

**THE ORIGIN OF THE
HOMERIC
POEMS: A LECTURE**

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The Origin of the Homeric Poems: A Lecture by Hermann Bonitz

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A Lecture

BY

DR. HERMANN BONITZ

TRANSLATED FROM THE FOURTH GERMAN EDITION

By LEWIS R. PACKARD



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INTRODUCTORY NOTE.

THE following lecture was delivered in 1860 in Vienna, and has passed through four editions in Germany. It has been recognized by many scholars as presenting in brief space and with fairness the points involved in the discussion, and the progress which has been made towards a solution of the problem. I have been led to translate it mainly by the fact, as I suppose it to be, that there is no work in English which gives any just idea of the difficulties in the way of accepting the Homeric poems as the production of one poet, unless it be the large and expensive work of Mure, which defends the unity of authorship. It seemed desirable that there should be accessible in English a partial statement of the reasons which have led so many German scholars to doubt the unity of authorship of the poems. Besides, the notes contain a very valuable, though not of course a complete,

bibliography of the subject, which would be of great service to one taking up the study of the Homeric question.

I have translated the lecture in full; but in the notes I have taken the liberty of omitting and condensing, so far as could be done without detracting from their value. The references I have verified so far as was within my power.

LEWIS R. PACKARD.

THE ORIGIN OF THE HOMERIC POEMS.

ON the threshold of Greek literature, as its earliest known work, not to us only, but to the Greeks themselves at the height of their historical development,¹ stand two majestic poems, to which few other works of profane literature can be compared, either for manifold influence on the intellectual life of their own nation, or for admiring recognition among all peoples of high culture, even after the lapse of twenty-five centuries—the Iliad and Odyssey of Homer. It seemed even to the ancients that the imperishable works of Greek literature, especially in poetry, were but the variously unfolded flowers of a tree whose root and trunk were the Homeric poems.² The Greek epic poetry was at first an echo, in later times a conscious imitation, of Homer. The founder of Greek tragedy in its classic grandeur, the mighty Aeschylus, declared himself that his poems were but fragments fallen

from the rich table of Homer;³ and the choicest praise of Sophokles—that master-poet whose dramas, even in modern times, in feeble reproductions, without the glory of festive representation, without the rhythmic dance of the chorus, without the inimitable flavor of the original language, yet fascinate their hearers—was that his tragedies eminently displayed a Homeric character.⁴ The Greek historians based their work on Homer, at first in unquestioning reception of his legends and involuntary imitation of his narrative style, afterwards in critical explanation of the subject-matter of his poems.⁵ The Greek philosophy, although, in its effort to solve by the intellect the highest problems of humanity, it gradually came into most decided conflict with the popular faith and with the Homeric poems, the most sacred representative of that faith,⁶ yet, at the same time, sought eagerly to find in those poems the foundation of its convictions.⁷ From Homer, from certain particular verses of the Iliad, Pheidias, in the highest bloom of Greek sculpture, derived the idea of the Zeus which he set forth at Olympia for the veneration of the people.⁸ At Athens, the intellectual centre of Greece,

the systematic reading of the Homeric poems was made, by an institution of Solon's, an important part of the greatest national festival from the beginning of the sixth century before Christ.⁹ From the time that reading and writing were introduced as a constant element into the education of the Athenian youth, the poems of Homer, especially the Iliad, formed the primary and necessary material for training in these matters, as well as in memorizing and in reading aloud;¹⁰ and when, in the fifth century B.C., a young Athenian of noble family boasts in company that he still knows by heart the whole Iliad and Odyssey, no one finds anything incredible in the statement.¹¹ Whatever Greek classic, in poetry or prose, we read,¹² whatever branch of Greek culture we study, an intimate acquaintance with Homer is an indispensable condition of a thorough understanding of it, for the literature and all the intellectual life of the Hellenic people are bound by a thousand threads to the poems of Homer.

To this universality of influence among his own people,¹³ of which the instances above given are only hints, corresponds the range of extension abroad of

these poems. They have gone far beyond the limits which are ordinarily set for the greatest works of genius by the lapse of time, the divergencies of national character, and the growth of new civilizations. Since the leading modern nations have definitely recognized the connection of their own culture with that of the classical nations of antiquity, and have found for this conviction an expression, necessarily varying in different times, in the form they have given to the higher education, the Homeric poems have taken a prominent place in the training of all whose early years give them an opportunity to study Greek. Although the learning of that language is in some cases made much too laborious, so that in after-years one looks back upon the time spent in it as so much fruitless waste, yet commonly the reading of Homer forms a bright spot on the dark background. For so soon as the first struggle with the discouraging abundance of forms and words is over, the fresh immortal youth in the poetry affects the student with a resistless charm. And though the delicate bloom of the original is destroyed by the loss of the sounds *themselves* in a translation, yet there remains a