

**THE UNITY OF HOMER.
SATHER CLASSICAL
LECTURES, VOL. I**

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The unity of Homer. Sather classical lectures, Vol. I by John A. Scott

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JOHN A. SCOTT

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LECTURES, VOL. I**

THE UNITY OF HOMER

BY

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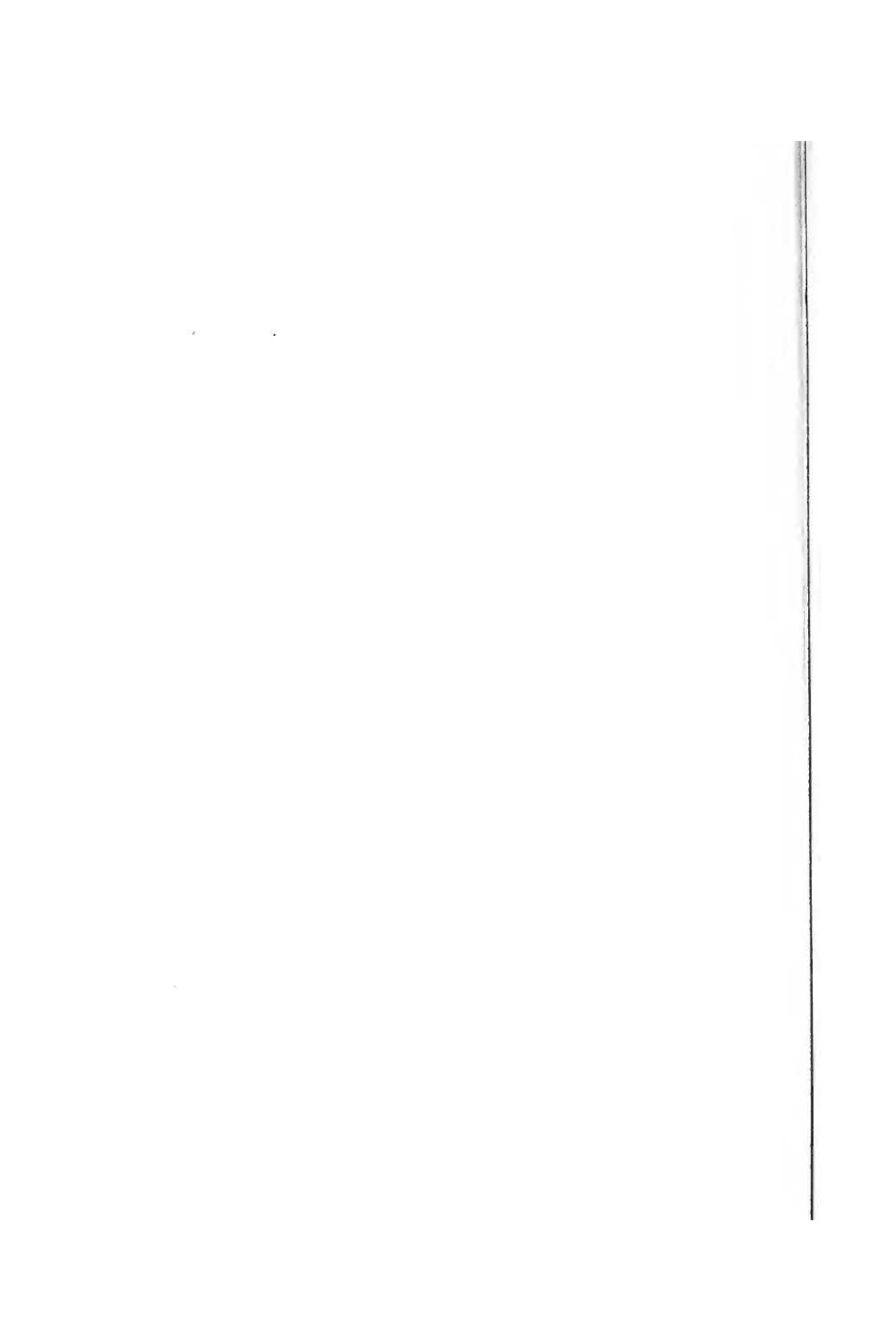
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CHAPTER I

HOMER AMONG THE ANCIENT GREEKS

The great fact of ancient Greece is the poetry of Homer, which was the center of education, the source of mythology, the model of literature, the inspiration of artists; known and quoted by all. Homer was a poet of such authority, even in matters not poetic, that contending states were supposed to have settled their claims to territory on the interpretation of his verses. Passing westward the power of Homeric verse transformed the Latin tongue, making the Romans abandon their own poetic forms and forcing that language, with its long case endings, to march in dactylic rhythms. The oldest Latin literature of which any fragments have been preserved is a version of the *Odyssey*, and the greatest poetic production of Roman Italy is the *Aeneid* of Vergil, a literary amalgamation and adaptation of both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Homer was thus in turn to inspire the genius of Dante; and the introduction of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, "Sing, heavenly Muse," shows the kinship of that poem also with Homeric poetry.

Nothing could better illustrate the preëminence of Homer than the fact that among the papyrus

fragments discovered in Egypt four hundred and seventy are from the works of writers previously known, of which two hundred and seventy, far more than half, are from Homer. Demosthenes comes second with but thirty, and Plato, with only twenty, comes third.¹

This popularity of Homer in Egypt is in keeping with the best opinion of classical Greece, for Plato, who reached manhood during the life of Sophocles and of Euripides, regarded Homer as the greatest of all the tragic poets; and oddly enough the genuine works of Plato contain hardly a verse from those mighty dramatists, although they are the most quotable of poets, while Homer is quoted more than one hundred times, many of these quotations containing several verses.² To the mind of the ancient world Homer stood quite alone, so that that great judge of literature, the Latin Quintilian, could say that Homer was to be approached by none and that it was a mark of ability to be able to appreciate him (x, 1, 50). Horace, whose own poetry is sufficient guaranty of his literary acumen, refers to Homer as the poet of perfect taste, *qui nil molitur inepte* (*Ars Poetica* 140).

This first and greatest of poets lives only in his poetry. In that poetry he tells us absolutely nothing about himself, his name, his home, his

¹ Kenyon, *Journal of Hellenic Studies*, 1919, 1 ff.

² Howes, "Homeric Quotations in Plato and Aristotle," *Harvard Studies*, VI, 155. Aeschylus is quoted in *Rep.* II, 362 A; Euripides, in the spurious *Alcibiades* II, 151 B.

age, or his ancestors; and we can only surmise his religious and political ideas as we read these ideas into the actions or descriptions of the poems.

Homer was such a master of dramatic narrative that each character represents only himself. When once Nestor, Achilles, Helen, Hector, or Agamemnon has been brought into action, each seems to live his own life, free to act or to speak as he pleases, entirely detached from the mind which created him.

The poet seems never to have made an allusion to contemporary events, so that it is impossible to assign him to a definite age; and his references to rivers, mountains, lands, and seas are so impersonal, so involved in the story he is telling, that it is as difficult to name his home as it is to define his time.

Not only does he name no contemporary person or event, but he, too, is unnamed in any contemporary source, so that practically every statement made regarding him is due to the creative imagination of those who had little or nothing on which to build except inferences drawn from the poems themselves. It is a significant fact that different traditions in regard to Homer, his life and his work, become fuller and more definite as they get farther away from any possible sources of knowledge. My own belief is that Homer was born in Smyrna, that he traveled much, that the island of Chios was closely connected with his life, also that he lived at approximately