

REFLECTIONS

THINKING ABOUT HOMER

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Homer? *Homer*? Why write about Homer in a science fiction magazine? *The Iliad* isn't SF. It's a gory tale of Bronze Age warfare. (Surprisingly gory. The battle scenes, with Homer describing where the spear goes in, which organs it encounters on the way through, and what happens to the spearee when Achilles has finished spearing him, make *Game of Thrones* seem as tame as *Alice in Wonderland*.) A case can be made that *The Odyssey*, full of monsters and sorceresses, is fantasy fiction of a sort. Even so, why talk about those two mighty poems here?

Because I've just been reading a brilliant book called *Why Homer Matters*, by Adam Nicolson, that opens a line of speculative thought not only about Homer and his great epics but about the history of Bronze Age Europe, a revisionist view of early European civilization that stirs in me the sort of fantasy-keyed thinking that tales of Atlantis do, or Robert E. Howard's sagas of the Hyborean Age, in which such kingdoms as Ophir, Hyperborea, and Aquilonia are depicted as flourishing long before Egypt and Sumer existed. It's the Europe of a relatively recent time, some four thousand years ago, which is a dark age to us because we have no historic data about it to go by. Egypt and Sumer had already been well into the Bronze Age for thousands of years by then, and their extensive monuments and documents survive to help us understand what they were like; but Europe of 2000 B.C. is largely shrouded in mystery for us. The dazzling guesses set forth in Adam Nicolson's *Why Homer Matters* offer hope of a peek within that shroud.

The Iliad—almost certainly the earlier of the two poems—tells of the long war that Greece's loose confederation of independent city-states, under the leadership of Agamemnon of Mycenae, launched against the rich mercantile city of Troy, on the coast of Asia Minor, in revenge for the seduction of Helen, the wife of Agamemnon's brother Menelaus, by Paris, a son of Troy's King Priam. (*The Odyssey* is an account of the decade-long homeward journey of Odysseus, cleverest of the Greek leaders, after the war.)

We have no way of knowing whether Paris, Helen, Agamemnon, Odysseus, and the rest of the Homeric crew ever existed, let alone whether the Greeks really went to war purely for the sake of returning Menelaus's flighty wife to him. Herodotus, the Greek historian who wrote in the fifth century B.C., thought Homer had lived about four hundred years before his time and the events of the Trojan War had taken place about four centuries before that, and that chronology has generally been accepted ever since, though Herodotus was working only from rumor and tradition. He claimed that Egyptian priests he interviewed while visiting Thebes and Memphis told him that Paris and Helen never got to Troy at all, but were blown off course and wound up in Egypt; the Egyptians, they said, eventually restored Helen to Menelaus when he came looking for her there after the Greek conquest of Troy had failed to produce her.

It's an interesting version of the story. Did the whole Paris/Helen/Menelaus imbroglio ever happen, though? The only evidence we have for it is Homer's two poems. But there is no doubt of the existence of Troy, whose ruins still can be seen, a short distance from Istanbul. The German archaeologist Heinrich Schliemann, obsessed with finding Homer's Troy from childhood onward, demonstrated that when he began digging into a mound at the Turkish village of Hissarlik in 1870. A great deal about Hissarlik matched Homer's geographical descriptions of Troy. The Romans had built a settlement atop the 162-foot-high mound in the second or third century B.C., calling it *Novum Ilium*—New Troy. Just beneath that were remains of a Greek town where

Alexander the Great had come to worship at the temple, and King Xerxes of Persia before him. Schliemann was convinced that the Troy of Homer lay somewhere within the depths of Hissarlik, and hired eighty workmen to cut the mound open.

In his memoirs, he wrote, "I have discovered the ruins of palaces and temples on walls of much older buildings, and at the depth of fifteen feet I came upon huge walls six feet thick and of most wonderful construction. Seven and a half feet down I found that these walls rested upon other walls eight and a half feet thick. These must be the walls of the palace of Priam or the temple of Minerva." Ultimately Schliemann discovered seven levels of occupation in the mound, one of which, where the debris of a great fire could be seen, contained a fantastic treasure of golden objects. Ever quick to jump to conclusions, he claimed that this level—the second from the bottom—had to be Priam's Troy. Later archaeologists, using far more careful methods, established that there were actually nine strata of settlement at Hissarlik, and that the one most likely to have been the city of Priam, or at any rate the city that the Greeks had attacked about 1200 B.C., was the seventh from the bottom.

Troy had already been an ancient site at the time of the Trojan War. Archaeologists now believe that the first primitive settlement at Troy may have been founded around 3000 B.C.—about the same time the Egyptians were erecting their magnificent pyramids and the Sumerians were inventing their elaborate system of cuneiform writing. Those first Trojans had not yet learned the use of metal. That first Troy perished, we know not how or why, about 2600 B.C., but soon a grander one was rising atop its ruins, with massive stone walls and a fine palace. The Bronze Age had now reached western Asia Minor. These people used copper, silver, and other metals. Troy II was a busy mercantile center that accumulated great wealth, thanks to its strategic position between the ancient civilizations of the Near East and the rising new markets in Greece and northern Europe. Around 2300 B.C. it was stormed and burnt by invaders, perhaps some wandering barbarian tribe in search of plunder. Again, though, it was rebuilt—again and again, in fact. Troy VI, a greater city than any of its predecessors and the one that Schliemann thought was Priam's city, was shattered by an earthquake about 1400 B.C., but a successor soon arose, a walled city famed for its bronze tools and gold jewelry. This is the one—Troy VII—that most archaeologists think was toppled about 1200 B.C. by a confederation of Greek chieftains in what we call the Trojan War. Homer tells us that the Greeks had come there to regain King Menelaus' wife Helen, and maybe so, but it is more likely that they wanted to remove the powerful competitor that sat astride the trade route leading into Asia.

And Homer? All we really know of him is the two epic poems bearing his name that have existed in written form since about 750 B.C. Supposedly he was blind; and supposedly he lived along the Aegean coast of what is now Turkey. (Seven cities claim to be his birthplace.)

Adam Nicolson's *Why Homer Matters?*, though, proposes that there was not one Trojan War but several, and not one Homer but a whole series of them. Just as the site of ancient Troy was occupied by a succession of settlements, culminating in one destroyed by an army of Greek invaders in roughly 1200 B.C., so, too, was the poet we call "Homer" really a succession of poets, telling and retelling what we call *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* over a span of perhaps a thousand years in the form of oral recitations delivered from memory, until they were finally written down by the last in that series of bards. (They could not have emerged in written form any earlier than 750 B.C. or so, the era of our "Homer," because that was when the familiar alpha-beta-gamma script of written Greek evolved out of Phoenician lettering.) Thus the poems provide us with a window into a world we barely know, one that was already ancient and primitive in the time of our "Homer."

Nicolson points out that there are 201 words that are used just once apiece in the Homeric poems, occurring nowhere else in all of Greek literature. Modern translators have difficulty with them, and possibly the Greeks of Herodotus's day were puzzled by them also. One critic has spoken of these as "materials emerging from the

deepest lava flows of epic time.” Much of the language of the poems is archaic in other ways: its grammatical structure seems to fit a Greek more similar to the early languages of the Indo-European group than the one used by Herodotus, Plato, or even the Greeks of the era when the poems first were written down, and some of the verse shows signs of different Greek pronunciation in earlier days.

Then there is the evidence of the story itself. *The Iliad* is only ostensibly about the Trojan War; its real subject is the feud between two powerful Greek chieftains, Agamemnon and Achilles, over war booty (mainly a beautiful woman) that had been awarded to Achilles and seized by Agamemnon. Achilles angrily withdraws from the war that they are waging and sulks in his tent until the final books of the poem, when at last he comes forth to avenge the death of his closest friend at the hands of the Trojans. The first line of *The Iliad* tells us that it is about “the wrath of Achilles,” and when that wrath is appeased the poem ends, though the war is not yet over.

The warfare depicted in *The Iliad* is savage, barbaric stuff, centering on male honor. (Except for the Amazons, women are mere property in the poem, traded like armor or weapons.) The warriors fight on foot, man to man, hand to hand, slaughtering one another with spears, swords, and javelins, or even bashing their foes with a handy stone. When a man is slain, the victor strips him of his armor to take back as a trophy, and mutilates his corpse. It is the ferociously violent warfare of a barely civilized culture, and it must have seemed that way even to the cultivated Greeks of Herodotus’s time. Those Greeks were warlike, yes—Herodotus’s history describes the colossal struggle against the Persian Empire, and that of Thucydides the slightly later one between Athens and Sparta that left much of Greece in ruins—but their methods of warfare were entirely different, involving cavalry, naval battles, and so forth. The poems even then must have been interpreted as tales of an earlier, almost unbelievably bloodthirsty time, as alien to the classical Greeks as the wars of the Crusades are to us. The weapons used in *The Iliad*, for instance, are of pre-Homeric type: silver-riveted swords, not found in strata later than 1500 B.C., and gigantic shields big enough to hide behind. The spears are also huge. The implication is that the Homeric poems originally were an account of a war between semi-barbaric Greeks barely out of the Stone Age and relatively civilized Trojans that took place long before the date we recognize now, perhaps even involving the wealthy Troy that was destroyed about 2300 B.C. Over the centuries, tribal bards shaped and reshaped the poetic accounts of this war in long narratives recited from memory, maintaining bits of the earliest verses but gradually introducing such themes as the abduction of Helen by Paris, the feud between Agamemnon and Achilles, and (in the sequel) Odysseus’s long, harrowing voyage home to Ithaca. And when the glorious poems we have today had reached their final form, a scribe whom we call “Homer” wrote it all down in elegant Greek script.

I find it a fascinating idea. We know a great deal about the early civilizations of Egypt and Mesopotamia, but practically nothing about the peoples who lived to the west of them in Europe. The Homeric poems may indeed describe, not the Greek world of 1200 B.C. of rich cities and elaborate palaces, the world of Agamemnon and Achilles, which is what we have long thought the Homeric age to have been, but a strange vanished epoch a thousand years or more older. It could almost be the world of Robert E. Howard’s Conan. And from such speculations we come to see that the past about which historians write is as misty, as uncertain, as changeable as the futures we pretend to invent when we write science fiction.