Homer and History

Introduction

Not so long ago, it was pretty much taken as a given that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were the earliest poems we knew of written in Greek. As such, it was thought that the poems could shed light on the earliest periods of Greek history – the Bronze Age and the earliest Iron Age, and it was not uncommon for histories of Archaic Greece to begin with a discussion of the world of Homer (e.g. Murray 1980, 38–68). Today, this consensus has broken down to some extent. Some scholars question the existence of a historical Homer (e.g. West 1999). Many more would argue that the Homeric poems took many centuries to reach the form in which we have them today (see Nagy 1995, 1997a).

All this is to say that one cannot consider the historicity of Homer without a whole number of other issues also being raised. The first of these is the Homeric tradition, and the process or persons by which the poems were first composed and reached their definitive form. While it is generally agreed that the Homeric poems stem from an oral tradition, scholars disagree profoundly as to whether (in their final form) they could have been composed without the aid of writing (and more specifically, the Greek alphabet; see Powell 1990; cf. Wade-Gery 1952). The introduction of the Greek alphabet therefore becomes a crucial issue. The second is the date of the composition of the poems – most scholars still plump for a date around 700 B.C., but many others argue for a much longer process culminating in a "Peisistratid recension" in the sixth century B.C. (e.g. Burkert 1987b; West 1999). For, if Homer relates to any period in history, the likelihood must be that the poems relate most closely to the period in which they were composed.

Below I explore four specific questions dealing with the relationship between Homer and history, which I will try to address in turn:

1 Are the events recounted in both poems real, historical events? Was there a Trojan War? And is there anything historical to the various accounts of the *nostoi*, the stories about the return of the heroes of which the *Odyssey* is the most significant?

2 What is the relationship between the action and behavior of Homer's heroes and material culture? Is there a Homeric way of war, are there Homeric arms and WEAPONS, and is there a Homeric way of burying the heroic dead (see WARRIOR GRAVES)? And are these practices in any way *historical*? If so, can they be dated?
3 Was there ever a historical "Homeric society"? If so, does it belong in the Late Bronze Age, the Iron Age (1100–800 B.C.), or the period of the composition of the poems themselves?
4 What is Homer's sense "of the past," that is, of history?

Homer's Narratives: Real Events?

The Greek historians of the fifth century B.C. certainly believed that the Trojan War at least was historical. Thucydides (1.10.1–5) makes an implicit rebuke to those who might doubt the historicity of Homer, basing their judgements on the small size of contemporary MYCENAE. His predecessor Herodotus begins his great work (1.1–5) by comparing the conflict between Persians and Greeks to the ancient conflict between Trojans and Greeks; indeed, his claim is that the Persian War is, in some way, a continuation of a broader Greek–Asiatic conflict. Herodotus has views about both the Trojan War and Homer: the Trojan War, he reckons, took place around 800 years before his time (2.145.4), whereas Homer and Hesiod lived no more than 400 years before his time (2.53.2). Later chroniclers tended to arrive at similar dates: the *Marmor Parium* (a third-century B.C. Greek inscription that records the chronology of important events) suggests the Trojan War took place between 1218/17 and 1209/8 (Jacoby 1904, 9, 146–9; 1929, 996 = *FrGrHist* 239 A 23–4), and Eratosthenes estimated Troy was taken in 1184 B.C. (Jacoby 1929, 1012–13 = *FrGrHist* 241 F1).

This view was not shared by the "scientific" historians and philologists of the nineteenth century. George Grote ([1847] 1883, vii), for example, began his history of Greece in 776 B.C. (the traditional date of the first Olympiad), everything before that being a time of legend. But archaeologists begged to differ. In 1870 Heinrich SCHLIEMANN began his excavations at the mound of Hissarlik in northwest Turkey, which he managed to convince the world was the site of ancient Troy (see TROY AND ITS TREASURES). His more scientific successors, first Wilhelm Dörpfeld and later Carl BLEGEN, managed to find evidence which convinced them that the city of Troy had been destroyed by fire at some point in the Late Bronze Age, although they disagreed as to which of the nine major phases (Troy I–IX) of the mound this should be assigned to. For Dörpfeld the destruction of Troy at the end of Troy VI (Dörpfeld 1902, 107–82; see also Blegen 1963, 111–46) and for BLEGEN the destruction of the city at the end of Troy VIIa (Blegen et al. 1958, 3–135, esp. 10–13; 1963, 147–64;) marked the sack of a historical Troy. Either archaeological horizon could be made to date to a period (ca. 1250 B.C.) only a little earlier than Greek historians' estimate for the date of the destruction of the Troy of legend. Both scholars remained convinced of the historicity of the Epic Cycle, and so went looking for Homer's palaces, described in some detail in the first few books of the *Odyssey* (see HOMERIC ARCHAEOLOGY). Dörpfeld searched for Odysseus's on Lefkada (Dörpfeld 1927; cf. Snodgrass 1987, 18–24); and BLEGEN was to find his "Palace of Nestor" at Ano Englianos near PYLOS in Messenia (Blegen and Rawson 1966).

Schliemann, then, is the scholar most responsible for the widespread belief that the Trojan War is a historical event that can be dated to the Late Bronze Age. But Schliemann himself also uncovered evidence that might contradict such an interpretation. When he came to excavate the Shaft Graves of Mycenae, one of his most compellingly "Homeric" finds was the Siege Rhyton (Karo 1930–33, 106–8, no. 481) from Shaft Grave IV. This silver vessel is decorated on its outside with scenes of a besieged city, which must (one thinks) derive from some kind of story or tale current at the time of its manufacture (see Destruction of Cities, The Literary Tradition of). The rhyton is dated to Late Helladic I, that is ca. 1600 b.c. – a date well before the "Herodotean" date of the Trojan War, which both Dörpfeld and Blegen believed they had confirmed. The Siege Rhyton is not the only piece of evidence that appears to show that there existed a well-developed siege narrative in the Late Bronze Age Aegean. A miniature fresco from room 5 in the West House at Akrotiri on Thera, which must date to 1550 b.c. at the very latest (and more likely ca. 1630), shows warriors armed with large body shields, spears, and boars' tusk helmets, and ships landing on a beach (some of which are being wrecked). The soldiers appear to be attacking, or laying siege, to a city (Morris 1989). Both the Siege Rhyton and the fresco from the West House show that a siege narrative (if not the *Iliad* as such) was already a part of Aegean culture well before the traditional date of the Trojan War. An agate gem recently found in the Griffin Warrior grave at Pylos datable to the LH IIA period (ca. 1500; Stocker and Davis 2017; the seal is likely to have already been old when it was buried, as it probably dates to the LH I period) depicts two warriors fighting over the body of a fallen comrade in a strikingly realistic manner which recalls the numerous dueling scenes from the *Iliad*. Certainly, the existence of a well-established oral tradition of "Homeric" poetry in the Late Bronze Age is confirmed, to my mind, by the fresco of a bard holding a lyre sitting on top of a mountain, from whose mouth "winged words" seem to fly; this fresco decorated one of the walls of the central megaron in the (pre-1200 b.c.) Palace of Nestor at Pylos (Lang 1969, 79–80 fresco 43 H6 plate A c). The Akrotiri fresco, the Siege Rhyton from Mycenae and the agate gem from the Griffin Warrior grave at Pylos all seem to take this tradition further back. They raise the possibility that the essential features of the cycle of poems of which the *Iliad* is a part must go back much earlier than the very end of the Bronze Age (Sherratt 1990; cf. Morris 1989). This in itself should cast some doubt on the idea that the Trojan War is a historical event that can first be dated and then fitted into a wider narrative of political development in the Late Bronze Age Aegean.

Scholars who believe in a historical Trojan War, datable to the Late Bronze Age, tend to cite the authority of Greek tradition. But this is to ignore two things: first, there was no real consensus about the relationship between the Greek present and the Greek past, since Hesiodic decline and Thucydidean progress (see below, "Homer's Sense of History and 'the Past'") cannot be reconciled; and second, the ancient traditions only really agree on one thing – the considerable gap in time between Homer and the events he purports to describe (Graziosi 2002, 90–124). There will, of course, always be some who believe; German scholars have, to some degree, been encouraged in this belief by the recent excavations at Troy (Troy and Its Treasures), led by Manfred Korfmann (Latacz 2001, esp. 297–342); and there is a persistent desire to locate the political geography of the Catalogue of Ships (Catalogue of Ships, Archaeology; Catalogue of Ships, Literary Aspects) in Book 2 of the *Iliad* in the late Mycenaean world (Hope Simpson and Lazenby 1970). Most historians in the English-speaking world, however, do not

believe that the Trojan War is anything but a legend. Not everyone is as categorical as Finley ([1954] 1979, 159–77) in dismissing the historicity of the Trojan War. Still the most that many Anglophone scholars would concede is that, if there is any kernel of historical truth behind the destruction horizons either of Troy VI or Troy VIIa, then this has only an oblique relationship to the development of an epic at whose center lay a great siege. And if we cannot find a plausible archaeological horizon for such a dramatic *event* as the fall of a city like Troy, it is foolish to look for more concrete evidence that the tales of the return of the heroes (such as the *Odyssey*; see NOSTOI) might also have a historical basis – though this has not stopped some scholars from trying (e.g. Catling 1995).

It is vain, then, to look for the historicity of any of the *events* recounted in the Homeric poems. But this does not exhaust the possible relationships between Homer and history in the broadest sense.

Homer, Archaeology, and Material Culture

Artifacts play an important role in the narratives of both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, and also in the "backstory" of the life and death of Achilles (Burgess 2009). Some artifacts are singled out as particular to certain heroes. So NESTOR'S CUP (*Il.* 11.632–7) with four golden "ears" and decorated with doves, is so heavy that only a hero can lift it. Some descriptions are even more elaborate, so much so that they contain their own narratives. This poetic device is known as *ekphrasis*, and its most famous example is the SHIELD OF ACHILLES, which was made for him by Hephaistos (*Il.* 18.478–608). It is difficult to find archaeological parallels for either object. The nearest parallel for NESTOR'S CUP is a two-handled gold goblet decorated with doves from the Shaft Graves at MYCENAE (Karo 1930–1933, 100, no. 412) dated to the beginning of the Late Bronze Age. There is no parallel for the SHIELD OF ACHILLES, which, with its concentric rings of figured scenes, does not resemble any shield known from the Greek archaeological record. The nearest parallels for the sequence of narratives, working from the outside to the inside, are the bronze *tympana* with figural decoration found in two sanctuaries of Zeus on Crete and dating to between 850 and 650 B.C. (Kunze 1931).

Perhaps more interesting is the way in which objects act as agents in the unfolding of both epics (Grethlein 2008; Antonaccio, HOMERIC MATERIALITY). Achilles' original armor, given to him by his divine mother Thetis, and worn by Patroclus during Achilles' long sulk, then seized by Hector, and last reclaimed by Achilles in his final act of revenge (*Il.* 17.194–7, 18.84–5, 22.322–3) is in some respects as much a *dramatis persona* as any human or divine protagonist. Other artifacts are given elaborate "object biographies": the BOARS' TUSK HELMET that Meriones gives to Odysseus has an elaborate genealogy, going back several generations (*Il.* 10.260–71); the silver krater that Menelaus gives to Telemachus (*Od.* 4.613–19, 15.113–19) and the one that Achilles sets up as a prize for the funeral games of Patroclus (*Il.* 23.740–9) both have pedigrees that take them back to Sidon via several aristocratic intermediaries.

Earlier scholarship was not so much concerned with these "entangled objects" (*sensu* Thomas 1991) as with three categories of Homeric material culture: metallurgy, WARFARE, and BURIAL PRACTICES. For, so the thinking went, if we could understand the use of bronze and iron in the Homeric poems, that might help us to decide whether "the world of

Homer" belongs in the Bronze or the Iron Age. Here the picture is ambiguous. Although bronze WEAPONS AND ARMOR are ubiquitous in Homer it is no help, as bronze armor is found both in the Late Bronze Age and in the Archaic period (at least from Late Geometric times onwards). Body armor of any kind does not, however, seem to be much in evidence in the period between 1100 and 750 B.C. (Snodgrass 1964, 71–90). Swords are a different matter: Homeric heroes seem to use exclusively bronze swords (Gray 1954), and no meaningful distinctions can be made in the terms used to describe swords, daggers, or other stabbing/slashing weapons (Snodgrass 1964, 93–113, 174). Homer's heroes, too, use only bronze spears (Gray 1954), and usually carry two of them. A pattern of long and short spears, invariably turning up as pairs, is one that we also encounter in the numerous WARRIOR GRAVES of the Early Iron Age (Blegen 1952; Snodgrass 1964, 115–39; D'Onofrio 2011), where the examples are exclusively of iron. Such pairs (spear + javelin) are also carried by warriors depicted on Late Geometric vases from Athens and elsewhere.

Homer, too, seems to know of iron tools (Gray 1954), and to have a fairly good understanding of the practices of ironworking, if the analogy between the blinding of Polyphemus by placing a burnt stake in his single eye and twisting and quenching a hot, iron axe in cold water (*Od.* 9.391–6) is anything to go by. That ironworking is used widely as a metaphor suggests that the practice was well established by the time the poem was composed. Yet Homer's view of metallurgy is difficult to reconcile with one particular period. As Gray (1954, 11) puts it, "clearly the poems do not represent the Mycenaean age or the full Iron Age. They differ from the transitional period . . . iron tools did not precede iron weapons" – a fact evident from the Areopagus Warrior Grave (ca. 900 B.C.; Blegen 1952; see also WARRIOR GRAVES), with its preponderance of iron weapons over iron tools.

Much the same goes for Homeric WARFARE, which has always puzzled scholars (see van Wees 1986, 1992). It seems first to involve the marshalling of armed men holding spears (infantry) in ranks –*stiches andrōn*. These ranks of men seem, to some scholars, to resemble later hoplite formations. Next the leaders or heroes are placed on chariots, and have charioteers to drive them when they fight. The fighting seems to involve the heroes often jumping off chariots and engaging in infantry duels with individual opponents from the other side. From a purely military (rather than a social or poetic) point of view this style of WARFARE does not make much sense. While we do know that chariots were used in war in the Near East and Egypt in the Late Bronze Age, the tactics do not appear to be "Homeric." In these cultures chariots are used as platforms for mobile archers (as they are not in Homer). Chariots do turn up in the Late Bronze Age Aegean – most famously a number of chariots are recorded in Linear B tablets from both Knossos and PYLOS (Ventris and Chadwick 1973, 361–81). But when chariots are depicted on vases, particularly kraters, in either the Late Bronze Age (Late Helladic IIIB and IIIC) or in the Late Geometric period, these chariots are used in processions, not in war (Crouwel 2006; Morris 2006). There are exceptions – notably the supposed representations of the Aktorione-Molione twins on Late Geometric vases from Athens, who seem to be fighting on chariots (Snodgrass 1998, 26–35; Crouwel 2006). But these images raise problems of interpretation: are these scenes meant to be "contemporary," or is the chariot (with the Dipylon shield) an iconographic device that tells the viewer that this scene is to be set "in the heroic age" (Giuliani 2010)? Again, pinning down Homeric WARFARE to a particular time or place (outside of the poems themselves) seems to elude us.

Perhaps we are on firmer ground with BURIAL PRACTICES. With the possible exception of Odysseus's companion, Elpenor, in the *Odyssey*, who complains about being unburied "in the ground" (*Od.* 11.51–7) all of Homer's heroes (Patroclus and Hector in particular) are cremated, their bones placed in some valuable metal (silver/gold) container, and a mound is erected over them (*Il.* 23.161–257, 24.782–804). The introduction of cremation in the Aegean at least can be dated with some precision. It does not appear in Greece much before 1100 B.C., and does not become widespread in central Crete, Attica, Boeotia, Euboea, and parts of Macedonia the Peloponnese until the tenth century B.C. (Snodgrass 1971, 187–91; Lemos 2002, 186–7; see BURIAL PRACTICES). Cremation seems to be reserved for adults in general, and adult men in particular (Whitley 2002; cf. Langdon 2008, 244–51). A striking parallel to Homeric practices appears in the archaeological record at the so-called heroön at LEFKANDI, Toumba in Euboea (Blome 1984; Popham et al. 1993), which can be dated by the associated pottery to around 950 B.C. (Lemos 2002, 48–50). Here a male warrior was cremated, placed in an antique Cypriot krater, and a mound was raised over him. He is accompanied by a richly furnished grave of a woman (who may have been sacrificed to accompany him in death) and four horse skeletons, reminiscent of the ostentatiously destructive burial of Patroclus.

Dating Homer through material culture therefore gives an inconsistent picture. While cremation can be dated to the Iron Age, no single "Homeric" artifact described yields a clear archaeological date. It will be immediately objected that this generalization leaves out the BOARS' TUSK HELMET, a genuine Late Bronze Age artifact that turns up in various parts of the mainland and Crete between 1500 and 1100 B.C. (Lorimer 1950, 212–19; Borchhardt 1972, 18–37, 30–1). But, while it is a genuine Late Bronze Age artifact, its significance is quite different. For the BOARS' TUSK HELMET is one of those entangled objects (*sensu* Thomas 1991) with an extensive aristocratic biography (*Il.* 10.260–71). It was given to Odysseus by Meriones, who was given it by Molos, who was given it by Amphidamas, who in turn was given it by Autolykos, who took it from Amyntor. In this way, the helmet travels from Eleon (in Boeotia), to Kythera, to Crete, to Troy, and (perhaps) to Ithaca. One of the last such helmets to turn up in the archaeological record is one from tomb 201–2 in the North Cemetery at Knossos, datable to around 1100 B.C. (Catling 1995). This helmet was probably an antique at the time of its deposition. Like the Cypriot bronze stand burnt with the male body, this helmet is found in one of the earliest cremations in central Crete in the Iron Age.

This combination of broken sword, burnt male body, and antiques whose "life" ends with their deposition in the grave represents a new kind of *personhood* that occurs at the beginning of the Iron Age and not earlier (Whitley 2013, 2016). Personhood is not a term that is as yet much used in Homeric studies. It stems from anthropology, where new terms (such as the "dividual") have been coined to describe persons whose social and historical boundaries do not conform to that of a Western individual. But while the term is not familiar, the concept should be. For it is this form of personhood that was first described in Classical scholarship as being peculiarly Homeric by Bruno Snell (even though he would not have used such terms). Snell saw Homeric heroes as bodies that were "comprehended not as a unit but an aggregate," that is, "construct[s] of independent parts variously put together" (Snell [1946] 1980, 6; cf. Snell 1980, 17; cf. Langdon 2008, 244–6). Rather than individuals, Homeric heroes might therefore be better conceived as "dividuals." And rather than Bronze Age persons (who were often buried with antiques but who were not cremated

and buried with entangled or broken objects: Whitley 2016; contra Bennet 2004) we are talking about Iron Age ones. This does not mean that "Homer belongs in the Iron Age"; rather that the Iron Age saw a fundamental change both in personhood and material entanglements, without which the Homeric hero would not have been possible.

History, Archaeology, and Homeric Society

Debates about Homeric personhood are probably premature. In any case, it might be thought that if Homeric personhood can be dated (and so become part of history), then so can Homeric society. Whatever one's view, the historicity of Homeric society remains one of the most vexed questions in ancient history (Raaflaub 1998; Ulf 2009), so it is worth outlining the history of this debate in some detail.

In the nineteenth century, it was generally the "scientific" philologists and historians who disbelieved in the historicity of Homeric society, and the romantically inclined excavators of Troy, Mycenae, and Tiryns who argued the opposite case. For them, Homer belonged to the Late Bronze Age. By 1980, due in part to an improved understanding of the archaeology of the Early Iron Age, the positions had, to some extent, been reversed: leading archaeologists of the Early Iron Age (notably Nicolas Coldstream and Anthony Snodgrass) viewed Homeric society as primarily a poetic construct, whereas historians (e.g. Murray 1980) continued to begin their historical narratives of Archaic Greece with "the world of Homer."

The terms of the current debate were fixed by Moses Finley. Originally written in 1954, Finley's *World of Odysseus* (Finley [1954] 1979) set out the following case. First ignore the palpable implausibility of the setting and plot of both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*; do not attend to the foreground figures of Achilles, Agamemnon, and Odysseus, or the elaborate descriptions of artifacts that have never been found by any archaeologist. Concentrate instead on the *background*, in what the poet did not so much compose as take for granted: marriage patterns, gift exchange, households, and assemblies. With the aid of ethnography, these key social institutions can be fleshed out to some extent, to yield a coherent picture of a past society. Because this society is coherent, it must also be both historical and datable: it is impossible for a poet working within (or at least being heavily indebted to) a primarily oral tradition of composition to invent background details of such consistency. Since "Homeric society" is palpably inconsistent both with the picture of the Late Bronze Age provided by the Linear B tablets and with what we know of Archaic Greece in the seventh and sixth centuries B.C., it must date to a period in between, that is to the Early Iron Age or Dark Age of the tenth and ninth centuries B.C.

I have never found this argument convincing, and I would like to illustrate the problem by the following thought experiment. Imagine that all evidence of twentieth-century Britain had been lost in some catastrophe. All that had survived (in book and other forms) were the novels of J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. It was from these texts that attempts were made to reconstruct historic British society in the earlier part of the twentieth century. While it was conceded that the plot itself was fanciful, the persons clearly either more or less than human, the setting imaginary and located in some kind of alternative past, it was felt that the background details must tell us something real about Britain during Tolkien's lifetime (which was known). Scholarly attention focused on the

Shire and the Hobbits, which were thought to provide an accurate reflection of life in rural Warwickshire in the years around 1900–1910. Such a reconstruction would have some realistic details – pubs and family farms. But scholars would be deeply misled if they thought that British rural society had no organized religion, lacked developed political institutions apart from sheriffs and a mayor, or that it was principally organized on the basis of extended patrilineal clans. "Tolkienish society," so reconstructed, could only be weakly historical, and the scholar would have no means (short of archaeological investigation) of sorting out the real from the fanciful.

Two objections may be raised at this point. First, Tolkien was an author who went to quite extraordinary lengths to provide a coherent background to his tales. He is quite exceptional in this regard. Second, Finley's argument for "background coherence" depends on Homer being primarily an oral poet, or one working at the end of an oral tradition. Oral traditions depend on a background that cannot be invented, but has to be taken for granted. To these two objections I would make two rejoinders: first, Tolkien is in many respects the twentieth-century author who most resembles Homer. He composed epics, albeit in prose. He made extensive use of "entangled objects" (the sword Andùril, the Ring), whose biographies both punctuate and structure his narrative. Second, we do not know to what extent Homer was an "oral" poet – this is tied up to unresolved debates about the date of the major period of the composition of the poems (see Crielaard, Homeric Communities). The Tolkien comparison is therefore an illuminating one.

Similar arguments to this one were put forward by Snodgrass (1974), who argued that Homeric society could not have been historical. He had two main points: first, as Finley had recognized, the inconsistencies in Homeric metallurgy and burial practices (see also Gray 1954) made it difficult to assign the epics to any archaeologically defined period; second "Homeric society," as reconstructed by Finley, was not as *anthropologically* coherent as might be imagined, as it combined features which one would not expect to find ethnographically. Snodgrass persuaded many of his archaeological colleagues but few historians. The debate was revived by Ian Morris (2001, first published in 1986) who argued that the inconsistencies in "Homeric society" were caused by distancing effects: a poet whose background lay in the Greek world around 700 B.C. was trying to make his world belong to an imagined past, and so inserted a number of deliberate anachronisms to emphasize its "pastness." In 1991 I put forward a slightly different argument against "Homeric society" (Whitley 1991): the world of Early Iron Age Greece was, on purely archaeological grounds, simply too socially and culturally diverse to form a coherent social order that might form the historical background to the Homeric poems. Historians, therefore, should look to social archaeology, and not to Homer, if they wish to reconstruct the early forms of Greek society either in the Iron Age or in the eighth century B.C. (when scholars still supposed the Homeric poems took their definitive form). It is striking how the debate has changed since the nineteenth century. No one was arguing for a Bronze Age Homeric society: either it is located in the Iron Age (tenth and ninth century B.C.), or around 700 B.C., or it is a historical fiction.

This of course raises another issue: the historicity of Homeric society depends on a consensus on the historical date of Homer. For most scholars, a date circa 700 B.C. is still preferred for the definitive composition of the Homeric poems (Ulf 2009), whether we conceive these as essentially oral performances which a scribe (Palamedes? see Powell 1990) wrote down with the new technology of the alphabet, or as principally literary and literate

compositions that derive from an oral tradition. But the Nagy (1995; 1997b) view, which sees Homer's poems reaching a recognizable form no earlier than 566 B.C., is gaining ground (see Snodgrass 1998; Burgess 2009). It is possible to argue that there is a historical Homeric society that dates to the years before 700 B.C., as there is no other literary or historical evidence to contradict this (and the archaeological evidence can always be interpreted in a number of ways). But no one has yet put forward the thesis that "Homeric society" is both historical and dates to the sixth century B.C., to the time of Anacreon, Polycrates, and Peisistratus. Such a suggestion would strike most scholars as being simply absurd.

This should not surprise us: Homer (whoever and whenever he was, *pace* West 1999) was a poet, and neither an archaeologist nor a historian. He was as little interested in providing accurate reports on Bronze Age battle tactics as he was in providing an anthropologically coherent account of Iron Age gift exchange. He was interested in character, in action, in metaphor, in plot, and in vivid and compelling battle scenes. In this he (or at least his characters) had to have a sense of the past, that is of history. What then was this sense?

Homer's Sense of History and "the Past"

Homer's epics are set in "the past"; Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are, in many respects, the "poetry of the past" (Ford 1992), set in a heroic age. But saying that the epics are set either in the past or in the heroic age is, in some respects, not to say much. Most Greeks of Classical times believed that there had been a heroic age, but they differed in their interpretations of it. The Greeks never had a unified view of "the past." For Thucydides, the past represents various stages of progress towards a present in the fifth century B.C., which no earlier epoch had equaled. For Hesiod, long thought of as Homer's contemporary, writing in the eighth century B.C., the past was conceived as being better than the present "Age of Iron." The present had declined from a golden age where things were much better than today (*Op.* 106–201; West 1978, 172–204). For both Thucydides and Hesiod, however, the past was, to some degree, "a foreign country"; things were very different then, whether for better or worse. This distant past is not, however, one that was relevant to Homer's heroes.

For Homer's heroes, the past is neither remote nor alien (*contra* Grethlein 2012). It is present in objects, and in those human–thing entanglements that structure the narrative of the *Iliad* in particular (see above; and Antonaccio, HOMERIC MATERIALITY). The object biographies of the BOARS' TUSK HELMET, of the krater that Achilles sets up as a prize, and of Agamemnon's scepter are ways in which Homer's heroes are linked to a recognizable past that is little different from their "heroic" present (Grethlein 2008). Memory is also located in more imposing objects, such as the tomb (tumulus) of Ilos (*Il.* 10.415, 11.166, 372, 24.349; see Grethlein 2008, 28–32), the rooms made for Priam and Paris (Alexander; *Il.* 6.314–18), and the walls of Troy itself (*Il.* 20.144–8; Grethlein 2008, 32–5). It comes to life in genealogies (rarely extending more than eight generations) recounted in battle scenes, such as the one described by Aineas to Achilles (*Il.* 20.229–41). Recently, Grethlein (2010) has made a useful distinction between modern ideas of history and *exemplary* history. It is the latter, being above all relevant to the present, that is evident in the exchange between the Trojan Glaukos and the Greek Diomedes (*Il.* 6.119–236). Genealogies and objects are

used to establish traditions that relate the past to the present – a present that cannot be too unlike the past.

Of course, there is a paradox here. For the Homeric epics are, from the point of view of the poet and the audience, set in the past, a past that is almost as different from the present as was Hesiod's "Age of Heroes" from his "Age of Iron." This is clear from the odd aside, where heroes lift stones that no one today could lift (*Il.* 5.302–4, 12.445–9, 20.285–7). In this sense, while for Homer's heroes the "past" in Homer can be exemplary, for Homer's audience Epic itself cannot.

Summary and Conclusions

This essay has examined four ways in which the term "Homer and History" can be understood. It has looked first at the historicity of "Homeric" events, in particular the Trojan War and the *nostoi*, the history of journeys home. These events cannot be seen as being historical in the sense of events that actually happened and can form part of an *histoire eventielle*, that is, a historical narrative. It has looked at the question of the relationship between Homer and material culture. Homer mixes up bronze and iron objects in ways that conform to no known archaeological period. Some Homeric practices (cremation; see BURIAL PRACTICES) seem to date to the Iron Age, and some Homeric objects (the BOARS' TUSK HELMET) seem to be Bronze Age in date. Overall, however, the Homeric pattern of "human-thing entanglements" (the relationships between persons and things) conforms more easily to the Iron Age than to the Bronze Age (*contra* Bennet 2004). Third, it has looked into the question of Homeric society, which many have argued is both real and datable to either the Iron Age (tenth and ninth centuries B.C.) or the period when the poems were composed (if that is the eighth century). Again, the arguments for there being a historical Homeric society have been found wanting. Bits of social reality may intrude into Homer, but the overall picture is less coherent than has been claimed and Early Iron Age society is too diverse to fit into a single mold. Finally, a brief glance has been given to Homer's view of history. If for Homer's heroes the past was still "exemplary," for Homer's audience his heroes were part of a "foreign country" where things were done very differently.

Where then does Homer belong "in history"? Homer does not clearly belong to one particular period, and there never was such a thing as "Homeric society." But an understanding of Homer remains nonetheless central to any understanding of Greek society, culture, literature, and art (Carter and Morris 1995; Giuliani 2003, 2013) in all periods from the Bronze Age to the end of Antiquity. Homer remains an essential part of history, even if we cannot place him exactly when or where.

James Whitley

Further Reading

Lorimer 1950; Blegen 1963; Snodgrass 1974; Finley [1954] 1979; Morris 1986; Nagy 1995; Bennet 2004; Grethlein 2008; Whitley 2013.