

THE AGE OF HOMER

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The age of Homer by Hodder M. Westropp

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HODDER M. WESTROPP

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OF HOMER**



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BY

HODDER M. WESTROPP.

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THE AGE OF HOMER.

Mr. Paley and Mr. Sayce have put forward their views with regard to the late age of the Homeric poems (that is, of the texts of the Iliad and the Odyssey as we now have them) from a critical examination of their language. I would here wish to express in a few notes my further doubts with regard to the early date of the Homeric poems founded on the knowledge they evince of the art of a late date.

Before discussing the date of the art as it appears in the poems, I shall endeavour to point out some evidences of the rudeness and imperfection of Greek civilization and language in the seventh century, about a century and a half after the supposed date of Homer.

I must in the first place confess myself a thorough sceptic with regard to the early date usually assigned to the Iliad in its present form, and I accept the theories so convincingly put forward by Mr. Paley. The mythology, the art and science, the language appear far too advanced for an early period of literature. The mythology is too grand; the conceptions too magnificent for that period; the archaisms seem too often unreal, imitative and affected; besides, the arts which would have been required to carry out the conception of the Shield of Achilles would have been enough to task the genius of a Phidias.

From what we know of the rudeness of Greek art in the seventh and sixth centuries B.C., there is every reason to believe

the state of civilization was in an analogous rude state. Thucydides considered the really primitive state, the veritable "juventus" of Hellenism, to be a state of barbarism, in which the Greeks lived chiefly by piracy; indeed Thucydides expressly writes, "In many respects one might show that the ancient Greeks lived in a manner similar to the barbarians of the present age," and this state must have existed only a little earlier than the seventh century. Hence to attribute the refined and chivalric civilization as depicted in the Homeric poems to the ninth, much more to the date of the supposed war, the twelfth century B.C., is manifestly absurd. Before we can obtain a correct idea of the early state of Greece, the whole system of myths of the so-called heroic age, which are all essentially legends—fictions, must be swept away. The myths of Pelops, Dardanus, Atreus, Agamemnon, "creatures of legends," as Mr. Grote truly calls them, and the Trojan War, have as little to do with genuine Greek history as Brutus and his Trojans, Cymbeline, King Lear, in England, Partholamus, Nemodius, and the Tuatha de Danaans in Ireland, have to do with the genuine histories of England or Ireland. The so-called heroic age in Greece was in reality a rude and barbarous age, an age of fighting and cruelty, not of virtue, eloquence, sentiment, or respect for women. When these myths are swept away, we may then trace out the genuine story of the early period of Greek nationality which does not begin before the eighth century B.C.

From the analogy with the history of other nations, the early Greek people must have passed through a rude and barbarous stage, and of this confirmatory evidence has been found in the numerous examples of stone implements which have been discovered in many parts of Greece. It is an established fact that all nations gradually emerged from a primitive barbarous state; and we have evidence that the Greeks of the seventh century were not more advanced than the rest. It is, therefore, an inevitable conclusion that the Greeks of the centuries before the seventh must have been in a ruder and more barbarous state.

According to Dodwell, the earliest inhabitants of Greece, the Dryopes, Caucones, Aones, Leleges, were uncultivated savages, who made a casual and temporary residence wherever they were attracted by the fertility of the soil, the abundance of water, or by considerations of weal, security, and protection. These were evidently the Greeks in their early hunting phase, of which Mr. Finlay has discovered such important proofs in the number of obsidian arrow-heads found everywhere in the country. "It is admitted by all writers," Sir John Stoddart observes, "that the original inhabitants of Greece were mere savages, feeding on acorns, living in caves, and clothing themselves in skins of beasts."

The Pelasgi, who, according to Strabo, were an ancient race which prevailed throughout all Greece, were a barbarous tribe. There are sufficient grounds for believing they were the original Greek race. The Pelasgians of Arcadia, Greek tradition tells us, dwelt in rude huts, and clothed themselves in skins, while the Pelasgians of Athens are described as originally plunged in the grossest barbarism; "other traditions," writes Bishop Thirlwall, "not so liable to distrust, concur in assigning tillage and useful arts to the Pelasgians. It is not an improbable conjecture," he adds, "that the genuine and most ancient form of the native name was expressive of their agricultural character." Lord Lytton writes (*Athens* I, 99), "The history of the early period in Greece was the history of the human race—it was the gradual passage of men from a barbarous state to the dawn of civilization."

There is the strongest probability in favour of the view that there was no art (properly so called) in Greece in the ninth century. The earliest attempts at art, or representations of the human figure, do not appear before the seventh century. Before that age the presence of a god was indicated in a manner akin to the "Fetish" of the African, by the simplest and most shapeless objects, such as roughly hewn blocks and simple pillars of wood or stone. The first attempt at representation consisted in fashioning a block of stone or wood into some semblance of the human form,

and this rude attempt constituted a divinity, and was styled *ξόανον*. Of this primitive form were the Venus of Cyprus, the Cupid of Thespiæ; the Juno of Argos was fashioned in a similar rude manner from the trunk of a wild pear. These attempts were little more than shapeless blocks, with the head, arms, and legs scarcely defined.

From what we know of Greek art in the sixth century, the sculptures of Selinus, the Athene of Endœus, the bas-reliefs of the Harpy monuments; it was in a very rude and imperfect state. The earliest record we have of any artists who executed works in marble is of Dipœnus and Scyllis (50th Olympiad—580 B.C.) The lentoid gems which are found scattered among the tombs of Greece and the Archipelago, and which exhibit the earliest and rudest form of Greek art, cannot be dated earlier than the seventh century B.C. All afford evidence that Greek art in the seventh century was of the most primitive and rudest description. It is therefore *impossible* that the art exhibited in the shield of Achilles could represent the art of the ninth century, the period usually assigned to Homer. The pottery of the seventh century, which is in the rudest and most primitive style, bears witness to an analogous rude state of civilization in that age.

The early Greek inscriptions tell us the same tale of the rudeness of the Greek language in the seventh and sixth centuries. As Mr. Grote admits, the traces of writing in Greece, even in the seventh century B.C., are exceedingly trifling. The early inscriptions are rude and unskillfully executed. The Sigean inscription, which is supposed to date from the sixth century, is in *boustrophedon*, one of the rudest styles of writing. The Abou-Simbel inscription (of the middle of the seventh century) shows the Greek language was still in a very imperfect state, and in this inscription, Mr. Newton writes, "we have a cardinal example of Greek writing used by the Ionian and Dorian settlers in Asia Minor about the beginning of the sixth century." The letters of the inscription on the Burgon vase are in a very archaic form from right to left, its date being about 500 B.C. The inscription in *boustrophedon* on the

scated figures at Branchidæ, bear further witness to the rudeness and imperfection of the Greek language in the beginning of the sixth century B.C.

Professor Sayce remarks (*Academy*, March 2, 1878), "With all the evidence of Grecian intercourse with the East, and more especially with the Phœnicians, it may seem strange that nothing like writing has been met with in the late discoveries in the rock tombs of Spata." This is a further proof of the late use of writing in Greece, and consequently of imperfect civilization at this early period.

The Homeric poems speak constantly of gold as being locked up in treasures, and used in large quantities for the purposes of ornament, but, as Mr. Murray remarks (*Greek Sculpture*, p. 30), "all this poetic gold could never have been justified by the actual possessions of Homer's time (i. e. of the ninth century), even admitting to the full extent the active commerce with the East indicated in the poems. In Greece proper it is known that in the earliest historic period gold hardly existed, whilst so late comparatively as the 70th Olympiad (500 B.C.) it was a great rarity."

Before the sixth century in Greece the temples were wooden structures and the altars of the rudest description, while the time-hallowed idol was sometimes preserved in a hollow tree.

All these evidences go to prove the rude state of Greek civilization, as far as we can judge from its art, pottery, and language, prior to the seventh century B.C.; and can we suppose that if the civilization and the language of Greece were in such a rude and imperfect state in the seventh century as the above evidences show, that such a poem as the *Iliad*, of the most elaborate structure, so refined in diction, so perfect in composition, "so largely artificial, imitative, replete with Atticisms and modernisms," as Mr. Paley writes, could have been composed in the ninth century—that is, over 200 years before the alleged dates of the Abou-Simbel and Sigeon inscriptions?

Having pointed out the great probability of there being a rude