

WAS HOMER A LIAR?

... une tradition à la fois antique et directe, ininterrompue, orale, déformée, méconnaissable et vivante.

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This is a deliberately provocative title, chosen in an iconoclastic moment, when I was annoyed by reading yet another book, in which the author prostrates himself abjectly before the altar of Homer the historian. The worship of this false god has reached such proportions that every writer on Mycenaean Greece devotes a great deal of space to what Homer says, and spends page after page trying to reconcile the Homeric account with the archaeological evidence. The idea that Homer can tell us about the Mycenaean Age dies hard; it is time to administer the *coup de grâce*.

I do not mean to question the importance of studying what Homer has to say on any given topic. There are countless studies of Homeric kingship, slavery, agriculture, shipping—anything you can find mentioned in the two great epics. These have a positive, if limited, value, provided they are treated as what they are: the background imagined by Greeks of the 'Archaic'

Was Homer a Liar?

Age for tales of long ago. They are as much, and as little, history as the historical plays of Shakespeare. Since they are unique in being the only literary works we possess from the early part of this period, they are worth study from this point of view. But they purport to describe a very different period of Greek history, some four hundred years earlier, and their claim to portray events of this date has been upheld by eminent authorities. But authorities, however eminent, cannot be accepted in the face of new evidence, and this is what, in one respect, I have to present.

The idea that Homer tells the truth about a bygone age is no recent one; it flourished throughout classical antiquity. When a historian wished to provide evidence for a prehistoric state of affairs, he trotted out a quotation from Homer. The text was even used in diplomatic quarrels to settle the ownership of disputed territory. An enormous reverence for Homer grew up, which is summed up in the saying that Homer was the Greeks' Bible. Certainly every schoolboy read Homer, and a quotation or an allusion would be instantly recognised. Small wonder that what was so well known was automatically regarded as true.

The fundamental difference between poetic and historical truth has been clearly apprehended at least since the time of Aristotle, who distinguished between "what happened" and "what might have happened." Yet precisely because the Homeric poems are the earliest surviving works of Greek literature, it has become fashionable to quote them not as poetry, which they are, but as history, which they are not.

Of course one might easily answer the question posed at the beginning, by enquiring whether there is any evidence for a race of one-eyed giants inhabiting a Mediterranean country, or whether a horse that could not only talk but prophesy is credible. If we believe Homer when he tells us what Hector and Andromache said to each other on the walls of Troy, must we not also believe him when he tells us what Zeus and Hera talked about up on Mount Ida?

The supporters of Homer the historian are not of course so easily discomfited. They will claim, if they deign to notice such objections at all, that no one doubts that Homer employs the

constant licence of the writer of fiction to invent “corroborative detail to give artistic verisimilitude to an otherwise bald and unconvincing narrative.” No one expects us to believe in the fairy-tale adventures of Odysseus on his wanderings (though there are still those who would chart his course on a map), or to regard the councils of the gods and their interference in human affairs as more than a dramatic device. But the background against which Homer sets his story, the Greek expedition against Troy and the slaying of the suitors of a deserted queen, must somehow be rescued from the realm of fiction and promoted to the category of history. Even if the unlikely feat of shooting an arrow through a row of axes is not exactly true, and the lengthy notes written on the subject prove at least that Homer was not very clear about it himself, still the house in which it happened must be accurately described. Above all, the picture of Greece must in general outline be a genuine account of Mycenaean Greece.

It may be permitted to marvel at the sagacity of these experts whose acute senses enable them infallibly to recognise when Homer is telling the truth and when he is, if we may speak bluntly, lying. If a novelist purports to tell us what Wellington had for breakfast on the morning of the battle of Waterloo, we can accept the invention, provided he does not say it was cornflakes; but if he tells us that Napoleon won the battle, we shall dismiss him as an incompetent craftsman and read no further. Similarly, so Homer’s supporters argue, if there had been no such event as the Trojan War, his hearers would have refused to listen to this wildly implausible tale.

First, we may question whether knowledge that the tale is untrue lessens our pleasure in hearing it; the fairytale section of the *Odyssey* is no less enthralling for all that we do not believe the facts narrated. Secondly, the true event described as the Trojan War may have differed enormously from the version Homer gives us, without the audience much caring; especially if one of the discrepancies is the exaggeration of the part played by the ancestors of the audience.

My point is not that there is no truth in Homer, but that some things are undoubtedly false, and therefore we must have some criterion by which to distinguish true and false. If Homer

Was Homer a Liar?

tells us that a chariot has an eight-spoked wheel mounted on an iron axle, when archaeology tells us that the Mycenaeans had fourspoked wheels and did not use iron, it is clear which we should believe. Where facts unambiguously attested by archaeological finds confute Homer, we must be content to reject Homer as a witness for the facts of the Mycenaean age.

Let us pause for a moment to consider this question of chronology. Homer tells us virtually nothing about himself in forty-eight books of verse. "Tell *me*, Muse, of the man..."; the unemphatic 'me' is the nearest he gets to mentioning himself. There are no contemporary documents which mention Homer; as soon as his name appears in historical sources he is long since dead and has become an almost mythical poet. So far from being a true witness, some are prepared to assent that he never even existed; but the poems are none the less true, even if their author be non-existent. Seven cities disputed the honour of being his birthplace; in plain language, there is no reliable tradition of his origin—an extraordinary thing for any historical Greek who was always known by his name and the name of the city, be it never so humble, of which he was born a citizen. But the fact that all the seven cities were in Ionia (in modern terms, the west coast of Turkey) allows us to locate his activity approximately; and this is confirmed by (if not deduced from) the nature of the language of the poems, which is an archaic form of the Ionic dialect of Greek, though interspersed with forms taken, with and without adaptation, from other dialects.

Whether the author of the two epics was called Homer or not hardly matters; the name is at least a convenience. But a more serious matter is whether the same author wrote both poems, or whether the whole of each poem is the work of the same author. If we cannot answer these questions, we can hardly attach a single date to the poems. On internal evidence of language there is precious little to judge by; either the *Odyssey* was written by the author of the *Iliad*, or by someone who lived not long afterwards and worked in the same tradition. Literary reasons incline most experts to separate the two poems; but Homer I, the author of the *Iliad*, cannot be far removed in date from Homer II, the author of the *Odyssey*. A century is a

reasonable estimate of the maximum difference, and the gap might be much less.

Now it is generally agreed that Homer did not write his poems down. There is a tradition that he was blind, but this is not the reason; he might, like Milton, have had a literate daughter. Rather the techniques of composition employed are typical of oral poetry, where an illiterate poet relates his tale in extempore verse, using a traditional stock of lines, half-lines and formulas to make the task a little easier. The fact that the Homers' skill in oral composition far surpasses any other oral poet known does not matter; and if Ionia produced one such genius, why not two? At some later date, which cannot be later than the end of the sixth century B.C., but may be as early as the seventh, the poems were written down, and thereafter additions to them would have become easy to detect. But between the Homers and the written tradition lies a gap which cannot be filled. Hence all we can say is that the great bulk of both poems probably existed by the middle of the seventh century, and for various reasons is unlikely to have come into existence in anything like the preserved form before the middle of the eighth century. Attempts to narrow the range of dates fail because we have nothing with which to compare the poems; and because the tradition of verse-writing and doubtless many parts of the stories were already old at the time the extant epics were composed.

The dramatic date of the Trojan War is never even hinted at in the poems; it is, like much else, regarded as of no interest to the audience, and immaterial to the story. We now know from archeology that the rich kingdoms of Greece Homer describes (I use the singular for brevity) did not exist in the eight or seventh centuries. This was a time when the new pattern of classical Greece was beginning to emerge; but the material culture was still relatively poor. Much less could it have existed in the ninth, tenth or eleventh centuries, the so-called Dark Age of Greece. Only in the twelfth, or more likely the thirteenth to sixteenth centuries, could a rich civilisation with stone-built fortresses and luxurious palaces be placed. Hence the dramatic date of the Homeric epics must be the Mycenaean period (c. 1550-1150 B.C.); and a convenient phase of the long-

Was Homer a Liar?

lived city of Troy was destroyed about 1250, thus giving a genuine date for the alleged Trojan War.

If there is a gap of at least four hundred years between the events described and the poet, how was it bridged? Since the tradition of verse-making was old in Homer's day, the stories too must have been transmitted by it. It makes little difference whether the verse tradition was already in existence at the date of the events, or whether, as has recently been suggested,¹ it came into existence afterwards, but while the events were still within living memory. Once it is admitted that the facts were transmitted by a series of story-tellers in prose or verse, then our reliance on their credibility ought to be severely shaken. For the function of a story-teller is to entertain, not to preserve a detailed record of fact.

This argument has been countered with two others. The Homeric descriptions are sometimes far more detailed than the story demands; therefore the details must be there because they are true facts. Obviously such an argument can be neither proved nor refuted; provided the details are of interest to the presumed audience, there is an adequate motive for their presence. Secondly, some descriptions have been confirmed archaeologically. The prize piece—and it is worth remarking that it is the only one of its kind—is the boars' tusk helmet: a curious type of headgear described in detail as a rare object in the *Iliad* (Book X), and exactly matching the pictures of such helmets common in the Mycenaean age, not to mention the plates of boars' tusk, which are all that archaeology can salvage of the actual object. I have no doubt that somehow or other a description of such a helmet was transmitted from Mycenaean times to the time of Homer. But again I ask: how can we tell, in default of archaeological evidence, which descriptions are true and which, if not false, anachronistic?

One point on which most experts agree in accepting Homer's evidence is the political geography of Greece. Since Homer's picture, as given in the Catalogue of Ships in Book II of the *Iliad*, is certainly not true of classical or archaic Greece, it is a possible theory that it is a true account of Mycenaean Greece. Various attempts have been made to test this theory, the most

¹ G. S. Kirk, *The Songs of Homer*, Cambridge, 1962.

recent in a book² which seeks to identify the sites mentioned by name in the text with places on the map, and then to verify archeologically the presence of Mycenaean sites on that site. Some of the names had, of course, disappeared before even ancient scholars began to investigate the problem, and some of their evidence for earlier names is not above suspicion. But the sites 'verified' archeologically will not be significant, unless it can be shown that they exceed by a large margin the proportion which would be given by investigation of a random sample of classical sites. Mycenaean settlement was so dense in the areas which have been fully investigated that there is a good chance of Mycenaean traces being found in the vicinity of any place selected.

But the authors of this book overlooked another source of information about the political geography of Mycenaean Greece. Since 1939 we have had a long series of authentic documents dating from the end of the Mycenaean period, c. 1200 B.C., found in the palace of Ano Englianos in the south-west Peloponnese. Since 1952 we have known that they are written in an archaic form of the Greek language, and they are thus, within limits, readable. Their study has now progressed to the point where we can establish with fair certainty which of the words on these documents are the place names of the area controlled by the palace. Moreover we can show which are the major places, and which relatively minor.

But the identification of these place names with actual locations is much harder. In some cases we can establish with certainty the form of the name; for instance, an important place is called *Leuktron*, a name well known in classical Greece, for there are at least three towns of that name. Unfortunately the Mycenaean *Leuktron* can be none of the three; it is yet a fourth, to be added to our confusing list of repeated names. Thus mere similarity is no help, unless we can also establish an approximate location for the Mycenaean name.

Fortunately our study of the documents has allowed us to group the major names and to discover connexions between them which must correspond to geographical proximity. The

² R. Hope Simpson and J. F. Lazenby, *The Catalogue of the Ships in Homer's Iliad*, Oxford, 1970.

Was Homer a Liar?

most prominent name on the tablets from Ano Englianos is *Pulos* (or in modern dress Pylos), which is undoubtedly the name of the site itself. This accords well with later tradition, which located this name a few kilometers away, and it is still in use at another site in the same area. But to illustrate the complexities of the problem, we must note that the tablets mention two other places of the same name, which are distinguished by special epithets; and in classical times the repetition of the name *Pulos* was proverbial.

When we turn to Homer we must perhaps distinguish the two authors again. Homer I (*Iliad*) and Homer II (*Odyssey*) agree that Nestor's kingdom lay on the coast between Laconia (south-east Peloponnese) and Elis (north-west Peloponnese). The south-west Peloponnese is therefore correct. However, Homer I tells a story which implies that *Pulos* was not too far from the river Alpheios, therefore a long way north of Ano Englianos. Homer II gives no useful details on this point. One may save the phenomena by locating one of the other Mycenaean towns called *Pulos* in the north of the kingdom.

The question of the Mycenaean frontiers is very complicated, and those who believe Homer I, that the norther frontier lay on the Alpheios, find themselves in difficulties. For reasons I have given elsewhere,³ I believe that the northern frontier was about 30 km further south, on or near the river Neda. The western and southern frontiers are the sea. The eastern frontier is clearly marked by the Taygetos mountain range, since on the far side of it lies Laconia, described by Homer (I and II) as a separate kingdom. I believe, however, that the kingdom of Pylos did not extend much beyond the modern city of Kalamata.

It is when we come to details of the geography that the discrepancies become clear. The Catalogue of Ships in *Iliad* Book II purports to list the main towns in each kingdom. The list for the kingdom of Nestor runs: *Pulos, Arênê, Thruon, Aipu, Kuparissêeis, Amphigeneia, Pteleos, Helos, Dôrion*. Leaving aside *Pulos*, the Mycenaean list of major towns has sixteen or seventeen names, only one of which agrees with Homer's; we find *Helos*

³ *Minnesota Messenia Expedition: Reconstructing the Bronze Age Environment*, ch. 7, Minneapolis, in course of publication.

again, but since this is the ordinary Greek word for 'marsh,' it is also common as a place name.

But among the minor towns of the tablets we might do better: we have a place called *Kuparissos*, which answers well enough to the Homeric *Kuparissêeis*, which is the same word with an adjectival ending (it means 'abounding in cypresses'), and is presumably in the area of the classical town of *Kuparissia*, by which name the site is also known today. There is, on a broken fragment of tablet, a name which might be *Amphigenea*, though it could be a woman's name rather than a place. Of the other names there is not a trace. One, *Thruon*, lies well north of the Mycenaean frontier; but it is incredible that Homer should have picked on such obscure places that the tablets never mention them. The suspicion must arise that they are not talking about the same kingdom.

Homer II gives us an account which implies that the palace of Nestor was on the coast; the Mycenaean palace at Ano Englianos is about 6 km from the nearest point on the coast, and considerably further from its probable port. The name under which its port appears to be mentioned on the tablets does not occur in Homer. He also implies that the Messenian plain was in a different kingdom, that of Diocles with his capital at *Phêrai*. In the Mycenaean tablets this area is subject to *Pulos*, its capital is *Leuktron*, and of *Phêrai* there is no trace. The Mycenaean *Helos* too lies in this area, so that even if the name is right, the location is probably wrong.

In the *Odyssey* Telemachus, having arrived at *Pulos* by ship, travels on to Sparta by chariot. Archaeology has produced evidence of a network of Mycenaean roads, though how extensive this was cannot be ascertained. But the route from Ano Englianos to Sparta is blocked by the great mass of the Taÿgetos mountain range, rising to over 2,400 m.; a very difficult motor road has been constructed across this range in modern times, but the existence of a road suitable for chariots in Mycenaean times is incredible. No one with a ship at his disposal would have attempted this journey by wheeled vehicle. Homer (II) not only sends Telemachus by this route; he also fails even to mention the mountain range, though he notes a minor and incorrect detail, the existence of a wheat-bearing plain. Locating *Pulos* much

Was Homer a Liar?

farther north will not solve the problem, since the route has then to cross the high tableland of Arcadia, and will pass nowhere near the alleged site of *Phêrai* (the modern Kalamata). The explanation is not far to seek: Homer did not know in any detail the geography of the Peloponnese.

One of the names which Homer (I) attributes to the kingdom of Nestor, *Dôrion*, requires a comment, for it is believed by many experts that this is an excavated Mycenaean site, now known as Malthi. The attribution by the Swedish archaeologist Valmin at the beginning of this century was based upon the description of Pausanias, written in the second century A.D. He found ruins at a place whose description fits the site at Malthi; he no doubt enquired the name and was told *Dôrion*. Being a learned man he immediately remembered the *Catalogue*, and identified it as the Homeric town. What seems to have occurred to no one is that the name *Dôrion* must have been associated with the Dorians, the people who occupied this region after 1100 B.C. A non-Mycenaean name with strong claims to be post-Mycenaean surely proves that the *Catalogue* is not a Mycenaean document.

If Homer's description of the south-west Peloponnese is almost wholly inaccurate as an account of this area around 1200 B.C., where did it come from? Let us suppose that it is a little earlier in date: the first two phases of the Mycenaean period show no major changes in the pattern of settlement, so the majority of sites ought to have recognisably similar names. Suppose it belongs, as has recently been suggested, to the period immediately following the fall of Pylos (say 1170 B.C.): the destruction accompanying the disaster may have caused a radical change in the distribution of population; but the site at Ano Englianos was then deserted. If this is *Pulos*, as the tablets prove it was, the name ought not to figure in Homer at all.

If we try a date in the Dark Age, we are left wondering how information about the western Peloponnese reached a poet in Ionia at such a time of interrupted communications. In fact, there is only one date which offers any chance of success: that of Homer himself. Here too we cannot speak with any certainty, for most of the names seem to have changed again by the time seven or eight centuries later when the ancient geographers investigated the problem. But if this is so, we need not suppose

that Homer had an accurate knowledge of so distant a part of Greece; all he would have needed was enough information to satisfy those few members of the audience who might have sailed round that coast, and it would be easy to silence critics by reminding them he was describing events of long ago.

It has been repeatedly asserted that the *Catalogue of the Ships* cannot be a document of the eighth century B.C. because we know that conditions were then quite different. But this is not the same as saying it could not have been composed by a poet of the eighth century, using some traditional material and filling this out by adding such names as were known to him from contemporary sources. For instance, the capital of Agamemnon is located at Mycenae, then a relatively insignificant, though independent, town in an area dominated by Argos. This is exactly the sort of information likely to have been handed down by tradition. But it is highly improbable that the Homeric account of Agamemnon's kingdom, which stretches away to the west and north, taking in Corinth and most of the southern shore of the Corinthian gulf, can be correct; for it is cut off from the sea only a few kilometers away at Tiryns by the kingdom of Diomedes. This is strategically nonsense; no ruler of Mycenae could afford to allow another power to block his access to the Aegean Sea. It is rather like giving London a coastline between Brighton and Portsmouth, but denying it access to Tilbury and Gravesend. The obvious solution has hardly, I think, been considered: that Homer did not know precisely where Mycenae was and imagined it much further to the west. His use of *Argos* has always perplexed scholars.

The same is true of another vexed question: the identification of Ithaca. There is little doubt that in classical times the name referred to the small island now officially named *Itháki*. But the Homeric account (Homer II) makes no geographical sense; it is said to be furthest to the west, with the other islands to the east and south—in fact, the largest neighbouring island lies just to the west of *Itháki*. No island off the west coast of Greece, large enough for the purpose, fulfills the conditions. We must conclude that Homer, living as he did several days' sail away, had no accurate information on this point.

But I am still reluctant to answer the question of my title

Was Homer a Liar?

with a definite affirmative. Homer is a totally unreliable witness to the Mycenaean age, though occasionally a true reminiscence does seem to have penetrated the fog of the Dark Age and been recorded. But inextricably mixed with the truth is a vast accumulation of anachronisms and fictions, the extent of which we shall never be able to measure in detail. Homer as a leading witness must be heard no more; he may, however, still be allowed to give corroborative testimony of facts established by other means.

My reluctance, however, springs from another reason: my conviction that Homer was a poet, and must be judged by the standards appropriate to poetry. It does not in the slightest affect my appreciation of the epics to know that much of the narrative and the background are fiction; any more than my inability to believe their theology lessens my admiration for *Paradise Lost* or *La Divina Commedia*. Poetry is about higher things than iron axles or minor towns. Truth is not simply contained in facts, and either of our Homers would have indignantly denied that they told lies. The fault is not in them, but in their literal-minded expositors, both ancient and modern.

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