

# THE WORLD OF HOMER

R.F.WILLETTS

## MYCENEAN SOCIETY

I shall begin with a quotation. It is from George Grote's History of Greece published in 1846. This is what he said about the Trojan War:

"Though literally believed, reverentially cherished, and numbered among the gigantic phenomena of the past, by the Grecian public, it is in the eyes of modern inquiry essentially a legend and nothing more. If we are asked whether it be not a legend embodying portions of historical matter, and raised upon a basis of truth . . . . . if we are asked whether there was not some such historical Trojan war as this, our answer must be, that as the possibility of it cannot be denied, so neither can the reality of it be affirmed. We possess nothing but the ancient epic itself without any independent evidence."

In 1846 there were no accepted objective criteria, in the form of buildings, pottery, jewellery and armour, which could be relied upon to form an independent witness of the material realities of the world which emerges in the Homeric poems. The history of Greece began approximately with the First Olympiad in 776 B.C.. Everything that went before, including the Homeric Age, was legend or myth.

And now, what is sometimes described as the Aegean Civilization has been discovered by archaeology. The objective criteria of Greek pre-history now reach back to the beginning of the Iron Age, throughout the whole of the Bronze Age and into Neolithic times.

The pre-history of mainland Greece begins with a Neolithic Age which ended about 3,000 B.C. This was succeeded by the Early Bronze Age, when a bronze-using people akin to the early inhabitants of Greece and the Cyclades entered Greece from its south-eastern coasts. This people apparently did not speak an Indo-European language. For there is linguistic evidence of a pre-Greek population in place-names, distinguished by the elements -nth - and -ss - in their endings, - for example, Korinthos, Tiryns (gen. Tirynthos), Kephiseos, Pamassos, Knossos. There are also plant-names like terebinthos (tamarisk), olynthos (unripe fig) hyakinthos; and a few other words like merinthos (thread), asaminthos (bathing-tub).

Not long after 2,000 B.C., it seems, the first Greek-speaking people entered Greece. Perhaps they came by way of the Dardanelles - but there is no certainty. These first Greeks of the Middle Bronze Age coalesced with the previous inhabitants, just as the Early Bronze Age people intermingled with the Neolithic people. Hence, by the Middle Bronze Age, soon after 1,600 B.C., the population of Greece was already mixed.

With the last phase of the Late Bronze Age (1,400 B.C., to the latter part of the 12th century B.C.), Mycenae and the mainland succeeded to the leadership of the Aegean world after the destruction of the Palace of Minos at Knossos about 1,400 B.C. This destruction was thorough - not only at Knossos, but elsewhere in Crete.

The martial character of the Mycenaean is exemplified in the fortification of their urban centres, in marked contrast with the unfortified cities of Crete. There are other differences, recognised as elements of northern origin perhaps, in architecture, religion and in dress.

Although the various ethnic groupings of which Mycenaean society was composed have still to be strictly defined, the 'Heroic Age' of mainland Greece, symbolised by the Achaeans of the Homeric poems, shares certain general characteristics with other 'heroic ages' elsewhere. These characteristics were analysed by H.M. Chadwick in his Heroic Age of 1912 and elsewhere. Barbarian newcomers, with a militarised tribal organisation, assimilate the superior culture and techniques of the social system which they disrupt. In the process, their tribal system undergoes further drastic changes. The appropriation of new resources of wealth, in land and in movable goods, brings about marked social inequalities. In the case of the Achaeans, as the citadel dominates the hamlets, so the kings and chieftains dominate the battlefield with their expensive war-gear, their chariots and their weapons of bronze.

This general conception of the nature of Homeric or Mycenaean society roughly held the field until recent years. Despite their differences of approach, it is a concept shared, modified and developed by scholars such as Glotz in "Le travail dans la Grèce ancienne" (1920); by M.P. Nilsson in Homer and Mycenae (1933)<sup>1</sup> by George Thomson in his Prehistoric Aegean (1949) and N.G.L. Hammond in his History of Greece (1959).

The comparative study of heroic ages shed light upon the genesis of oral epic poetry over a long period of time in a pre-literate society. It helped to explain why archaeological elements from the 15th century to the 7th century B.C. can be found in the text of Homer, while at the same time re-emphasizing that Homer presents us largely with a picture of a pre-Dorian Bronze Age world, though obviously some parts of the Iliad and Odyssey are unhistorical in so far as they introduce superhuman exploits, divine intervention, folk-tales and imaginary wanderings. This is the stuff of imaginative poetry. But the general situation and the society of the poems were historical, that is, of the Mycenaean period, the Late Bronze Age. Of course, the epics are primarily concerned with the doings of an individualistic upper class. But the society in which they lived was bound by traditions to which they sometimes pay little heed. The people, if not the princes, were loyal members of their tribal units, based on kinship.

The general view of Late Bronze Age or Mycenaean society which was gaining ground before the Ventris-Chadwick decipherment of the Linear B script as 'an early form of Greek' was announced ten years ago does allow us, in spite of difficulties, to use Homer's epic as a bridge from the Middle Bronze Age of Greece, and from the Minoan Age of Crete, to the historical world of the Greek city-states. The proposed decipherment was accepted by a majority of scholars, seriously attacked by others, including Professor Beattie. Others, including myself, would argue further that, even if the criticisms based on linguistic grounds had been systematically refuted, which they have not, the poverty of the documents and the difficulty of their interpretation could not allow them to be used as historical evidence.

THE LINEAR B SCRIPT

The Linear B. Script, occurring on the mainland at Mycenae and Pylos round about 1,200 B.C. was the palace style of recording at Knossos some 200 years earlier. The Ventris - Chadwick decipherment offered to those who accepted their transliterations the possibility of reconstructing the social system of Mycenaean Greece and of such parts of Crete as might have had Mycenaean settlers between about 1,400 and 1,200 B.C. This reconstruction has gone ahead on a quite astonishing scale. Feudal Mycenae has become, as it were, a Bronze Age prototype of Western European feudalism. The Linear B tablets are held to reveal a minute organisation of social life in a Mycenaean state paralleled by the records of other palace civilisations in the second millennium - Bronze Age Near East - Boghaz Keui, Ugarit and the Hurrian palaces of Nuzi and Alalakh.

Even so the translations proposed for many of the tablets, even of the 300 more 'interesting ones' from Pylos, Knossos and Mycenae described by Ventris-Chadwick in the fundamental Documents in Mycenaean Greek of 1956, are admittedly provisional and often very dubious. A friendly critic, Mr. G.S.Kirk, has recently observed that, on the basis of the proposed decipherment, some of the 500 selected tablets of Documents give scant sign of containing Greek. Presumably most of the total of 3,500 tablets are even less intelligible as Greek than the selected 300. Moreover, as Ventris - Chadwick tell us, at least 65% of the recorded Mycenaean words are proper names. It follows that some 3,500 tablets produce only 990 separate words (excluding apparent proper names). Of these, 260 are mere spelling or inflexional variants. Of the remaining 630 distinct words only some 252, according to the decipherers, can be "directly equated with Homeric or Classical forms, and have corresponding meanings which fit the context of the tablets with virtual certainty".

But only about two thirds of this total of 252 fulfil the requirements of morphology and context defined by the decipherers. Nor is the total made up of 252 quite different words, but in some cases of different forms, adjectival or nominal, from the same root. Therefore, the 252 'certain' Greek words of the decipherment ought to be reduced by at least 35. Of the remainder only two thirds really fill both requirements. This gives a total of 150 lexical units convincing as Greek on the basis of the proposed decipherment.

One of the more explicit tablets from Pylos (Pylos Jn 829) was translated: "Thus the mayors and (their wives), and the vice-mayors and key-bearers and supervisors of figs and hoeing, will contribute bronze for ships and the points for arrows and spears". There follow the names of places with the quantity of bronze to be contributed by mayor and vice-mayor of each place. Not surprisingly, the same friendly critic had to describe the supervisors of figs and hoeing as "those splendid but improbable figures".

As compared with the text of Homer, specialisation of labour appears to have been acute. Woodcutters, bronze-smiths and shipbuilders are plausible Bronze Age specialists, but unguent-boilers and chair-makers and now, apparently, cyanus-makers at Mycenae are perhaps hearer the Ministry of Labour categorisation of the Second World War. And perhaps surpassing even that massive achievement of modern bureaucracy are the .37 female bath-p\*urers of Pylos and the six sons of the headband makers. Or is all this just in keeping with the ability of the list-makers of Pylos to know the location of every pig and sheep and chariot-wheel?

The most massive sortie into the realm of comparative sociology on the basis of these linguistic premises was made by Professor L.R. Palmer in his Achaeans and Indo-Europeans of 1954 and elsewhere, in which he examined Hittite, Latin and Indo-Iranian vocabulary to penetrate (to use his own words) "the mysteries of ancient Indo-European institutions". As a result, Professor Palmer has concluded that the society of the Heroic Age of Greece was feudal in form, i.e., that land was held of an overlord in return for an obligation to render military service.

#### THE GREEK LANGUAGE

The Greeks of historical times learnt many inventions from their eastern neighbours, the greatest being the art of alphabetic writing. The Minoans before them were similarly indebted - and investigation of the connexions between the various Minoan writing systems and Anatolian and Oriental forms of writing is now being pursued by a number of scholars.

So far as alphabetic writing is concerned, it is of course, known beyond doubt that the North Semitic script was the model for the Greek and there are examples of the model and the copy in their early stages. It is generally agreed that there is no surviving example of the Greek alphabet which can be dated earlier than the 8th century B.C. The Cretan alphabet is the closest of all to the Semitic Phoenician and it has long been agreed that Crete was, if not the birthplace, at least one of the earliest receivers of the Greek alphabet.

Though the study of the transmission of the Greek alphabet takes us back only to the 8th century B.C., we gain illuminating insights into Greek pre-history from the study of the Greek dialects. This specialised study produced a theory which, with slight variations, was accepted over the past half century until recently. The ancients, from the time of Hesiod, distinguished three groups of Greek-speaking peoples - Dorians,, Aeolians and Ionians. Modern scholars accepted this as a rough basis, since the Doric and Ionic dialects were at least plainly recognisable. Doric was divided into (a) North-west Greek and (b) the Doric proper of the Peloponnese and the southern Aegean islands, including Crete. Ionic was divided into Attic and Ionic. Lesbian, Thessalian and Boeotian were grouped together as Aeolic. A fourth group, Arcado-Cyprian, had to be designated to explain the common elements of the dialects of Arcadia and Cyprus. This was closely linked with Aeolic. On this basis, a scheme of genetic relationships between the dialects was proposed, though it was not entirely satisfactory.

This general theory was linked with the premises of three or more waves of Greek infiltration of the mainland. Of these, Doric was the most recent and could obviously be linked with the Dorian invasion or "return of the Herakleidai". It was more difficult to postulate pre-Dorian migrations, but most scholars favoured the idea of two separate infiltrations - Ionian and Achaeae or Aeolian - these names being used indiscriminately on the view that Arcado-Cyprian was nothing more than the southern branch of Aeolic.

It was clear that the dialects of Arcadia and Cyprus must go back to a widespread "Achaean" dialect, which elsewhere was overlaid or replaced by the Dorian immigration. The colonisation of Cyprus, from the

archaeological evidence, must have begun in the Mycenaean period and so it could be inferred that this "Achaean" substratum was the common dialect of southern Greece at that time. But legend told of Ionians in the northern parts of the Peloponnese and it was thought that there must have been an Ionian invasion followed by an Achaean or an Achaean followed by an Ionian. However, the evidence for the replacement of Ionians by Achaeans is scanty and insecure. When Herodotus (7.94) says that at one time the Ionians occupied the part of the Peloponnese subsequently called Achaea, this does not prove that they were expelled by Achaeans. It could mean no more than that Attica and Achaia were once part of a linguistic unity. And when Pausanias (2.37.3) says that, before the return of the Herakleidai, the Argives spoke the same dialect as the Athenians, this does not prove that Argos spoke Ionic.

In the archaeological record there is a clear break between Early and Middle Helladic (c. 1900 B.C.) and this break is now generally equated with the arrival of the first infiltration of Greek-speaking immigrants. There is another but much less decisive break between Middle and Late Helladic - the Mycenaean period, in fact - round about 1,600 B.C. All this has been used in support of a theory of two pre-Dorian immigrations.

From the purely linguistic point of view there are some major difficulties in determining the place of Ionic. A separation into Attic and Ionic can be readily referred back to migrations in pre-history. But then arises the question: What were its earlier affinities? In trying to meet this problem, Professor George Thomson had argued, in 1949, that there had never been any Ionians in the Peloponnese. That was simply the name given in later times by the Ionians of Ionia to their Achaean ancestors; and further, that Ionic was, from the beginning, a mixed dialect, formed by the fusion of Achaean (already subjected to proto-Ionic influence), with a variety of local vernaculars, including Attic, *Dialectal Studies* by Porzig and Risch in 1954 and 1955, also led to the conclusion that the Ionic invasion of Greece was a fiction. For it now appears that various innovations in which Ionic agrees with Doric were introduced at the time of the Dorian migrations; and therefore that, at the close of the second millennium, a dialect of the Arcadian type was for a time under the influence of Doric. This influence soon ceased, and the dialect then proceeded on its independent course of development, only subsequently dividing into the two branches of Attic and Ionic.

The position of Aeolic is still not clearly determined and it could still be the case that the name represents a separate infiltration of Greek speakers. However that may be, it is possible that, round about 1,200 B.C., the dialectal distribution was something like this. The Dorians were, in the extreme north-west and perhaps in contact with (non-Greek) Illyrians; the Mycenaeans were occupying all southern Greece, perhaps extending as far north as Bessotia; the Aeolians were forming a sort of buffer between them, cutting off the Dorians from the Aegean.

#### HOMER

The Homeric Question is not a modern invention. In the great days of Hellenistic scholarship there was dispute whether the epics had been composed by the same man. Nowadays, simple unitarianism is on the retreat and what it is fashionable to call an analyst view based on the comparative study of epic style in other languages than Greek - including recent

epic composition - is becoming more generally accepted. One of the scholars who gave impetus to this view was the late Milman Parry.

The importance of Parry's work - he died a premature death in 1935 - was for some time overlooked except by a few scholars. His contributions to Homeric scholarship are two-fold. He appreciated the relevance of the modern oral poetry of Yugoslavia and actually recorded a good deal of it. And he demonstrated that the Homeric poems had been oral compositions, dependent upon a gradually evolved traditional style of fixed formulaic phrases (of the type of POLYTLAS DIOS ODYSSEUS - 'long-suffering god-like Odysseus', or GERENIOS HIPPOTA NESTOR - 'the Gerenion charioteer Nestor', or BOEN AGATHOS MENELAOS - 'Menelaos of the loud war-cry' applied to Menelaos even when he is getting out of bed) - these phrases covering most common ideas and situations. Parry's work is now generally recognised, though few of the contemporary scholars who rightly praise his work seem to be aware of its relationship to the work of Radlov at the end of last century or to that of H.M. Chadwick in the earlier part of this century.

"For Homer," wrote Parry, "as for all minstrels, to versify was to remember - to remember words, expressions, phrases from the recitals of minstrels who had bequeathed to him the traditional style of heroic verse." In other words, the Homeric poems were transmitted over many centuries by means of oral tradition through the performances of < professional minstrels, performances which were at once improvisations and re-creations, maintaining, the stock phrases and epic formulae, adding new material as they went on being recited in the Iron Age, though in the main evoking a pre-Dorian world of the Bronze Age, until they were finally committed to writing, according to tradition, in Athens at the end of the 6th century B.C.

There are elements in the poems - descriptions of material object and social usages - which have been dated to definite periods, early or late, from the 15th century to the 7th. The site of Troy has been identified with Hissarlik, an ancient settlement near the coast of the Aegean in the north-west corner of Asia Minor, whose remains show the marks of repeated destruction and rebuilding.

The Troy sacked by the Achaeans belonged to the same culture as their own Mycenae-

The language of the poems differs from all the known dialects of Greek, spoken and literary. It appears as a mixed dialect, mainly Aeolic and Ionic, with a good deal of Arcado-Cyprian and a touch of Attic. Such a literary dialect is, for us, a strange conception and we have to go back to Chaucer and Beowulf to find even the approximation to an analogy in our own literary tradition.

Much study has been devoted to Homeric linguistics and, so far as it goes, it seems to be in harmony in its conclusions with Homeric archaeology. The nucleus of the epic tradition was a heritage from the Mycenaean age Transplanted to Asia, after the Dorian invasion forced migration on other Greek speakers from the mainland, it was elaborated, perhaps in the neighbourhood of Smyrna and Chios, by poets whose ancestors had come partly from Thessaly and Boeotia, partly from the Peloponnese. Their spoken language was thrown into confusion by the migrations but was extremely rich in parallel forms and they seized on this feature to their advantage in perfecting an eclectic medium distinguished by its fluency of metre.

That fluency is indeed remarkable. Verbally it arises from the hexameter's dominating dactylic rhythm, which in turn owes so much to the large number of polysyllables in Homeric Greek. Homeric Greek preserves very many uncontracted contiguous vowels, so that its words are more easily suited to dactylic rhythm than the contracted forms of Attic Greek. These contracted forms are more suited to trochaics or iambics. As Aristotle said: "The iambic is the most colloquial of metres, as is shown by the way in which we so often fall into iambics in conversation." Large scale contraction affected the rhythm of the language. Homeric KAI METEEIPEN becomes Attic KAI METEIPEN or DE TIS EEIPE GYNAIKON becomes DE TIS EIPE GYNAIKON (Od.2.108). Uncontracted forms were an essential need for the hexameter. So were such alternatives of the epic language as EMATA for HEMERAS, MECHOS for MECHANE, KRADIE for KARDIE. So was the artificial lengthening of short vowels which Aristotle commented upon.

The single verse constantly repeated is saved from monotony by the skilful use of caesura. Of course, this single verse is a metrical unity. But Greek poetry, throughout its history until modern times, has not become so divorced from music as our own. It is quite clear that the hexameter was originally not spoken but sung. Homer describes the bards of his poems, a Demodocus or Phemias singing as, to the lyre. He himself invokes the muse to sing, ABIDE in the Iliad. When he bids, the Muse ENNEPE (describe), in the *Odyssey*, this does not exclude description in song. The Muses gave Hesiod a staff for a lyre, and the staff seems to have been handed on to the rhapsodes of later times. But singing was originally the normal practice. Therefore, the arguments of those who trace the origin of the hexameter to an early form of choral lyric cannot simply be dismissed by saying that this early lyric does not exist. To emphasise unduly the metrical unity of the hexameter is to overlook the point that it is commonly composed of two formulaic phrases divided at the feminine caesura.

The large-scale employment of these stock phrases means that epic diction involves an immense amount of repetition. The washing of hands, the cooking of meat, the reception of guests are described in set terms and epithets are similarly recurrent. Of course, this recurrent material is skilfully used, but it is a misemployment of admiration to try to argue that this material is always subtly varied. Must we agree that Homer leaves people or characters their epithets in cases where they do not apply - as in the case of the always barking dogs who do not bark - because their use will actually sharpen his hearers' perception of the characters he is building up? There is so much of Homer that the opposite tendency must have been at work. The listener must be allowed to relax with something familiar, ornamental to the point of atrophy.

I have introduced the listener and I want to keep him in the forefront of all else that I have to say. Originally a kind of court poetry, the poems of Homer became popular among a mass audience of farmers, craftsmen, artisans, merchants, sailors, philosophers, their wives and children. They became popular not by being vulgarised, but by a process of refinement and perfection executed by guilds of professional craftsmen who retained and developed their highly conventional and formal techniques with a complex and subtle skill. The direct, simple, brutal and intense experiences of a vanished Heroic Age glow with vitality in a language that was never spoken as ordinary speech. That is why, despite all the historical and archaeological detail that can be verified and catalogued, it remains true to describe "the world of Homer", with all its unsurpassed concreteness and colour, as yet

situated somewhere outside time and space. This visionary world was brought into contact with the real world of a new audience markedly in the development of the similes-

#### HOMER'S SIMILES

In some ways the similes are like the stock epithets. They are sometimes repeated, sometimes fit a context better than another. It is, of course, a commonplace of Homeric criticism that in Homer we find the simile fully developed and that this is almost unique in early narrative poetry. With an audience intent on getting the story clear, lengthy similes can be a distraction. But the new audience for Homer must have delighted in these distractions, especially in the Iliad, which has more of them. The similes recalled the listener from the distant past to his own time and familiar world. The present or the gnomic aorist tenses prevail in the similes and a formal introduction and reference back are common. As, for example, in the famous simile from Book VIII (302) of the Iliad when the arrow misses Hector and lands in the breast of Gorgythion. Homer then tells us his pedigree, briefly summing up his existence in two lines:

"Gorgythion, whose mother, lovely Kastianeira, with the body of a goddess, had come from Risyne to marry the king".

Then abruptly we see him dead, as in a picture or a symbolic close-up sequence in a film:

"Just like a poppy with its head falling on one side, a poppy in a garden, weighed down by its seed and the showers of spring, just so his head sank to one side, weighed down by the helmet."

The image is detached from the immediate context, it takes us to another, more benign world and illuminates the context by its sharp and beautiful contrast. It is directed at us, the listeners, the readers. We are intended to retain it in the mind's eye. And we do. The language is carefully chosen to give undertones to the imagery. "Mekon" especially signified the opium poppy, the sleep-bringer. It is a garden-poppy, and the battlefield becomes a garden, the sudden brutal death transmuted to a gentle everyday experience, familiar and nostalgic. The transition heightens and softens the death. It now becomes something more than an item in a catalogue of slaughter, as we look again at the battlefield through the pointed recall of the simile's conclusion - "just so his head sank to one side". The word used here for "sank" is an epic verb, only in the Iliad; has been used already in Book 11, again in a simile, of the ears of corn bent low in the field before the onslaught of a boisterous west wind; and a second time, used metaphorically, when Agamemnon wishes for ten counsellors like Nestor, which would mean that Priam's town would soon be tottering. War is like the forces of nature, bending men and cities to their destruction.

The simile of the poppy, simple and short as it is, illustrates the aesthetic contradictions which the Iliad orchestrates on a grand scale. The appeal, by contrast, to the poignantly familiar world of nature is constant - constant and necessary. This, I feel, is often

overlooked by those who complain that Homer's similes are sometimes elaborated beyond the point of allusion for their own sake. These elaborations should be seen within the whole design, as evocations of a real world which is progressively built up in order to make the lost world of the narrative mellow with comprehension. The same device is consciously pursued in the work of the greatest of our modern war-poets, Wilfred Owen. In the midst of battle, making all experience short-lived, a man remembers the permanency of sun, wind, birds, fields;

"Hour after hour they ponder the warm field -  
And the far valley behind, where the buttercup  
Had blessed with gold their slow boots coming up,  
Where even the little brambles would not yield,  
But clutched and clung to them like sorrowing hands;  
They breathe like trees unstirred.

Till like a cold gust thrills the little word  
At which each body and its soul begird  
And tighten them for battle . . . . ."

The similes evoke the ordinary world of common men, the audience of the rhapsodes;

"In the meantime, the Achaeans stood fast before the oncoming Trojans, but they could not fling them back from the ships, despite their greater numbers. Nor could the Trojans ever break the Danaan ranks and make their way among the huts and ships. Rather, just as a carpenter's line makes a ship's timber quite straight when handled by a skilful tradesman who has been schooled by Athene to master his craft, just so their fighting was equal, their battle drawn tight." (15.412)

Of course, we can argue, as Leaf did, that the simile is not exact, since the point to be illustrated is the equality of two strains, while the simile only gives the intensity of one, adding that it is not unnatural that the poet should think of the equality and severity of a fight as almost synonymous. Quite so. For in Book 12 (434) we have a similar comparison used more exactly:

"Even so, the Trojans could not get the Achaeans on the run. No, the Achaeans held on, just as an honest working woman holds the scales, with a weight poised in the balance on one side against wool in the other, to ensure a meagre recompense for the sake of her children. Just so, their fighting was equal, their battle drawn tight."

This is a contrast indeed from the palace in Phaiacia where the women of the household sit at the loom or sit and twist the yarn, their hands fluttering like leaves on a tall poplar. We are now in the workaday artisan world of the city-state. Here is an image from the post-heroic world, pointed by the use of the word ALETHES to mean "honest", not its early sense. In the same way, in the carpenter simile, SOPHIE is a late word, to denote cleverness or skill in handicrafts, and neither SOPHIE nor its cognates appear elsewhere in Homer. The language, like the scene, has a post-heroic ring about it.

Hence, although we can compare these and other like similes for their verisimilitude, it is what they have in common that is more revealing if we are to appreciate their technical virtuosity, that is, the appeal to an audience whose familiar world is consciously brought to bear upon that other lost, yet half-remembered world of the violent past, in order to build an imaginative bridge between the two.

Like the scenes on the shield of Achilles, the stuff of the similes is compounded from the lives of ordinary men as a complete change, from the life of the heroic narrative. The images of the poppy in the garden, the carpenter, the woman weighing wool, are paralleled by the scene where the woman keeps flies from her child, reapers in the barley, the ass breaking into a field and so on.

It is the merit of Professor Shipp's Studies in the Language of Homer, published ten years ago, to have consolidated this view of the function of the similes from his study of the technical data and, incidentally, to have shown the value of similar studies for deepening our appreciation of Homer's use of language.

He concluded that the similes of the Iliad are characterised by linguistic lateness. Late forms occur much more frequently in them than in the narrative, and archaisms are hardly found. More than half the similes of any length include late forms, and no significant difference is observable between the similes of different parts of the poem.

He also asked himself the question: to what extent does the linguistic evidence tally with the results of other methods of approach? Homer has three types of simile:

- (1) The simple comparison of one thing with another, as in Bk. 24.572 - "The son of Peleus leapt out like a lion."
- (2) Those in which the points of comparison are expressly developed on both sides, as in the poppy simile.
- (3) The typically Homeric simile, in which the picture used as illustration is developed for its own sake, details being added which no longer apply in the comparison, as in 4.482-9.

"He fell down to the dust, felled like a slender poplar with a bushy top that has shot up in the big meadows by a stream and is cut down by a wainwright with his gleaming axe, so as to make felloes from it for the wheels of a beautiful chariot, though for the time being he leaves it to lie and season on the bank. Thus King Aias felled Simoeisios Anthemion's son."

The simplest type of comparison is itself not universal in early poetry. But it can exist alone, without any development to the second type. Of the four in Beowulf only the last is of type (2). In the Chanson de Roland there is only one simile of type (2); the simple type being commoner. The third type is apparently peculiar, in European literatures at least, to Homer and his direct or indirect imitators (Virgil, Dante). Hence the possibility that the longer, more elaborate simile has evolved from the simple type. While the specifically

Homeric type will have evolved from the second type, which in Homer it has largely replaced.

Homeric similes have many features in common with others, and they can be repeated, sometimes, as I have said, not fitting too well in the context. Many long similes read like extensions of short ones. Shipp concluded that literary considerations agreed with the result of his linguistic analysis. The Homeric simile must have a long history behind it and it is a very natural view that its full development is later than that of the art of the narrative which it adorns. There is nothing in the matter of the similes to make this conclusion unlikely.

I think that the possibility of a long history behind the simile can be illustrated - and we expect religious contexts to be more conservative - from that common category of image which describes the speed of descent of deities from Ida or Olympos. In some cases the comparison with the flight of birds is pointedly emphasised:

"Thus he spoke and Apollo did not turn a deaf ear to his father, but went down from the mountains of Ida like a swift dove-killing hawk, the swiftest creature on wings."

Such passages can be assessed as similes referring only to speed and not to an assumption of the form of birds. But elsewhere there is no doubt that real bird epiphanies are described. The species of bird vary, but any of them may take the form of a divinity. A passage from the 5th Book of the Iliad is particularly convincing. For Athene and Hera set out for the battle to help the Greeks "with steps like shy doves." If it is intended to remind us of the strides of heroic warriors, this simile is hardly suitable. Nor can it be, I think, intended as mockery, as some suppose. I agree with Nilsson that the goddesses here appear in the shape of birds. There are several other examples from the Iliad and the Odyssey, the last one in the Odyssey during the battle with the suitors, when Athene darted up and perched on the smoky roof-beam of the hall, in the actual form of a swallow.

It is significant that, in Homer, the gods sometimes do change into birds, but never into animals. Since the testimony of the Minoan monuments leaves no doubt that the bird is a form of the divine epiphany, it seems that this recurrent type of metamorphosis has affected this category of simile. Homer's delight in pictures is always apparent. In the more developed similes, criticism, of their over-elaboration should be tempered by the consideration that fresco-painting and iconography have been as abiding as the poetic tradition in Greek history. We can surely allow Homer the indulgence of stopping from time to time to paint a detailed picture in words while the narrative is abandoned.

#### THE ENJOYMENT OF HOMER

As I have pointed out elsewhere ('Early Crete and Early Greek' in *Marxism Today* Dec. 1962, p.376), the archaeological discoveries of the past half century and more, accompanied by advances in the field of linguistics, allow the modern reader of Homer to combine the enjoyment of literary masterpieces with something of the same respect for authority that exalted the reputation of the poet in antiquity. This authority, however, is of a different order, being, though not clearly defined and often indeed obscure, the authority of an actual historical background,

with roots in the late Bronze Age and sometimes harking back to the collapsed Minoan civilisation once centred in Crete. Further archaeological and linguistic study can help to establish further links between the Middle Bronze Age and the early phases of the world evoked by Homer. The limits of our historical knowledge of the origins of Hellenic civilisation could be pushed back a thousand years, and the record of a vital stage of social development thereby become more securely based.

"But", as Karl Marx said, "the difficulty is not in grasping that Greek art and epos are bound up with certain forms of social development. It rather lies in understanding why they still constitute with us a source of aesthetic enjoyment and in certain respects prevail as the standard and model beyond attainment". Marx's description of epic as the art form of an undeveloped society (in A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy) has been commented upon recently by Ernst Fischer (The Necessity of Art p.12) in these terms:

"What matters is that Marx saw the time-conditioned art of an undeveloped social stage as a moment of humanity, and recognised that in this lay its power to act beyond the historical moment, to exercise an eternal fascination.

"We may put it like this: all art is conditioned by time, and represents humanity in so far as it corresponds to the ideas and aspirations, the needs and hopes of a particular historical situation. But, at the same time, art goes beyond this limitation and, within the historical moment, also creates a moment of humanity, promising constant development. We should never underestimate the degree of continuity throughout the class struggle, despite periods of violent change and social upheaval. Like the world itself, the history of mankind is not only a contradictory discontinuum but also a continuum. Ancient, apparently long-forgotten things are preserved within us, continue to work upon us - often without our realising it - and then, suddenly, they come to the surface and speak to us like the shadows in Hades whom Odysseus fed with his blood. In different periods., depending on the social position and the needs of rising or declining classes, different things which have been latent or lost are brought again into the light of day, awakened to new life."

The different things which the Homeric poems themselves brought into the light of the day throughout the centuries of their composition were awakened to new life because they were vital, dynamic realities whose freshness the epic reciters renewed against the realities of the new world. Homer describes a world of violent motion in which the old Bronze Age society is being shattered, to prepare the way for the class society of the city-state. His epics are the heralds of change, at once charged with the memories of the vanishing past and also lighting the threshold of the epoch of European class society, which is now challenged by the institutions and ideology of Socialism.

The dynamism of the content, exploring the past, bringing that past into touch with a new present, establishing the heroic nature of man in all the tragedy of his brief mortality as the major theme of later European literature, preserves the power of Homer through the medium of the Greek language. No other European language has persisted with so relatively little change for so long - nearly three thousand years. Latin and Italian are two languages. Ancient and Modern Greek are a single language. Homer still belongs to the literary traditions of the Greek people in a way that Beowulf and Piers Plowman cannot belong to our own literary traditions. Our own language and, accordingly, our

literary traditions have changed very quickly in comparison. Hence the question which Marx thought it worth while to discuss is of particular importance to us just now. We are in the midst of a revival of folk-song, which is already threatened by "consumers' culture", the culture which is not spontaneously generated but which, like other commodities, depends upon manufacturers and salesmen and therefore ceases to be genuinely popular and becomes shallow, debased, temporary.

Great art in the past has often been popular. Some of it still is - including Homer in translation. We can learn from the way in which the Homeric poems were composed and developed in antiquity, from their historical setting at the dawn of class society, from the power which raises their themes out of a time-bound context - above all about the relationship between great art and a popular audience. Homer promises constant development.

---

This is the 32nd Quarterly number of OUR HISTORY, published by the History Group of the Communist Party. It is hoped to cover some of the following subjects in further numbers during 1964:-

SHAKESPEARE'S IDEA OF HISTORY

SLAVE SOCIETY

HISTORY OF MARX HOUSE

CARL SCHORLEMMER

ERASMUS DARWIN

Copies are obtainable from Central Books, 37 Grays Inn Road, London. W.C.1. 1/6d post free for single numbers: 6/4d post free for an annual subscription.

---