

Introduction Part 2

Basic Facts about Homer

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This reading come from the Cave's
The Best of Homer's Iliad.

WHO WAS HOMER? In the ancient world, Homer was the divine "adorned of warrior heroes, the godly Homer."¹ At least that is what one epigram we have claims. Alongside Hesiod, he was "the most inspired of poets."² More specifically, for most ancients, Homer was known as the sole creator or *maker* of several long epic poems that brought to life and glorified many heroes among the ancient Greeks.³

In more recent times, however, and for good reason, scholars have doubted that one man alone was responsible for these poems. Rather, in one way or another, they have suggested that the epic poems are the evolved result of a long process through time. Consequently, various answers have been given to the *who*

was Homer question. Of them, two stand out. What follows simplifies each thesis considerably.

One is that no one man called Homer ever existed. Rather, following the nature of oral poetry—with its basic themes, type scenes, and formulaic phrases combined like Legos or the colorful shapes in that old video game Tetris—, the epic poems were created or composed by countless bards over hundreds of years and just as many performances before live audiences. Some have called this the creation-by-committee approach. Bard A would recite a version of the poem following the usual poetic conventions and restrictions, yet putting it together in his own way to suit the audience listening to him. Bard B would do the same with

another crowd, as would bards C, D, and E. When they all got together, as it were, for their annual bard convention in Chios (or when they met over the years and ensuing centuries), they would discuss their performances over cups of wine—what they sang and how they sang it. Their conversation about certain points of difference may have gone something like this: *What terms do you use to describe ships? How do they work—metrically, rhythmically? You regularly call Diomedes that? Is Achilles' anger the major theme for you? Oh, so that's how you describe Hector's death. Are the gods always makar (blessed) in your recitation? And what about arming or sacrifice—how do you depict them? And ultimately—or so goes this view of Homer and Homeric poems in a nutshell, and all-too simplistically—the committee-originated poems were written down by some scribe once the Greeks had access to a suitable alphabet.*

The other major view is that the poet who gave final shape to these epic poems *was* Homer himself—or, at least, a bard who came to be called Homer. Cambridge classics scholar G.S. Kirk shares this view when he writes that “Homer was an individual singer who came near the end of a long tradition of heroic poetry; he presumably acquired a repertory of songs from other singers and reproduced them in his own manner.”⁴ In this manner, this one poet was responsible for the poems in a way that the scribe of the committee-originated poems was not.⁵ Though not creating them *ex nihilo*, from nothing, he was nevertheless the creative force behind the poems, a creativity that can be detected throughout.

What are Homer's major works? The sixth century AD Byzantine Hesychius of Miletus tells us that Homer's “undisputed poems are the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.” Modern scholars all tend to agree. Therefore, we may safely say that Homer's most important works are the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. The one narrates a portion of the tenth year of the Trojan War. The other tells of the hero Odysseus and his travels home to Ithaca after the same war.

Were any other poems attributed to Homer? If we were to time travel back a few thousand years and ask the ancient Greeks this question, many would tell

us that Homer composed the *Homeric Hymns*, some thirty-plus poems meant to glorify one god or goddess or another—Dionysus, Demeter, Hera, Zeus, Helios the Sun, and Earth, the mother of all, among others. Despite this ancient testimony, however, modern scholars deny Homeric authorship, dating the hymns to the few centuries (seventh century BC and on) after the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were written down. Otherwise, one life of Homer tells us that the poet composed a series of “fun poems” for a group of boys he was teaching in Chios: the *Cercopes*, the *Hep-tapaktike*, the *Epikichlides*, and some truly entertaining ones, the *Battle of Frogs* and the *Battle of Starlings*. The *Margites*, a comic narrative poem, fits in with these fun poems. Still others attribute the whole epic cycle to him, those poems narrating the events surrounding the Trojan War.⁶ Today, as we have noted, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* alone are ascribed to Homer.

When were Homer's epics written down? Most contemporary scholars argue that, utilizing a modified version of the Phoenician alphabet, Homer or a scribe probably wrote the epics down sometime toward the end of the eighth century BC.⁷

What time does Homer represent? Without entering the academic battlefield that is this question, Homer's epics represent the world and values of not only the end of the eighth century BC, when the poems were written down, but also the three or four (or more) centuries before, including the Greek Dark Age and the earlier late-Mycenaean period. The reason why this is the case mirrors the long evolution of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. When the poems were first recited—possibly as long ago as the very late-Mycenaean Age, let's say—they had certain features and reflected certain cultural elements and artifacts that were carried through time to recitations during the Greek Dark Age (c. 1100-776 BC) and onward into the Archaic period (776-479 BC). The result was that the poems came to represent the time when the scribe or final poet wrote them down, as well as the long centuries before. Consequently, relative to the first feelings, thoughts, words, and behavior mentioned in the previous section, the *Odyssey* represents some of our first words and the like from as far back as three thousand years ago.

INTRODUCTION PART 2 ▪ BASIC FACTS ABOUT HOMER

So ends “Introduction Part 2: Basic Facts about Homer.” **See you in the next item,** “Introduction Part 3: The Trojan War and the Two Battling Armies.”

NOTES

¹ See *The Contest of Homer and Hesiod* 1, in *Homeric Hymns, Homeric Apocrypha, Lives of Homer*, ed. and trans. Martin L. West (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 319.

² *Ibid.*, 18, 353.

³ The English words *poet* and *poem* are derived from the Greek verb *poieō*, “to make.” Accordingly, one life of Homer tells us that Homer “made [*poieō*] the *Odyssey* ... having already made the *Iliad*.”

⁴ G.S. Kirk, “The Search for the Real Homer,” in *Homer*, ed. Ian McAuslan and Peter Walcott (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 39.

⁵ The sixth century AD Byzantine Hesychius of Miletus had this to say about the making and writing down of one of Homer’s poems: “He did not write the *Iliad* all at once or in sequence, as it has been put together: he wrote each rhapsody and performed it as he went around from town to town to make a living, and left it there, and subsequently the poem was put together by various people, above all by Pisistratus, the Athenian tyrant [sixth century AD].” See “From Hesychius of Miletus: Index of Famous Authors,” in *Homeric Hymns, Homeric Apocrypha, Lives of Homer*, ed. and trans. Martin L. West (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 429. Hesychius’ report reflects the two major positions scholars have historically taken since the late eighteenth century (and the analysis of Friedrich Wolf) regarding the fundamental unity (the Unitarians) or lack of unity (the Analysts) of Homer’s poems. The poems were either composed “all at once or in sequence,” or they were “put together by various people” over time. The debate shifted emphasis in the early twentieth century with Milman Parry’s observations regarding the oral composition of the poems (though similar ideas may be traced back to the nineteenth century).

⁶ Poems in the Epic Cycle include, among others, the *Cypria*, the *Aethiopis*, the *Little Iliad*, and the *Nostoi* or *Returns*.

⁷ We should nevertheless note that there are some who argue for a later date, suggesting the latter part of the sixth century BC in keeping with the above remark (among other considerations) of Hesychius of Miletus that “the poem was put together by various people, above all by Pisistratus, the Athenian tyrant.”

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