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The Homeric Epics:
Strata or a Spectrum?

by CAROL G. THOMAS

Archaeologists have uncovered nine principal layers with forty-six strata at Hisarlik, the site that many identify as Homeric Troy. The collective activity of archaeologists, philologists, historians and linguists has revealed just as many, if not more, strata in the Trojan War epics themselves. Detectable in the language, physical objects, institutions and geography described in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, the divisions between these strata may not be as hard and rigid as physical strata; still they are clear and numerous enough to suggest that even Homer may have been "stratified."

Although the strata of the epics have been present from the poems' creation, a perception of them has emerged only gradually over long centuries. The ancient Greeks neither sought nor found layers in their "best and most divine of poets" (*Plato Ion* 530b). They knew that a single poet had created the two poems that even Aristotle's keen scrutiny judged to surpass all other poems in diction and in thought (*Poetics* 1448b). This view of Homer passed to the Romans who, with Cicero, believed that "Homer, because of his outstanding excellence, made the common name 'poet' his own proper name" (*Cicero Topica* 55.5).

Such a simple, glowing regard did not survive the collapse of the ancient world, in large measure because a knowledge of Classical Greek itself was essentially lost to medieval Europe. Even the renewal of interest in Greek texts spurred by the twelfth century Renaissance drew on a pale image of the originals, coming through the medium of Latin translations and focusing almost exclusively on theology and natural science. By contrast, the fifteenth century Renaissance turned scholarly eyes in new directions and began to do so through Greek texts.\(^1\) Here started the stratification of Homer and, in the process, the emergence of a great variety of views. By the mid-nineteenth century, one interested critic confessed:

On no other similar subject have more strange or conflicting theories been proposed, more voluminous commentaries expended, or a keener spirit of controversy displayed; on none, perhaps, has the lavish exuberance of speculative inquiry been more barren hitherto of positive results.\(^2\)

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I am indebted to Craig Conant and Richard Johnson for their careful reading and useful suggestions in my effort to find the rainbow in the Homeric Question.

2. Mure (1852) II, 180-81. Mure attempted to make a creative contribution to the controversy as would many other interested parties from that time forward. Since the appearance of Mure's study, the literature dealing with the controversy over Homer and the epics has certainly more than quadrupled in volume.
Unease about the grandeur of Homer’s poetry attended the newly recovered ability to read the epics in their original language. As Bolgar has shown, the early humanists felt some disappointment with the poems but found a source for their dissatisfaction in the translations. When knowledge of Greek spread, they came to sense that the fault was not entirely due to the translations.

La Motte in France and Pope in England represented the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* as products of an early stage in man’s development, magnificent but crude, which had to be polished to suit a civilized taste. Homer continued to be mentioned as a great poet. But he was little read, and, when read, he was not liked or understood.¹

Soon the excavation of the epics was underway; the nature of the poetic language immediately claimed attention.

Five principal layers are now visible in defining the language of the epics. Many scholars have sought to find a place where the unusual mix of dialects actually existed at a particular point in time.⁴ Others, abandoning this first trial trench, have concluded that the epic language was never a spoken tongue; it resulted from the fact that the poems were first composed in one dialect and later transcribed into another dialectal form.⁵ Still others have argued that the language of the epics, like that of Chaucer, was completely artificial, a deliberate literary creation with no historical counterpart.⁶ Actual excavation of Bronze Age sites has uncovered the fourth layer within the Homeric epics in providing inscribed tablets; when deciphered, the syllabary known to scholars as Linear B was shown to have been used to write a form of Greek. Studies have revealed correspondences between aspects of the Homeric dialect and elements of Mycenaean Greek and thus, as John Chadwick has recently suggested, “It is therefore possible to believe in a Mycenaean Greek origin for epic verse.”⁷ The findings of Milman Parry in the 1920s and 1930s added the fifth level by demonstrating that the language of the epics results from their oral composition. Not literate products, the poems were created through a systematic use of formulaic language and narrative patterning that served, in a nonliterate society, as mnemonic aids.⁸

Not poetic language but the nature of the physical world represented in the poems now provides an area for another excavation. The ancient Greeks did not worry about this issue any more than they questioned Homeric language. Herodotus matter-of-factly declared that Homer lived about 400 years before his own time, that is closer to the Age of Heroes but not remote from the Classical Age (II.53). Stationed between two Ages, the poet might well admit objects from two distinct Ages—both Bronze and Iron, for example—to his poetic world. Such unanimity no longer exists. Perhaps the antithesis of the Classical Greek

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3. Murray (1907).
6. Parry’s studies were collected by his son A. Parry (1971). A. B. Lord has been a leading continuator of Parry’s theses.
view is that Homer's world is wholly artificial: "He created a life that never was on land or sea," and through his powerful gift for illusion he persuaded his hearers of the historical reality of this world. There is no need to excavate to find counterparts to the world created through supreme poetic genius.

But many undertook actual excavation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, driven precisely by the wish to discover the actuality of Homer's Age of Heroes. The story of Schliemann's trust in the poet's description is common knowledge. And, though he had more evidence than the epic poems to guide him, Schliemann did excavate Hisarlik/Troy, Mycenae, Tiryns and Orchomenos and, in the process, persuaded many of the historical reality of the poetic account. William Gladstone, in writing the preface to Schliemann's Mycenae, boldly announced:

By the foregoing detail I have sought to show that there is no preliminary bar to our entertaining the capital question whether the tombs now unearthed, and the remains exposed to view, under masks for the faces, and plates of gold covering one or more of the trunks, are the tombs and remains of the great Agamemnon and his compere, who have enjoyed, through the agency of Homer, such a protracted longevity of renown. 10

Recent study of Bronze Age iconography has added another category of evidence to this view of the epics' background in seeing a narrative element in Late Bronze Age Aegean art. The frescoes from Thera are the most striking example of this element but the same quality is apparent in frescoes from other sites and in quite different objects—rhyta, steles, inlaid patterns, pictorial vases.

Even in Schliemann's day, many scholars did not accept the equation between the world of Homer and the Mycenaean Age. While admitting that there are some Mycenaean relics in the epics, many find some point in the Dark Age to be a much closer match. An extreme stance is that of Rhys Carpenter who allowed that there was one possible Mycenaean object—the boars' tusk helmet. (In a letter, however, he questioned his wisdom in opening the door even so wide!) For Carpenter, the poet's own age provided concrete detail of huts and fences and brooches.

Ascription of institutional references in the poems spreads over an equal width. For some, the temenos of the wanax reveals the Mycenaean-based economic structure while for others the strength of personal obligations of service rather than conditional tenure defines a Dark Age economic and social structure. Martin Nilsson found strong parallels between Mycenaean and Homeric political organization while for Walter Donlan the Homeric basileis are drawn from knowledge of village chieftains of the Dark Age.

Religious practice in the epics offers a lively case study of the disparity of...
interpretation of a single scene. In search of news of his father, Telemachus
arrives on the shore of sandy Pylos to find Nestor with a large number of Pylians
sacrificing in nine groups of 500 each; each group has nine black bulls for the
offering to Poseidon (Odyssey, Book 3). Here is surely a Mycenaean reference:
the site and general topography date to the Bronze Age; Nestor is a figure from
the legendary past; the grandeur of the occasion reflects the wealth of the Bronze
Age, not the poverty of the Dark Age.14

However, we must consider recent work at the Isthmian Sanctuary, particu-
larly finds referable to the eighth century. According to Elizabeth Gebhard:
the broad terrace, 28 m. wide and adjacent to the place of sacrifice, provided a special area for
feasting. There is no evidence for divisions of the sacrificial place....however the first built altar at
Isthmia was very unusual in that it stretched for 100 feet along the rock of the plateau....We might
understand its length as an indication that the Isthmian ritual required a number of animals to be lined
up for sacrifice, and so possibly that the sacrifice was done by separate groups as at Pylos. ... The
ceramic remains on the first terrace, however, do suggest a separation of diners, possibly by rank.15

In other words, the occasion would be comfortably set in the sort of ranked
society of the Dark Age that Donlan presents.

Place names and accounts of non-Hellenes, too, derive in part from the Bronze
Age but also from the Dark Age. R. Hope Simpson and J. F. Lazenby have been
persuasive in arguing from the Mycenaean basis of the Catalogue of Ships in
Book Two of the Iliad.16 Many of the references of the Odyssey, on the other
hand, seem better suited to conditions of the Dark Age. Travels into the central
Mediterranean, the prominence of Phoenicians in Aegean waters, the colonizing
move of the Phaeacians all accord well with developments after the collapse of
the Mycenaean palaces.17

We might prolong a recounting of areas of disagreement on the form and
substance of the epics, but, in doing so, we run the risk of demonstrating, as
Woodhouse ventured of the Odyssey, that, “The great poem proves to be, then,
it may be objected, a hotch-potch, a ramshackle mechanical assemblage of
second-hand oddments, held together by a somewhat exiguous cement of its
reputed author’s providing.”18 Woodhouse’s image is not attractive; in fact, it
places the student of the Homeric epics in a junkyard. To rescue something of
beauty to the poems, we must turn to the issue of “the poet” and epic creativity
since stratification is visible even in the question of the poet of the epics. Along
with the disappearance of poetic beauty, the poet too has vanished for some
critics. George Thomson, for one, reasoned that Homer was not an actual person
but rather the legendary first bard imagined for themselves by authentic sing-
ers.19 If we wish to recover both a poet and coherent poetry, it is essential to

14. McDonald employed Telemachus’ visit to Pylos to describe the features of the palace and its environs that
he had helped to excavate. See McDonald and Thomas (1990).
17. Maintaining that the Odyssey was composed in Sicily, Samuel Butler (1967) 210 ff. made a case for a date
slightly later than 1050 B.C.
18. Woodhouse (1930) 237.
understand the nature of epic composition, an understanding that has been uncommon until recently.

Initial discomfort with the poems arose, in large measure, with their comparison to other epics; placed alongside the Aeneid or Paradise Lost, the Iliad and Odyssey seemed "primitive," "unpolished." Such comparison, however, did serve the purpose of inaugurating a theory of the Greek epics' creation: they differ from the poems of Vergil and Milton in their oral composition. In 1795 Friedrich A. Wolf rigorously questioned the epics' composition; in his Prolegomena ad Homerum he concluded that we owe the complete poems to deliberate joining of small independent poems undertaken by the Athenian tyrant Peisistratos. Before the joining in mid-sixth century, Homeric poetry was, in Giambattista Vico's words, "a great confused mass of things."²⁰

Obviously, the thesis of the poems' nonliterate nature did little to restore them to favor. That would come only in the present century, largely through the work of Milman Parry, although the implications of Parry's study were not immediately appreciated. Forty years after Parry's work, Sterling Dow could write, "The human brain works slowly, if at all, and there are signs that although the Parry doctrines are getting to be fairly well absorbed in England, farther away, as in Vienna, the light has not yet dawned."²¹ After another quarter century, however, the doctrines have been widely absorbed, if not completely accepted.²²

As its name reveals, oral tradition relies solely on word of mouth for memory and transmission of information; as such it is positioned between conservation and change. Traditional tales with stock characters, regular metrical form and units of words and phrases facilitate memory in cultures that are nonliterate. The composer works with these poetic blocks of words, or formulas, that have been tested by time and found satisfactory in terms of the two essential criteria, comprehension and aesthetic pleasure. Once a singer starts his song or tale, the well-learned formulas well up spontaneously within him. Carried along by narrative, the units attach themselves in their right places to the thread of the story as it passes through the singer's mind. An old song stays much the same because the bard and the audience know the patterns. New song melds organically out of old, reborn phrases. But, largely because storytellers are not aided by writing, each telling of an account will vary from the preceding. Moreover, the most successful of the bards are those able to combine various inherited elements into a dynamic, apparently spontaneous whole. Consequently, those products of oral tradition that are eventually captured in written form contain chronological "layers" corresponding to the depth of time over which they have been sung.²³

²⁰. Vico (1836) 481.
²². A useful review of the history of study arising from Parry's research is that of Foley (1988).
²³. Janko (1982). "In an oral or mainly oral tradition... formulae are preserved over long periods for reasons of convenience, or even necessity, as an aid to composition. Many formulae are handed down through the generations and preserve archaic forms, some extremely ancient indeed...one expects old formulae and archaisms to diminish in frequency through the generations, as innovative phraseology and language creeps in, and if this could be quantified, it might provide a yardstick useful for assigning approximate relative dates to the poems" (188 f.).

On Homer as oral poet, the studies of A. B. Lord, G. S. Kirk, M. W. Edwards, J. A. Notopoulos, and J. A. Russo are important points of departure.
One more step beyond knowledge of oral technique is needed before a sense of coherence can be restored to the final product, namely an appreciation of the power of oral poetry. In our modern view, literacy is good, a symbol of cultural achievement. Nonliteracy is bad, a sign of primitive simplicity that must be corrected. Presentism pervades such an attitude. Our subject provides an excellent example of the pervasive power of nonliteracy. Across the centuries, singers sorted, added, discarded and retained poetic accounts of great value to them, creating, finally, a product that retained its several components, which we have called layers.

I suggest that the metaphor is inappropriate although it does describe the result of much scholarly criticism. In seeking to define the essential basis of the epics, scholars have trained their eyes on distinct features, looking at these individual aspects as if they were layers piled atop one another. Understanding the oral nature of composition suggests another, apter metaphor: that of a rainbow whose hues are soft and blurred, melting into one another. A rainbow of those hues is more than an arch of light caused by distinct drops of water falling through the air; it is an object in its own right, momentary to be sure, but a true entity nonetheless. The various elements in the epics, then, are akin to hues: they are the natural consequences of oral composition whose blending produces another, larger object.

The superiority of this metaphor rests in its appreciation of the relationship of a single entity to its parts. The image of the rainbow acknowledges distinctions between the “hues” that comprise the full spectrum, a necessity in the study of the poems since there are chronological differences detectable in all aspects of the epics. Thus it encourages attempts to define chronological elements as nearly as possible. At the same time, it emphasizes the error of ignoring the full spectrum of colors: isolating a single, fixed level for a feature of the epics—comparable to Troy I or VI—will distort an understanding of even that single level if it is not continually placed within the context of the whole. Unlike archaeological levels, oral composition regularly retains earlier features, blending them with contemporary or almost contemporary traits. The divisions are not clear. Traditional phrases are melded with newly created phrases; themes sung for decades are combined with new themes. To succeed with his audience, however, a singer must weave new and old together to create an intelligible whole.

Envisioning the occasions when actual bards—whatever their names may have been—drew together their inheritance allows us to appreciate the creative role of individual singers. For oral poetry does grant great potential freedom to singers: while owing form and substance to earlier songs, each song’s power comes from the skills of its singer. Study of more contemporary oral societies has revealed good singers and great singers. And, as anyone who regularly lectures must admit, one and the same person can be more and less inspired according to a number of factors. In other words, knowledge of oral composition and performances allows us to restore “Homer” to the creative process. It may be necessary to acknowledge more than one inspired singer, particularly if we
believe that the roots of the epics are to be found in the Mycenaean era. Yet, even this acknowledgement need not do away with a final monumental bard whose songs were captured by the recently restored skill of writing. In arguing the case that “the alphabet came into being as a tool for recording hexameter verse,” Barry Powell finds room for a Homer: “no achievement surpassed that of Homer and his scribe, who made Homer’s song immortal.”24 An understanding of both the process and the role of the poet in this achievement comes from the pen of a young scholar of the Classics. With his permission, I offer John Woodson Stewart’s view of “Homer.”

Homer

Of him your most beloved suppliant,
The blind bard of Smyrna or Chios,
Whose great voice knew more turnings than the mind
Of his favorite child, the bold Ithacan,
And told the wrath of gods and mortals,
Foolish men who in their haughty passions
Acted beyond shame in wickedness
Earning punishment, blind to their fates
And the will of the gods who never die:
Of Homer sing, Pierian Muses,
Shining daughters of cloud-gathering Zeus
And the most honored of the old divines,
Memory, who alone with you is there
At the planting of each seed, and the bloom,
And the final overturning when the blasts
Of fall strip the leaves and harsh winter
Comes again and the years unroll always
In your vision; show him to me through the mist
That gathers dark about on this far shore
Of the gloomy, howling river of the dead.
Is this he who comes closer with his staff,
Surrounded by a flickering swarm of shades?
But speak, divine sage, or show me the rites
To give you voice that I may drink that wine!
“You are spared the sacrifices, strange child;
Ewe and ram need not be bled in the pit,
Nor must I drink that ancient clotted brew.
But I, Tiresias, am not your goal,
Nor will you find it even here where all
Mortality resides in Time’s good time.
For you seek no mortal that ever crossed
Dark gleaming Styx on Charon’s bark,
But many men, and many more who came

In that strange interlude, when wonders lost
Made way for greater wonders yet to come.
These all bore the seeds and long conserved
Their promise til the fallow land could grow
Again, from many sources bred to one,
As the bee carries pollen plant to plant
And shared diversity gives strength to all.”
So he spoke, and after a long silence
Pondering such things as he had uttered,
I replied, and addressed him with soothing words,
“Then these great and chosen souls may I see,
Most excellent prophet, to hear their songs
Again and learn each part: how they began,
By what care and nourishment they grew,
And what guiding hand, either god’s or of man,
Made them well, with good order and restraint?”
The great Mantis addressed me with a speech,
“They are myriad and singly cannot come,
But as you seek the beginning, the middle,
And the end of this great living process
I will send you three, one each from the
Different ages of the song to tell their part.
Now behold, and listen: the eldest comes.”
Then resolving from the murk a form appeared,
From vapors made a man, young without doubt,
But bent and worn beyond his years with age
Etched with care and suffering in his face.
He raised his hand for silence offered, and spoke,
“Wrath, wrath! sing that bore us endless woes,
When famine drove us to sack the cities
And palaces full of grain and fruit.
Always hungry, we were starving then.
Harsh necessity gave us no choices.
But no help for us in those plunderings,
For the years passed and the crops yet failed,
And those who could not flee kept dying.
Even so the will of Zeus was accomplished.
So few remained when I first bloomed, and they
Had learned to see the need for some restraint,
So neighbor could trust suspicious neighbor
And the mighty would feel shame’s heavy weight.
So we sang, holy priests leaving the altars,
Of the best of men, and their haughty ways,
And the sure retribution they invoked.
We knew the names of old, the greatest king,
The mightiest warrior, their common need
And the fatal dispute that parted them,
As we were parted by contention.
Contention, and the long path to settlement,
These were the hard seeds of our infant song.”
So he spoke, and even as the last words
Echoed his form had vanished into light,
Making darkness visible in the gloom.
In that space there now appeared an older man,
Less troubled than the eaten shade before.
He stood erect, disciplined in his pose,
And in his hands he held a clear-voiced lyre.
He waited for my expectation, then began,
“The wrath I sing, of great Achilles,
And the many heroes whom he excelled,
Heroes borne from the womb of each district,
Gathering about the son of Peleus
And the king of kings Agamemnon
As soldiers would gather for a campaign,
Drawn in their pride (but for the strange Ithacan)
To join their songs to the first song of anger,
Making greater its fame and their own
As the seasons unroll and the singers travel,
Sacred ambassadors of a greater home
In which reside the many men and gods
Whose exploits there are shared and made known
To all, to which all add in ordered contest:
But always about the durable axis
Stretched between the greatest king and best warrior,
Pride in great place and pride in great action,
Blind to the order which Father Zeus confers,
Unwilling to resolve their first dispute,
Even as we discover codes of justice
To surround them, more evidence for men
Of better ways to live outside of constant strife.
The Ithacan as well attracts the Muse,
Though I make him strange indeed, as I am
Born in the first song—and even so I
Can feel the tug of home that preserves him.
Perhaps it is a greater cause for men,
But someone younger must sing it to you.”
Then he as well flitted into darkness,
And as surely as before another came,
Moving proudly through the fog for good effect,
Like Hamlet’s father pricking my desire
Before he deigned to offer subtle speech.
Turning swiftly toward me transfixed he began,
“Now I sing the man of many turnings,
Odysseus, whom the Muses favored
Next to swift-footed Achilles as the best
Of the Achaeans—a changing man
For a changing time, the aftermath
Of war, the recovery from the past.
What Achilles must lose to teach us all,
Blessed homecoming, Odysseus regains.
Gathering stories like troubles he aims
Always on that path, straight though much delayed.
He is all of us, and always more.
From his island taken he has found a home
In every home of god-beloved Hellas,
His ordered world growing just like that at Troy,
Through our yearly sharing at the contests,
And coming home to share what we have heard.
In my days strange hunched men were in attendance,
Invited as well by the aristoi.
Staring at nothing with gnarled, cramping hands
They claim to hold the secrets of our songs
In weird designs, small and uninspired.
Untaught, worthless, what good can they bring?
Only a few of the worst of us deigned
To study their wretched craft—blind mouths!
Who will not see where inspiration lies:
In the soul of the songs, the ancient seed,
Which grew beautifully through the years.
Lay upon lay, scene upon scene added
To its balanced whole, small additions
Like tender shoots from the iron strong oak,
Always growing, all joined to one great form.”

John Woodson Stewart