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The World of Homer

CHAPTER CONTENTS

Ancient Greece from Homer to Alexander: The Evidence, First Edition. Joseph Roisman.

This chapter briefly surveys the so-called Homeric Question, including the relations between the Homeric epics and material evidence. Its major focus, however, is on the society and institutions depicted in the epics, which are assumed here to be largely historic. On that assumption, Homer is a valuable source for two main reasons. Firstly, the poet describes institutions and practices that were likely to have existed no later than the early Archaic period. Secondly, his heroes often served as models for generations of ancient Greeks, especially members of the elite. The Homeric value system, then, was relevant to many Greeks far beyond his age. In general, the *Odyssey* is more informative on Homeric society, and the *Iliad* on political institutions and war. The following sections discuss the Homeric family and household, their relationship to the community, political institutions and leadership, values, and social networks.

Scholarly interest in the Homeric epics goes back to ancient times. It has often focused on the so-called Homeric Question, which may be more aptly termed the Homeric Controversy. Readers have failed to agree on the identity of Homer; the time and the manner by which the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were composed or edited; the origins of the epics and their unique language; and the historicity of the poems.

Briefly, already in ancient times readers doubted whether Homer was a historical figure or if he wrote both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Many modern scholars would answer both questions in the positive. They assume that he wrote, or orally composed, first the *Iliad*, and then the *Odyssey*, based on oral traditions. Indeed, the epics reveal their oral origins in their language, which used a special rhythmic form, the hexameter, and many repetitive descriptive words or phrases (epithets) that were well suited to recitations.

Students of history are particularly interested in how historical the events and the society described in the epics are and to what period they should be dated. The *Iliad* in particular describes a long war between a large Greek expedition and a well-fortified Troy. The nineteenth-century excavator Heinrich Schliemann identified the site of Troy in the mound of Hissarlik in Asia Minor near the Dardanelles. Yet the site has revealed the existence of nine cities as well as sub-settlements dating from the Bronze Age to Roman times. Identifying which of these is the Troy of the Trojan War has been a bone of scholarly contention since Schliemann. The Greeks could not have mounted a large expedition following the destructions and consequent decline of many Bronze Age sites around 1200. This means that only Troy VIh, ca. 1300, or Troy VIi (formerly known as VIIa), ca. 1210–1180, would be good candidates. Yet both were relatively small settlements that appear to have suffered no human destruction, although recent excavators of the site interpret some findings as signs of a much larger site and even of human destruction for Troy VIi.

Many scholars agree that the Homeric epics may retain ancient memories, but that they also project on mythical times realities that better fit the poet's own era, perhaps between the second half of the eighth century and the first half of the seventh. This does not mean that the world depicted by the poet is consistent or securely fixed in this period. The epics mix elements from

different times and locales in a way that has caused some readers to regard attempts to historicize the Homeric world as futile.

The following example illustrates the complexity of attempts to compare the Homeric evidence with archaeological findings.

1.1 A Funeral Scene on a Dipylon Vase

Figure 1.1 shows a grave marker in the form of a very large crater or mixing bowl from the Dipylon cemetery in Athens. It was made ca. 750 by a potter known as the "Dipylon Master." It depicts a dead man surrounded by more than forty male and female mourners, who are making the same gesture of (probably) tearing their hair. Chariots are driving by, and a ship is depicted under the handle. The painter is possibly describing the dead man's military exploits. Homer describes a chariot parade around the corpse of Patrocles, Achilles' friend (*Iliad* 23.12–16). It could be that Homer's description is based on a practice current in his own day, or that he inspired the painter. No less likely, however, is that both poet and artist, in their different ways, mix fiction and reality.

Questions

1. What is the Homeric Question?
2. Can the Homeric epics be used as historical documents?

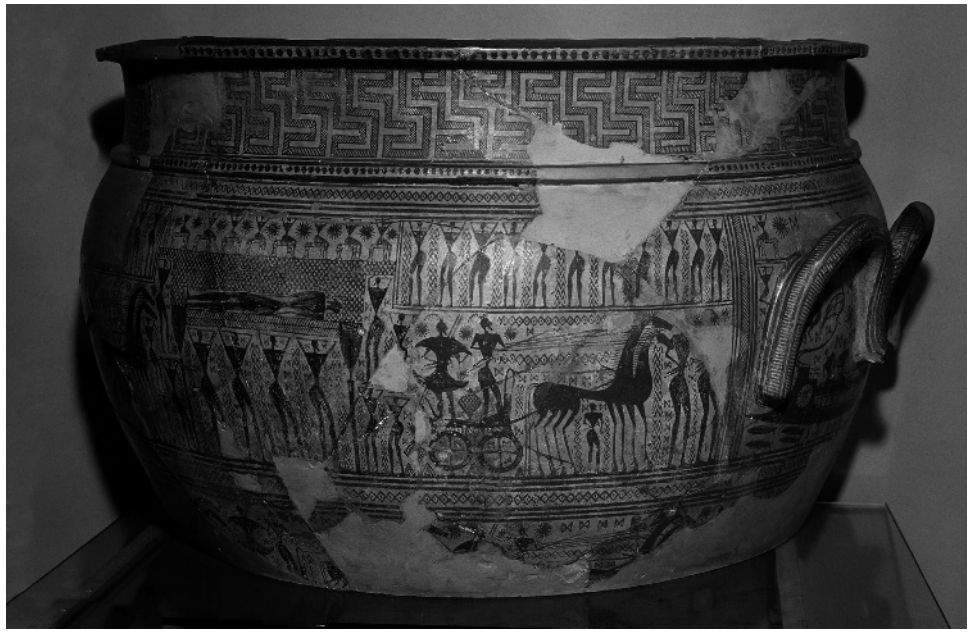

Figure 1.1
A funeral scene on a Dipylon Vase. © Photo 12 – Oronoz.

1.2 The Homeric Household (*Oikos*)

The historian M.I. Finley provides a definition of the Homeric household that conveys its critical importance:

> The authoritarian household, the *oikos*, was the center around which life was organized, from which flowed not only the satisfaction of material needs, including security, but ethical norms and values, duties, obligations and responsibilities, and relations with the gods. The *oikos* was not merely the family, it was all the people of the household together with its lands and goods. (Finley 1978, 57–58)

When wandering Odysseus reached the blessed land of the Phaeacians, he came upon an idealized palatial home and household that belonged to their king, Alcinous. The great house is a center of political, social, and economic activity, bedecked with gold, silver, and bronze.

Homer *Odyssey* 7.95–132

(**95**) Inside, seats were installed along the walls on both sides, from the palace threshold to its center, and on them were drapes of fine embroidery, the work of the women of the house. On these seats sat the leaders of the Phaeacians, eating and drinking, and lacking nothing. (**100**) Golden statues of youths stood on firm pedestals, and in their hands they held blazing torches, brightening the night for the diners throughout the hall. Alcinous has in the house fifty female slaves, some of them grinding yellow grain with hand-mills, (**105**) and others sitting and plying the loom and spinning wool, which flutters like leaves on a lofty poplar. From the tightly woven fabric seep beads of oil. And as the Phaeacians surpass all men in the skill of sailing a ship swiftly on the sea, so their women excel in the work of the loom; (**110**) for to them especially has Athena granted the knowledge and wit to produce fine works of art.

Outside the palace courtyard, close to its doors, stands a large four-acre garden encircled by a hedge. Here grow tall trees in full bloom – (**115**) pear and pomegranate, apple trees with glistening fruit, sweet fig and rich olive trees. Their fruit grows constantly, never dying and never failing winter or summer; and the west wind is constantly breathing on it, bringing some to birth and some to ripeness. (**120**) And one pear follows another pear in ripening, one apple another apple, one bunch of grapes another bunch, and one fig another fig. There, too, Alcinous has a bountiful vineyard planted, part of which is a warm area on level ground where grapes are being dried in the sun, (**125**) while others his people are gathering or treading. In front of this are unripe grapes that are dropping their blossom, and others that are starting to turn dark. And there, too, parallel to the last row of vines, are planted well-ordered gardens of all sorts of herbs that are constantly fresh and lush, and two springs, one diffusing water to the whole garden (**130**) and the other flowing toward the lofty palace, under the entranceway to the courtyard (and from this the town's inhabitants have their water-supply). Such were the splendid gifts of the gods in the palace of Alcinous.

For women and slaves in the Homeric household, see WEB **1.3–4**.

Questions

1. Describe the economic and social activities that take place in Alcinous' household.
2. What does Homer's description of the household suggest about the status of its head?

1.5 The Measure of Happiness

A man's happiness was often measured by the well-being of his family and household. Thus Menelaus, king of Sparta, describes the good fortune of Nestor, the old ruler of Pylos.

Homer *Odyssey* 4.207–211

It is easy to recognize the son of a man whom Cronus' son [Zeus] destined for happiness both when he married and when he produced children! Just as now to Nestor he has granted happy days everlasting, allowing him to grow old in his palace, and have sons who are wise and excellent wielders of the spear.

1.6 A Household in Trouble

While Alcinous' and Nestor's households were prosperous and secure, Odysseus' house in Ithaca was in turmoil. In his absence, local nobles pressured his wife, Penelope, to marry one of them. They also invaded Odysseus' house and squandered its resources.

In the following exchange between Odysseus' young son, Telemachus, and the most evil of the suitors, Antinous, Telemachus articulates the notion that the male head of the *oikos* should have sole control over its assets. The prince tries to assert his authority, but also alludes to the unstable nature of dynastic power. In spite of Telemachus' protests, the suitors continued to behave insolently until Odysseus exacted revenge on them.

Homer *Odyssey* 1.365–398

(**1.365**) There was a noisy response from the suitors throughout the shady hall, and they all prayed to lie in bed alongside Penelope. But quick-witted Telemachus began to address them:

"Suitors of my mother, with your brash arrogance, let us now enjoy our feast, (**370**) and let there be no shouting; for it is good to listen to a singer such as this with a god-like voice. In the morning let us go and sit in the assembly so that I can tell you something straight – to leave these halls! Prepare other banquets for yourselves, (**375**) eating your own provisions and going from one house to another. But if you think it nicer and better to waste the possessions of a single individual without compensation, then eat up! I shall call upon the ever-living gods for Zeus to grant me my revenge, (**380**) with you dying in these halls – and without compensation!"

So spoke Telemachus, and with teeth fastened in their lips they were all amazed at his confident address. Then Antinous, son of Eupeithes, spoke:

"Telemachus, those very gods certainly teach you to play the bold orator (**385**) and speak with confidence. May the son of Cronus not make you the king in sea-washed Ithaca, your birthright though that be!"

And quick-witted Telemachus gave him this reply:

"Antinous, I may annoy you with what I say, (**390**) but if Zeus granted me the throne, I would happily take it. Are you saying that this is the worst thing on earth? To be a king is not a bad thing, for the king's house quickly gains wealth and he himself gains greater honor. However, there are many other kings of the Achaeans, both young and old, (**395**) on sea-washed Ithaca, and one of these may gain this prize, since noble Odysseus is dead.[1] But I shall be master of my own house and of the slaves that noble Odysseus took as plunder."

Note

1. *See **1.8–9** on Homeric kingship. Telemachus presents kingship as accessible to local leaders, also called kings.*

1.7 Households and Community

Telemachus' words show how a man's responsibility and loyalty centered on his family and household. Attitudes toward the community derived largely from these sentiments. When the Trojan hero Hector exhorts the troops to fight the enemy, this is what he proclaims.

Homer *Iliad* 15.494–499

And any of you meeting his death and his fate from a missile or blow, well, let him die. It is no shame for him to die defending his fatherland. Indeed, his wife and children, who live on after him, and his home and property [*kleros*][1] will remain inviolate if the Achaeans should reach their native country with their ships.

Note

1. Kleros, *lit. "lot," refers to an inherited land or property that was distributed among the heirs by lot.*

Questions

1. Contrast the description of Nestor's household (**1.5**) with that of Odysseus (**1.6**). What might account for the difference?
2. What distinctions does Telemachus make between domestic and public authority (**1.6**)?
3. How does Hector link household to country (**1.7**)?

1.8 Homeric Leaders

Any investigation of Homeric leadership and political institutions and their relation to history is bound to run into difficulties. In addition to the epics' mixture of reality and fiction, the poems describe unusual circumstances, such as men at war in the *Iliad* and a leaderless household and community in the *Odyssey*, but seldom examine the operation of political institutions under more ordinary circumstances. Moreover, the epics might have artificially combined political realities from different times and locales. Nevertheless, they show that at the head of the hierarchy of power stood the king (*basileus*). His power was based on his large household, companions (*hetairoi*), and followers (and their followers), whom he had attracted. The king's ability to exert power, however, varied. A king like Agamemnon, the leader of the Greek expedition to Troy, inherited a scepter that came from Zeus, thus indicating divine confirmation of his rule. But the competitive principle of "ever to be the best and excel among others" (*Iliad* 6.208) affected leadership as well. It created an expectation of kings to legitimize their power, preferred status, greater honor, and large economic assets through their personal performance. Thus, when Sarpedon, the king of the Lycians and a Trojan ally, encourages his companion Glaucus to fight the Greeks, he highlights displays of strength and courage as justifications of their leadership position.

Homer *Iliad* 12.310–321

(**12.310**) Glaucus, why is it that we two are held in the greatest honor in Lycia, with thrones, meat, and cups full of wine, while all look upon us as gods? And why do we have a large plot of land to live on by the banks of the Xanthus, well blessed with vineyards and wheat-bearing soil? (**315**) It is for this that we must now take our position in the front lines of the Lycians and face the raging fight, so that any man of the well-armed Lycians may say: "Our kings who rule over us in Lycia are not without fame, these men who eat fat sheep (**320**) and drink our sweet vintage wines. No, indeed! They have outstanding strength, for they fight in the front lines of the Lycians."

1.9 Kings, Council, and Assembly

A leader's authority was largely based on his wealth, his excellence in fighting, and on attracting fellowship through feasting and gift-giving. He thus resembled a type of ruler that anthropologists, and following them historians, have labeled the "big chief" (or "big man"). A king, however, was also exposed to challenges and criticism from others who saw themselves as his equals or even superior in merit and resources. Indeed, the title "king" appears to denote a level of authority rather than an office, because in Homer there are kings who are more "kingly" than others. Telemachus' concession to others of the right to be king (**1.6**) shows the weakness of an inherited claim to the throne. Conversely, an inherited claim combined with a measure of divine favor legitimized Agamemnon's leadership to some degree. It could be that the epics retained memories of leadership by "divine right," as well as a different conception, later or coeval, based on personal performance.

Homer also described councils consisting of other "kings" or "elders" (*gerontês*), who were convened by the leading king to advise him and discuss mutual concerns. Ideally, all participants were supposed to agree on a common course.

The assembly was made up of adult males from both the elite and the masses. Leaders used this arena to garner public support, inform the people, and prevail upon rivals. Some scholars regard these functions as an indication of significant popular power, which Homer, who wrote for an elite audience, tried to minimize or even to denigrate. Those who put more credence in Homer note that, in the poems, members of the elite call the assembly, do most of the talking, and take no popular vote.

The following description shows the working of Homeric kingship, council, and assembly. It also describes an unusual and failed attempt by someone outside the leading elite, the Greek Thersites, to upset the political and social hierarchy of the camp. The poet is clearly hostile toward attempts to challenge those in power.

The episode commences with a dream, sent by Zeus, that urged Agamemnon to do battle with the Trojans.

Homer *Iliad* 2.16–59, 71–154, 182–277

(**2.16**) With these words, and on hearing the order, the dream went on its way. It came quickly to the swift ships of the Achaeans and went to Agamemnon, son of Atreus, whom it found sleeping in his hut wrapped in a sleep divine. (**20**) Standing over him in the form of Neleus' son, Nestor – whom Agamemnon respected most among the elders – the god-sent dream addressed him:

"You are asleep, son of wise Atreus, tamer of horses. A man responsible for giving guidance should not sleep all night, (**25**) not when an army is under his command and so much is his concern. Now quick, listen to me! I come to you as a messenger from Zeus, who, far off though he is, has great

concern and pity for you. He tells you to put the longhaired Achaeans under arms post-haste, for this is when you might take the broad-wayed city of the Trojans – (**30**) the immortals who have their homes on Olympus are no longer in disagreement on this. Hera has changed the minds of all with her entreaties and over the Trojans hang troubles sent by Zeus. But see that you keep this in mind and do not let forgetfulness take hold of you when honey-sweet sleep lets you go."

(**35**) So saying, the dream departed, leaving Agamemnon there to ponder in his thoughts things that were not to come about. He thought he was going to the city of Priam on that day – silly man, ignorant as he was of the designs that Zeus had in mind. (**40**) For the god was going to bring distress and groaning on Trojans and Danaans alike in dire conflict.

Agamemnon awoke from his sleep and the divine voice still rang about him. He sat up straight, put on his soft tunic, a handsome, newly made garment, and threw around him his great cloak. Beneath his shining feet he bound his fine sandals, (**45**) and over his shoulders he slung his silver-studded sword. He took up the ever-imperishable scepter of his forefathers, and with it proceeded to the ships of the bronze-mailed Achaeans.

And so the goddess Dawn arrived on high Olympus, announcing day's arrival to Zeus and the other gods. (**50**) And Agamemnon instructed the clear-voiced heralds to summon the longhaired Achaeans to an assembly, and when they summoned them the Achaeans quickly gathered.

The king first held a council of the greathearted elders beside the ship of Nestor, the king born in Pylos. (**55**) Calling together the elders he devised a cunning strategy.

"Listen, friends," he said. "A heavenly dream came to me in my sleep during the divine night, and in form, size, and stature it most resembled illustrious Nestor. It stood over me and addressed me as follows:

Agamemnon repeats the dream's words.

(**71**) With these words the dream went flying away, and sweet sleep let go of me. But come now, let us try to put the sons of the Achaeans under arms. But I shall test their spirit with an address, as is appropriate, and will order them to take to flight with their many-benched ships. (**75**) But your task is to try to restrain them with your words from your various positions.

With that Agamemnon sat down, and Nestor arose amongst them, the lord of sandy Pylos. He addressed them warm-heartedly. "Friends," he said, "leaders and rulers of the Argives: (**80**) had it been any other of the Achaeans telling of this dream, we might call it a lie and be inclined to disregard it. But the man who saw it is he who professes to be the best of the Achaeans. So come now, let us try to put the sons of the Achaeans under arms."

So saying, he led the exodus from the meeting, (**85**) and the other scepter-bearing kings stood up and followed the lead of the shepherd of the people. The rank and file came swiftly to meet them. It was as when the thronging swarms of bees come forth from a hollowed rock in a continual stream, hovering in groups over the flowers of spring, and congregating in clusters on this side and that. (**90**) Just so did the numerous tribes of men come forward in companies from ships and huts to the assembly ground, before the low-lying shore. And amongst them blazed Rumor, messenger of Zeus, urging them on; and so they came together. (**95**) Confusion now reigned in the assembly. As the men took their seats the earth groaned beneath them, and there was general uproar. Nine heralds cried out in an attempt to restrain them, hoping to make them quell their clamor and listen to the kings who are blessed by Zeus. Only with difficulty could the common soldiers be brought to sit and keep to their

seats, (**100**) and end their shouting. Their ruler Agamemnon then stood up, holding the scepter that was the handiwork of Hephaestus. Hephaestus had given it to lord Zeus, Cronus' son, and then Zeus had in turn given it to the guiding god, the killer of Argos. Lord Hermes had then given it to the charioteer Pelops, (**105**) and Pelops had given it to Atreus, the shepherd of his people. When Atreus died he left it to Thyestes, the owner of large flocks, and Thyestes then left it to the hands of Agamemnon, for him to become ruler of many islands and all of Argos.

Agamemnon now leaned on the scepter as he addressed the Argives.

(**110**) "Friends," he said, "Danaan warriors, squires of Ares! Zeus the son of Cronus had me tightly enmeshed in terrible folly – a merciless god who earlier made me the solemn undertaking that I should return home after sacking strongly fortified Troy. Now it transpires that he has played a foul trick on me, and he bids me go back to Argos in disgrace (**115**) after sustaining so many losses. That is probably going to be the decision of all-powerful Zeus who has brought low the battlements of many cities, and will do so again in future, his power being the greatest. This is a disgraceful thing for future generations to hear, (**120**) that an Achaean force of such quality and size should be fruitlessly engaged in a hopeless fight and struggle against an inferior enemy, with no end yet in sight. For suppose we Achaeans and Trojans were prepared to establish a binding truce and be counted, (**125**) and the Trojans were to agree to a count of all with homes in the city and we Achaeans to be divided up into units of ten. Suppose then that each of our units should choose a Trojan to serve its wine – many such groups of ten would be without a wine-steward! Such is the numerical superiority of the sons of the Achaeans over the Trojans who live in the city. (**130**) However, they have allies present, spearmen from many cities, and these are a great hindrance, and do not allow me to fulfill my wish of sacking the populous city of Ilium. Nine of great Zeus' years have already gone by, (**135**) and our ships' timbers have rotted and their rigging has disintegrated. And I expect our wives and little children are sitting in our halls waiting for us, while for us the task for which we came is nowhere near to being accomplished. So come now, let us all follow my instructions. (**140**) Let us retreat with our ships to our own country, since we shall not now take Troy with its broad streets."

Such were Agamemnon's words, and amongst the assembled multitude he stirred the hearts in the breasts of those who were not party to the plan. The meeting was moved like the towering waves of the deep – of the Icarian Sea – (**145**) which the east and south winds whip up, swooping down from the clouds of Father Zeus. It was as when the west wind comes and sets a deep cornfield in motion with its swift onrush, so that its corn-ears nod in the breeze. Just so was the movement of the whole assembly. They rushed to the ships with a cheer, (**150**) the dust rising high from beneath their feet. They urged each other to seize the ships and drag them to the divine sea, and they proceeded to clear the launching paths. Their shouts went up to heaven as they eagerly set off for home, and they began to remove the props from beneath the vessels.

The enthusiastic response to the idea of sailing home alarms the goddesses Hera and Athena. Athena urges Odysseus to put a stop to it.

(**182**) Such were Athena's words, and Odysseus heard the goddess speaking to him. He began to run, throwing aside his cloak, which the herald Eurybates of Ithaca, his squire, gathered up, (**185**) and he came to Agamemnon, son of Atreus, from whom he received the everlasting scepter of the royal house. With that in hand he proceeded to the ships of the mail-clad Achaeans.

On coming upon a king or a man of distinction, Odysseus would stand beside him and hold him back with gentle words. (**190**) "My friend," he would say, "it would be improper for me to try to intimidate you like a coward; just sit yourself down and tell the others to be seated. For you do not know yet what the son of Atreus has in mind. This is a test he is conducting, (**195**) and soon he will deliver a blow to the sons of the Achaeans. Did we not all hear what he had to say in the council? I am afraid that in his anger he may inflict injury on the sons of the Achaeans. Kings, cherished by Zeus, possess violent tempers; their honor comes from Zeus, and all-wise Zeus loves them."

When, however, he spied a member of the common people and found him shouting, he would strike him with the scepter and threaten him, saying: (**200**) "My friend, sit down quietly and listen to what others have to say, men better than you – you who are a cowardly weakling and never of any use in battle or debate. We Achaeans shall not all play the king here – the rule of many is not a good thing! (**205**) There should be one ruler, one king, the man to whom the son of cunning Cronus has granted that power."

Thus, with authority, he set the army back in order, and the men came swiftly streaming back to the assembly from the ships and the huts, creating a noise like that (**210**) when a wave of the deafening deep thunders on an open shore and a roaring comes from the sea.

The others sat down and remained in order in their seats, with the sole exception of the loudmouthed Thersites, who kept up his noisy tirade. In his mind he had a large store of indecent language with which to squabble with the kings in a reckless and unseemly manner, (**215**) saying whatever he thought would make the Argives laugh. He was the ugliest man who came to Troy. He was bow-legged, and lame in one foot; and his shoulders were rounded and bent down over his chest. Above that he had a pointed head with thin, straggly hair sprouting on it. (**220**) He more than anyone was detested by Achilles and Odysseus, whom he made a habit of reproaching, but on that occasion it was against noble Agamemnon that he directed his reproaches with piercing screams. In fact, the Achaeans were furious with him, and had indignation in their hearts. But he kept up his noisy shouts of abuse against Agamemnon.

(**225**) "Son of Atreus," he said, "what are you grumbling about now and what do you want? Your huts are full of bronze and you have lots of women in them, a choice bevy which we the Achaeans grant to you first whenever we take a town. Can it be that you still need gold – (**230**) gold that one of the horse-taming Trojans will bring from Ilium as ransom for his son, a man that I, or another of the Achaeans, brought in irons? Or is it a young woman you need, one to make love with and keep on the side for yourself? But one who is their leader should not be bringing the sons of the Achaeans into trouble. (**235**) You softies, you miserable cowards, you who are Achaean women rather than Achaean men, let us go back home with our ships. Let us leave this fellow here in Troy to bask in his honors and see whether or not we are a help to him. He has even shown disrespect for Achilles, a much better man than he is – (**240**) he has seized Achilles' prize for himself, and still holds on to it. And it's not that Achilles does not feel resentment in his heart – he's just apathetic! Otherwise, son of Atreus, this would now be the last insult of which you would be guilty!"

Such were Thersites' reproaches against Agamemnon, the shepherd of his people. But noble Odysseus swiftly came up to him and, (**245**) with a withering look, gave him a severe dressing down.

"You loudmouth, Thersites," he said, "you have a shrill tongue but you can stop now and put an end to your one-man rant against your leaders. In my opinion there is no more worthless being than you amongst the men who came to Ilium with the sons of Atreus. (**250**) So none of this chatter and talk about your kings now, and no hurling abuse at them as you seek an opportunity to get home! We do not yet have a clear picture of how these things will turn out, of whether we sons of Achaea will go home with success or failure to our credit. So there you are hurling reproaches at

Agamemnon son of Atreus, the shepherd of his people, (**255**) because the Danaan warriors give him many presents, and your words are completely insulting. But I tell you something, and it is going to happen. If I find you once more ranting like this, (**260**) I shall take hold of you and strip you of your clothing, your cloak and your tunic that cover your private parts, and I shall send you weeping and wailing to the swift ships, driving you from the assembly with a shameful beating. If I do not, then let my head not remain on my shoulders and let me no longer be called the father of Telemachus!"

(**265**) Such were Odysseus' words, and with the scepter he beat the man on his back and shoulders. Thersites cowered, and a large tear fell from his eye, while a bloody weal arose on his back from the golden scepter. He sat down aghast; and in pain and with a look of bewilderment he wiped away his tears. (**270**) Vexed though they were the soldiers laughed heartily at him and, looking at a comrade close by, one of them would say: "Good heavens! Odysseus has countless great deeds to his credit as the author of fine plans and as a leader in battle; but this is now the best thing of all that he has done amongst the Argives, (**275**) namely, putting a stop to this foul cheap-talker's ranting. For sure his headstrong spirit will never again drive him to assail his rulers with insulting language."

See WEB **1.10** for a description of a trial scene in Homer.

Questions

1. What legitimized the power of the Homeric leaders according to sections **1.8** and **1.9**?
2. What does the story of Agamemnon's dream and its consequences tell about the respective powers of the king, council, and assembly?
3. Were Thersites' complaints justified? How were they addressed? Why did his fellow warriors not support him?

1.11 Homeric Values: Honor and Excellence

To a large extent, what separated the good man (*agathos*) from the bad (*kakos*) in the Homeric world were his social status and personal performance. Hence the importance of the concept of *aretê*, which equated virtue with competitive excellence and being better than another man. It also identified defeat with shame. However, this individualistic, competitive ethos did not exclude adherence to cooperative values such as aid, magnanimity, and helping the community. Honor (*timê*) and shame (*aidos*) were often functions of keeping up with society's expectations and showing acute awareness of what others might think or say about one's conduct. A man of honor was anxious to increase or maintain it and defend it from challenges and insults. He also looked to gain fame or glory (*kleos*) that could immortalize him.

All these perceptions are recognizable in the response of the Trojan hero Hector to the pleading of his wife, Andromache. She asks him to have mercy on his family and defend Troy from behind the walls instead of on the battlefield. Hector's words evince sensitivity to public opinion as well as to his own self-image, and distinguish between the good and courageous man and the bad and cowardly one.

Homer *Iliad* 6.441–446

Yes, my wife, all that is on my mind, too, but I would feel deep shame [*aideomai*] in front of the Trojan men and the long-robed Trojan women if, like a coward [*kakos*], I keep out of the battle. Nor does my heart tell me to do that; for I have learned ever to be courageous and fight in the front lines of the Trojans, gaining great renown [*kleos*] for my father and for myself.

1.12 Reciprocity and Guest-Friendship (*Xenia*)

One of the governing principles of social and political interaction in Homer is reciprocity. It existed between a leader and the community when the people gave their chief material gifts, and he reciprocated in the form of common feasts, sacrifices, military and political service, and individual rewards. Reciprocity also guided the conduct of members of the elite who exchanged gifts, services, and favors with one another. The men involved in the exchange were not blind to its material value, but it was primarily designed to establish and regulate social and political relationships. Reciprocal gift-giving and hospitality were also the mark of *xenia* (Homeric Greek: *xeinia*), or guest-friendship, between prominent individuals from different places. *Xenia* was hereditary and, as shown in the following case, could even supersede one's allegiance to fellow combatants. Thus, the Greek Diomedes and the Trojan ally Glaucus decide to avoid fighting each other after discovering that they are guest-friends (*xenoi*) through their grandfathers. They affirm their relationship with a gift exchange, in which Glaucus' greater gift suggests perhaps his inferior status to Diomedes.

The scene commences with Diomedes, son of Tydeus, and Glaucus, son of Hippolochus, meeting in the space between the two armies. Diomedes acknowledges Glaucus' courage and military prowess and asks for his identity. Glaucus assures Diomedes that he is not a god in disguise and identifies himself through his lineage. He focuses especially on the tale of his grandfather, Bellerophon, who was forced to leave his native land near Argos and go to Lycia. There, after performing some heroic feats, the local king "recognized him [Bellerophon] as the noble son of a god, he kept him there, giving him his daughter in marriage and half his royal honors" (6.194–196). Bellerophon fathered three children, including Hippolochus.

Homer *Iliad* 6. 206–236

(**6.206**) Hippolochus fathered me, and of him, I declare, am I born. He sent me to Troy and time and again impressed upon me ever to be the best and excel among others, and not to bring dishonor on the line of my forefathers, (**210**) who were by far the bravest men in Ephyra and broad Lycia. This is the family and bloodline that I declare myself to belong to."

Such were Glaucus' words, and Diomedes of the great war cry was delighted. He thrust his spear into the fertile earth, and addressed the shepherd of the people with gentle words:

(**215**) "So then," he said "you must have long-standing ties of guest-friendship with my father's house. For noble Oeneus [Diomedes' grandfather] entertained the peerless Bellerophon in his home, keeping him there for twenty days, and they exchanged fine presents to mark their friendship. Oeneus gave a belt of gleaming purple, (**220**) and Bellerophon gave a golden cup with two handles, which I left behind in my house when coming here. I do not remember Tydeus since I was small when he left, at the time when the Achaean army perished at Thebes. And so I am now your host in the midst of Argos, (**225**) and you are mine in Lycia whenever I might come to the country of those people. Let us avoid each other's spears, even in the thick of the fray; for there are large numbers of Trojans and of their famous allies to make my victims, any that a god puts before me or I catch by the speed of my feet, (**230**) and for you there are many Achaeans to kill if you can. But let us exchange armor, so that men here may also know that we proudly declare that we are friends [*xeinoi*] through our fathers."

With these words they leapt from their chariots, clasped each other's hands, and swore an oath of friendship. (**235**) But then Zeus the son of Cronus deprived Glaucus of his wits, for he exchanged with Tydeus' son Diomedes armor of gold for armor of bronze, a hundred oxen's worth in return for nine.

For a link to a Roman copy of a bust of Homer, see WEB **1.13**.

Review Questions

1. What constituted a desirable, i.e., "good," Homeric man?
2. Describe the structure and role of the Homeric household on the basis of the documents in **1.2** and **1.5**, and WEB **1.3** and **1.4**.
3. How was power distributed in the Greek camp and in Ithaca? Also consult the trial scene in WEB **1.10**.
4. Identify Homeric ideals and explain how they were anchored in their social and economic environment.

Suggested Readings

Homer, history, and archaeology: Project Troia, http://www.uni-tuebingen.de/troia/eng/index.html; Kolb 2004 (against identifying Troy VI as Homeric Troy); Jablonka and Rose 2004 (*contra* Kolb); see also Strauss 2006. *Homer, artistic evidence, and the Dipylon*

Vase: Hurwit 1985, 93–124; Snodgrass 1997. *Homeric society and its historicity*: Finley 1978 (highly influential and still quite valuable); see also Raaflaub 1998a. *Homeric household and family*: Lacy 1968, 33–50. *Homeric social and political institutions*: Donlan 1997; Raaflaub 1997; Hammer 2002. *Homeric values*: Adkins 1960, 30–60 (*contra*: Cairns 1993, 48–146); Donlan 1980. *Homeric chiefs, friendship, and xenia*: Donlan 1989, 1993; van Wees 1992; Herman 1987; Zanker 1994; Konstan 1997, 24–42. *Greek concepts of reciprocity*: C. Gill et al. 1998.