ismarus (**is-ma-rus**. Ismaros), city in Thrace, sacked by Odysseus, 177
- Italy, 35, 46–9, 62–5, 69, 154, 157, 164, 177, 204, 210–13, 219
- Ithaca (Ithaka), off the northwest coast of Greece, one of the Ionian Islands, home of Odysseus, 59–63, 68, 83, 93, 108, 111, 153, 154, 157–66, 169, 177–85, 195, 196, 199, 215, 220, 223
- Ixion (**ik-sī-on**), tried to rape Hera, bound to a wheel in Tartarus, 132
- Jason, son of Aeson, husband of Medea, leader of the Argonauts, 163, 171, 172, 208–10, 213
- Jeremiah, Hebrew prophet, sixth century BC, 39
- Jesus, 183
- Josephus, first century AD, Jewish general and historian, 15, 16, 20
- katabasis*, “going-down” into the underworld, 148, 162
- kleos*, “fame,” what a warrior hopes to win through martial achievement, 104, 116, 121, 169, 175
- Kosovo, site of battle in 1389 between Turks and Serbs, celebrated in *guslar* song, 82
- Lacedaemon (**las-e-dē-mon**. Lakedaimon), another name for Sparta, or the territory around it, 160
- Laestrygonians (**les-tri-gō-ni-anz**. Laistrygones), cannibal-giants who destroy all Odysseus' ships save one, 171, 172, 179, 184, 211
- Laomedon (**lā-om-e-don**), early king of Troy, father of Priam, 117
- Latium (**lā-shum**), homeland of the Latins, in central Italy, 48, 210
- Leda (**lē-da**), wife of Tyndareus, mother of Helen, Clytemnestra, Castor, Polydeuces, 175
- legend, “things that must be read,” stories of famous early men and women, 53, 68, 79, 80, 142, 167, 179, 212, 213
- Lemnos, island in the northern Aegean, associated with Hephaestus, 210
- Lesbos, island in the Aegean, near Troy, 74
- Leto (**lē-tō**), mother of Apollo and Artemis, 133, 142, 148, 165
- Leucothea (**lū-koth-ē-a**. Leukothea), “white goddess,” a sea goddess, formerly the mortal Ino, who gave Odysseus a magic sash, 161–4
- lexigraphy, “speech-writing,” writing attached to human speech, 17
- Livius Andronicus, third century BC, earliest Latin poet, translated the *Odyssey* into Latin Saturnians, 212
- Lord, Albert B., 1912–1991, student and assistant to Milman Parry, author of *The Singer of Tales* (1960), 26–31, 42, 43, 55, 82, 96, 213, 217
- Lycaon (**lī-kā-on**. Lykaon), cannibal king in Arcadia, turned into a wolf, 143
- Lycia (**lish-i-a**. Lykia), region in southwest Anatolia, home to the Trojan heroes Glaucus and Sarpedon, 16, 18, 108, 114, 136
- Lycurgus (**lī-kur-gus**. Lykourgos), Thracian king, opposed Dionysus, 114
- Lydia, a region in western Anatolia, 192

- Machaon (ma-kā-on. Makhaon), son of Asclepius, physician at Troy, 127
- magic, 150, 160, 174, 178, 185, 199
- Marduk (**mar-dūk**), Babylonian world-builder god, 88
- Medea (me-dē-a), witch from Colchis, daughter of Aeëtes, wife of Jason, 209, 210, 213
- Međedović, Avdo, M. Parry's best *guslar*, dictated a song as long as the *Odyssey*, 26, 27, 43, 217
- megaron*, "great hall," a large room in the center of which was a circular hearth and a smoke hole above, 191
- Melampus (mel-am-pus. Melampus), a prophet, 182
- Meleager (mel-ē-ā-ger), Aetolian hero, killed Calydonian Boar, 122, 123, 150
- Memnon, king of Ethiopia, ally of the Trojans in post-Homeric epic, in which he is killed by Achilles, 138, 206
- Menestheus (men-es-thūs), ousted Theseus, leader of Athenians at Troy, 111, 129, 130
- Mentor, Ithacan adviser to Telemachus, 159
- Messenia (mes-sē-ni-a), territory in the southwest Peloponnesus, 160
- Messina, Straits of, between Sicily and the toe of Italy, 63, 177
- Milton, John, 1608–1674, British poet, author of *Paradise Lost*, much influenced by Vergil, 22, 213
- mimesis*, "representation," the essence of literary narrative according to Aristotle, 92
- Minoans, Bronze Age inhabitants of Crete, 188
- Minos (**mī-nos**), Cretan king of Cnossus, son of Zeus and Europa, husband of Pasiphaë, judge in the underworld, 132
- Moabite, a West Semitic dialect spoken in Moab, southeast of the Dead Sea, recorded in West Semitic script, 35
- moly* (**mō-lē**), magic herb that protects Odysseus from Circe, 68, 172
- Mot, "death," enemy of Baal in Ugaritic myth, 37
- motif, an element in folktale, 17, 18, 52, 96, 155, 158, 171, 172, 177, 181
- Mouseion, "temple of the Muses," in Alexandria, 9, 12, 14, 208
- Muses, the inspirers of oral song, a personification of the oral tradition, 9, 16, 107, 176, 207, 208
- Mycenae (**mī-sē-nē**. Mykenai), largest Bronze Age settlement in the Argive plain, home of the house of Atreus, 51, 54–8, 75, 108, 154, 218
- myth, a traditional tale, 122, 215, 220, 221
- Naples, "new city," a Greek colony in southern Italy, 48, 49, 63, 127, 172
- Nauplius (**naw-pli-us**. Nauplios), father of Palamedes, 52
- Nausicaa (na-sik-a-a), "ship-girl," Phaeacian princess, daughter of Alcinous, who helped Odysseus, 68, 164–8, 172, 179
- nectar (**nektar**), drink of the gods, 68

- Neoptolemus (**nē-op-tol-e-mus**. Neoptolemos), "new-fighter," son of Achilles, 80, 141, 175
- Neptune, Roman equivalent of Poseidon, 130
- Nestor, garrulous septuagenarian Greek at Troy, who owned a famous elaborate cup, 49–52, 56, 65, 103–5, 111, 117–20, 127–32, 135, 138, 147, 154, 159, 160, 167, 179, 200, 210
- Nibelungenlied*, "song of the Nibelungs," a medieval German epic, 82
- Nineveh (**nin-e-va**), capital of the Assyrians on the upper Tigris river, destroyed 612 BC, 10, 33, 68, 91
- Noah, biblical survivor of the Flood, 68
- nostos* (plural *nostoi*), "homecoming" of the heroes from Troy, 154, 155, 158–63, 166, 169
- nymphs, "young women" = nature spirits, 71, 142, 165, 178
- Oceanus (**o-sē-a-nus**. Okeanos), Ocean, a Titan, husband of Tethys, the river that encircles the earth, 204
- Odysseus, son of Laertes (or bastard son of Sisyphus according to post-Homeric accounts) and Antia, husband of Penelope, 23–5, 29, 40, 43, 44, 56, 59–71, 86–93, 106, 109, 111, 113, 117, 118, 120–7, 130, 132, 141, 146, 153–96, 199, 200, 207, 210–12, 219–24
- Oedipus (**ē-di-pus**, or **ed-i-pus**. Oidipous), "swellfoot," son of Laius and Jocasta, married his mother, killed his father, 95
- Oileus (**ē-lūs**), father of the lesser Ajax, from Locris, 79, 89, 161, 200
- Old Testament, 11, 39, 221
- Olympia, sanctuary of Zeus in the western Peloponnesus, 61
- Olympus, Mount, in north Greece between Thessaly and Macedonia, 70, 72, 95, 117, 119, 133, 134, 139
- Orestes (**or-es-tez**), son of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, who killed his mother and her lover Aegisthus to avenge his father, 156, 182
- Orpheus (**or-fūs**), son of Apollo, musician, tried to bring back his wife Eurydice from the dead, 148
- orthography, the way something is written, including spelling conventions, 6, 8, 11, 37
- Ortygia (**or-tij-a**), "quail island," equated with Delos, birthplace of Apollo and Artemis, 183
- Palamedes (**pal-a-me-dēz**), son of Nauplius, clever enemy of Odysseus, 52
- Palestine, the southern portion of the land at the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea, named after the Philistines, 34, 36
- Pallas (**pal-as**), an epithet for Athena, 111, 140, 144, 191
- Panathenaic festival (**pan-ath-en-ē-ic**), annual festival to Athena at Athens, 14, 60, 207
- Pandarus (**pan-do-rus**. Pandaros), Trojan bowman who treacherously breaks the truce, 81, 110, 112
- papyrus, = Egyptian "the thing of the royal house," origin of our word *paper*, 9–14, 20, 32, 33, 36, 53, 77, 156, 207–9, 218, 223



- Paradise, 22, 213  
 parchment, a writing surface made from the skin of a sheep or goat, a technology developed in Pergamon in Asia Minor (hence the name), 9  
 Paris, son of Priam and Hecabe, lover of Helen, 5, 78–82, 109–11, 115–17, 127, 130, 131, 138, 143, 147–50, 160, 161, 165, 168, 183  
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 Parry, Milman, 1902–1935, American classicist, creator of the oral-formulaic theory of Homeric composition, 22–31, 40–3, 55, 82, 86, 96, 217  
 Parthenon, temple to Athena on the Acropolis in Athens, 60  
 Patroclus (pa-trok-lus. Patroklos), Achilles' best friend, killed by Hector, 44, 49, 68, 93, 113, 119, 127–31, 134–40, 143–8, 150, 154, 167, 174  
 Peleus (pē-lūs), husband of Thetis, father of Achilles, 23, 90, 101, 122, 134, 139, 150  
 Peloponnesus (pel-o-po-nē-sus. Peloponnesos), "island of Pelops," the southern portion of mainland Greece linked to the north by the narrow Isthmus of Corinth, 45, 53, 56, 57, 114, 122, 127, 160, 170, 206  
 Pentateuch (pen-ta-tūk), "five rolls," the first five books of the Bible, 18, 21  
 Penthesilea (pen-thes-i-lē-a), Amazon queen who attacked Troy, 106  
 Pergamum (per-ga-mum), city in Asia Minor, 9  
 Perseus (per-sūs), son of Zeus and Danae, beheaded Medusa, married Andromeda, 132  
 Phaeacia (fē-ā-sha. Phaiakia), the island of Scheria, where Nausicaa lives, 63, 68, 93, 112, 178, 183  
 phalanx, in the Classical Period a form of close-line fighting with ranks made up of heavily armed hoplites, 60, 61  
 Phemius (fē-mi-us), "the famous one," or Phemius Terpiades (ter-pi-a-dēz), "famous one who gives delight," an *oidos* who sang for the suitors, 40, 59, 158, 184, 194, 195  
 philology, the study of a specific language, 2, 5, 8, 14, 15, 29, 30, 40, 54, 84, 219  
 Phocis (fō-sis. Phokis), region in central Greece, where Delphi is, 108  
 Phoebus (fē-bus. Phoibos), 142, *see also* Apollo  
 Phoenicia, the coast of the Eastern Mediterranean, modern Lebanon, 9, 32, 35  
 Phoenicians, "red-men," from the dye that stained their hands; a Semitic seafaring people living on the coast of the northern Levant, 33–7, 49, 62, 65, 96, 115, 162, 183, 213  
 Phoenix (fē-niks. Phoinix), tutor to Achilles, 120–3, 132, 137, 150  
 Phorcys (for-sis), a sea-spirit, 178  
 Phthia (thī-a), region in southern Thessaly, home of Achilles, 103, 108, 198  
 Pindar, Greek poet, fifth century BC, 20, 94, 206, 207  
 Pindus (Pindos), range of mountains that forms the backbone of Greece, 108  
 Pirithous (pī-rith-o-us), king of the Lapiths, foe of the Centaurs, friend of Theseus, 132

- Pisistratean recension, a text of Homer supposedly formed under Pisistratus according to F. A. Wolf, 20, 21  
 Pisistratus (pi-sis-tra-tus), tyrant of Athens, sixth century BC, 18, 20, 41, 45, 160, 207  
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