

REVIEW ARTICLES

Homer and the Bottomless Well of the Past

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Tief ist der Brunnen der Vergangenheit. Sollte man ihn nicht unergründlich nennen?
Thomas Mann, *Joseph und seine Brüder*

Irak Malkin, *The Returns of Odysseus. Colonization and Ethnicity*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1998. xiii + 331 pp. ISBN 0 520 21185 5. \$45.00, cloth.

I

Until recently, to refer to ‘historical myth’ was tantamount to saying that something had no historical substance whatever. Both scholars and the general public had nothing but scorn for myths relating to the past — and the word ‘myth’ itself was generally understood as the opposite of historical truth. However, a marked shift in attitudes towards the concept of historical truth in recent decades has cast doubt on the validity of the assumptions from which the traditional approach to myth proceeded. In much current historical research, traditional historiography is rapidly losing its privileged status of a reliable guide to the past, more and more being treated as just one narrative among many. The contextualisation of historical narrative within the time and place of its composition that has accompanied this development has made the gulf between history and fact even wider, and has actually merged history with myth. This is not yet to say that approaching historiography and myth as phenomena of the same order would necessarily lead to treating historical myths seriously. One approach, which in the present reviewer’s opinion is less productive than others, is to devalue any narrative, whether historical or mythological, that makes a claim to deliver a truthful account of past events; accordingly, it becomes impossible to draw a meaningful distinction between, say, the tradition of the Persian wars on the one hand and that of the Trojan war on the other. The approach that seems much more promising is the one which, rather than denigrating history by treating it on a par with myth, rehabilitates myth by elevating it to the status of historical source. This is the approach that Irak Malkin adopts in his book.

This in-depth investigation of Greek myth of the aftermath of the Trojan war is expressly designed as a contribution to the study of the history of Greece. This does not mean that the subject of *The Returns of Odysseus* is the historical substance of the myth in question. Although Malkin does not sympathize with those who, to put it in his own words, ‘confuse nonessentialism with disregard of hard facts instead of looking for the dynamism between that which “happens” (e.g., a shot fired in battle) and that which is continuously influenced by observation (who won the war)’, he has little interest in ‘myth as containing some kernel of truth, for example, considering whether the *nostoi* reflect actual Greek settlement’ (pp. 6-7). Nor does he embrace the recent trend of

cultural poetics, which glosses over historical periods in order to create ‘a rather essentialist abstraction of “Greek culture”’ (p. 23). For Malkin, the story of the Heroic Age is first and foremost a story of the time when the myth of the Heroic Age took its standard form. ‘The question raised in this book’, he writes in the Introduction, ‘is how myths of Odysseus and other *Nostoi* were used to mediate encounters and conceptualize ethnicity and group identity and how such conceptualisations functioned historically, especially in the Archaic period’ (p. 5). In combining the historical and the archaeological perspective with that supplied by the epic tradition, Malkin unfolds a rich and illuminating picture of how, by appropriating figures of Greek legend as their founders and/or remote ancestors, various population groups, Greeks and non-Greeks alike, negotiated the terms of their coexistence and consolidated their identities in the early first millennium BCE.

According to Greek tradition, two main factors were responsible for the disappearance of the Race of Heroes: their destruction in the wars of Thebes and of Troy and their migration to the ‘ends of the earth’ (πείρατα γαίης).¹ The two events are inextricably connected in the Trojan saga in that, instead of returning home, most heroes who survived the war went elsewhere, eventually to become founders of new settlements all over the Mediterranean. The entire epic genre, entitled somewhat incongruously ‘Returns’, or *Nostoi*, specialized in perpetuating the memory of this event. Most of the poems which belonged to this genre are now lost, but the fragmentary information available concerning some of them — such as, for example, the epic *Melampodia* usually ascribed to Hesiod — gives us a pretty good impression of the range of the *Nostoi* phenomenon. Teucer son of Telamon went to Cyprus where he founded Salamis; Agapenor, the leader of the Arcadians in Homer, also settled in Cyprus where he founded New Paphos; Amphilocheus son of Amphiaraios went to Pamphylia and Cilicia where he founded Mallus; Mopsus, son of the Theban prophetess Manto, led the immigrants not only into Pamphylia and Cilicia but also into Syria and Palestine; Diomedes went to the Adriatic where he became the founder of numerous cities; Philoctetes went to the region of Croton in Italy where he colonized Cape Krimissa, and so on. ‘The entire ethnography of the Mediterranean could be explained as originating from the Big Bang of the Trojan War and the consequent *Nostos* diffusion’ (p. 3). Malkin, who deals with the western *Nostoi* only, analyses the migrations of Nestor, Philoctetes, Diomedes and others in the concluding chapters of his book (Chapters 7 and 8). Above all, however, the *Nostoi* was the genre to which the Homeric *Odyssey* belonged. Small wonder, therefore, that *The Returns of Odysseus* gives the poetry of Homer pride of place.

II

After a Phaeacian ship brings Odysseus back to Ithaca, along with the treasures that the Phaeacians bestowed on him — ‘the handsome tripods and the cauldrons, the gold and the lovely woven garments’ (*Od.* 13. 217-218) — Athene, whom Odysseus meets upon his landing, advises him to hide the treasures in a cave by the seashore:

‘And now at once let us store away your treasures in some recess of the sacred cave where they may be ordered best’. And with these words she entered the twilight cave, looking for hiding-places there, while Odysseus brought all his gifts inside — the gold, the enduring

¹ Hes. *Erga* 159-173. Cf. Hes. Fr. 204.95-105 Merkelbach-West; *Cypria* fr. 1 Bernabé.

bronze, the well-made garments that came from the Phaeacians. And when they had all been cunningly stowed away, Pallas Athene sealed up the entrance with a stone.²

This is arguably the only Homeric episode that is actually paralleled in archaeological record. I mean the rich deposit of bronze tripods dedicated in the course of the ninth and the eighth centuries BCE in a seaside cave in Polis Bay on Ithaca. Although the epigraphic evidence explicitly pointing to Odysseus as the recipient of the cult is not earlier than the second century BCE, it is difficult not to agree with Malkin that Odysseus was probably worshipped in the Ithaca cave from the establishment of the cult in the middle of the ninth century. Significantly, in the ninth and eighth centuries BCE Polis Bay was an important stopping point for the Greeks sailing to Epirus, Corcyra (Korfu), and Italy. 'Ithaca was precisely at the geographical point where departing from it or returning there could have been perceived as sailing in the wake of Odysseus, and this perception was linked with the cult of Polis' (p. 117). The Polis Bay tripods (Chapter 3) are both the cornerstone of Malkin's discussion and its most recurrent theme.

Malkin has no patience with those who treat the *Odyssey* episode as an *aition*, that is, as relating to the cult that already existed in Homer's time (pp. 96-8). In his opinion, an *Odyssey* — either the one we have or an earlier variant — must have preceded the cult at Polis Bay and served as its direct stimulus. The alternative is formulated as follows: 'I therefore draw immediately two lines in the sand: the first is the proposition that the *Odyssey*, as we know it, existed in the ninth century. The second and more modest claim is that even if there was no monumental *Odyssey* so early, there was enough of its specific *story* to make its framework and some of its particular episodes meaningful to Greeks of that time' (p. 45; Malkin's italics). In the present reviewer's opinion, the first proposition is untenable, if only for the reason that subscribing to it would involve raising the accepted date for the introduction of the alphabet by one hundred years and that for the Homeric *Odyssey* by two. And although Malkin is nevertheless prepared to give the ninth-century *Odyssey* a chance (he discusses the issue at length in the Appendix), he is aware of the difficulty, and this is why he engages mainly in exploring what 'the second and more modest claim' can offer. The result is a significant enhancement of our understanding of the inner fabric of the Homeric *Odyssey*.

Many of the so-called 'lying stories' about Odysseus that are told in the poem by both Odysseus and others refer to Epirus. Especially noteworthy is the story that the disguised Odysseus tells in Ithaca to Eumaeus and Penelope: according to this story, before going back to Ithaca Odysseus left his treasure with the Thesprotian king Pheidon and went to Dodona, to ask the oracle whether he should return home openly or in secret.³ 'If Dodona's answer had been "Return in secret", according to this hypothetical and unrealised *nostos*, Odysseus' treasure would presumably have been kept in Thesprotia. Thus Thesprotia, the region of Epirus across from Corcyra, fulfils the function of the cave of the nymphs in the "real" story' (p. 129). Significantly, it was with Corcyra rather than with the *Odyssey* never-never land in the far west that Scheria, the land of the Phaeacians, is usually associated in later sources.⁴ In all probability, Epirus

² *Od.* 13.363-371. Tr. W. Shewring.

³ *Od.* 14.314-335; 19.285-302.

⁴ See Hellenic. fr. 77 Jacoby; Thuc. 1.25; Callim. fr. 12 Pfeiffer; Ap. Rh. 4.566-571; 1209-1219; Apollod. 1.9.25.

also played a prominent role in the lost epics *Thesprotis* and *Telegonia*, as well as in other traditional poems that dealt with the continuation of the Odysseus story. By linking together shreds of evidence relating to the relevance of this story to Epirus and other parts of north-western Greece, Malkin builds a powerful case for 'the *Odyssey*'s alternatives' — the alternatives, it must be added, of which the *Odyssey* itself was fully aware (Chapter 4). This is what places his book in the context of one of the most hotly debated issues in contemporary Homeric scholarship.

It is generally recognized today that both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* lean heavily upon the nomenclature of Trojan subjects dealt with in other traditional epics, especially in the poems of the Epic Cycle.⁵ When approached from the standpoint of the theory of oral composition, the parallels between Homer and other epics should be regarded as independent variants of a common tradition. Thus, to quote what Laura Slatkin wrote in her pioneering application of the methods of oral approach to the Homeric *Iliad*, '...the Cycle poems inherit traditions contingent to our *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* and preserve story patterns, motifs, and type-scenes that are as archaic as the material in the Homeric poems, to which they are related collaterally, rather than by descent. The Cycle poems and the *Iliad* offer invaluable mutual perspective on the recombination of elements deriving from a common source in myth'.⁶ This quotation, which Malkin also adduces (p. 34), would account fairly well for the approach to the Homeric *Odyssey* that he adopts in his book.

It seems at the same time that the *Odyssey* and 'the *Odyssey*'s alternatives' cannot be simply placed on one plane as if they were variations on the same theme. Note that 'the *Odyssey*'s alternatives', in that they do not presuppose at all Odysseus' eventual homecoming, sharply disagree with the Homeric *Odyssey*, for which Odysseus' return to Ithaca is a *sine qua non*: even the prophecy of Teiresias, according to which upon his return to Ithaca Odysseus should leave it again for the country of men who 'know not the sea, neither eat meat savoured with salt', makes provision for his eventual homecoming.⁷ By the very fact of turning the alternative versions of the Return of Odysseus into 'lying stories', the *Odyssey* poet signals their subordinate status in his poem and privileges the version that he offers. In other words, the relationship between the Homeric *Odyssey* and the Odysseus tradition is anything but reciprocal. Homer both reshapes the tradition he inherited and adapts it to his own agenda, which obviously do not concur with those of his sources: thus, a myth of leaving home for foreign lands is transformed in our *Odyssey* into a myth of homecoming. Here as in many other cases, rather than offering just another variant of the common tradition, Homer turns earlier traditions about the Trojan war and the Returns into raw material for his poems. That he

⁵ This development is almost entirely due to the Neoanalytic trend in Homeric scholarship. The works most representative of the methods of Neoanalysis are J.T. Kakridis, *Homeric Researches* (Lund 1949) and W. Kullmann, *Die Quellen der Ilias* (Wiesbaden 1960); for comprehensive discussions in English see W. Kullmann, 'Oral Poetry Theory and Neoanalysis in Homeric Research', *GRBS* 25 (1984) 307-23 and M.W. Edwards, 'Neoanalysis and Beyond', *CA* 9 (1990) 311-25.

⁶ L. Slatkin, *The Power of Thetis. Allusion and Interpretation in the Iliad* (Berkeley 1991) 11-2.

⁷ *Od.* 11.119-137; 23.266-284.

is nevertheless anxious to show his awareness of these traditions strongly suggests that he meant his poems to assume the privileged status of metaepics.⁸

This however does not change the fact that, in revealing how Homer's version of the Return of Odysseus 'reverberates'⁹ against a broader background of Greek tradition, Malkin's book does for the *Odyssey* what Slatkin's did for the *Iliad*. And not only that. By showing that 'the *Odyssey*'s alternatives' associated the geography of Odysseus' wanderings with such prominent centres of Greek colonization as for example the Bay of Naples (Chapters 5 and 6), Malkin not only vindicates the later sources that persistently associate Odysseus with Italy and Sicily¹⁰ but also restores to life entire layers of the authentic tradition which were deeply buried within the Homeric *Odyssey*. The question is how their relationship is to be interpreted in terms of absolute chronology.

III

Approaching the Homeric poems as documents that throw light on Early Iron Age Greece is in itself hardly new. Although in the decades that followed Schliemann's excavations of Troy and Mycenae it was generally believed that the Homeric poems present an almost exact reflection of Mycenaean Greece, the radical shift in evaluation of Homer's historical background that took place in the second half of the twentieth century has changed this attitude. First, the study of the Homeric formulae has demonstrated that the traditional language is characterized by an extremely high degree of flexibility and adaptation, so that it is absolutely out of the question that everything we find in Homer could have arrived untouched from the Bronze Age. Second, the picture of Mycenaean society that emerged as a result of the decipherment of Linear B has made scholars realize that Greek tradition, first and foremost the poems of Homer, can least of all be interpreted as an adequate reflection of the institutions and society of Bronze Age Greece. This last conclusion is almost entirely due to Moses Finley, whose articles of the 1950s and especially the book *The World of Odysseus* (1954) opened a new era in the historical study of Homer.

Finley himself placed the formative stage of the Homeric epics in the so-called 'Dark Ages' (ca. 1050 — ca. 800 BCE). Yet the same argument that made it impossible to see in Homer a reflection of Mycenaean Greece also holds good as regards the hypothesis that the poet who presumably lived in the eighth or even seventh century BCE described a society which preceded him by two hundred years. As Ian Morris put it in a seminal article, 'Trying to find tenth- and ninth-century societies in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* is just

⁸ See further E.L. Bowie, 'Lies, Fiction and Slander in Early Greek Poetry', in C. Gill and T.P. Wiseman (eds.), *Lies and Fiction in the Ancient World* (Exeter 1993) 1-37, esp. 18; R. Martin, 'Telemachus and the Last Hero Song', in H.M. Roisman and J. Roisman (eds.), *Essays on Homeric Epic. Colby Quarterly* 29 (1993) 222-40; K. Dowden, 'Homer's Sense of Text', *JHS* 116 (1996) 47-61; M. Finkelberg, *The Birth of Literary Fiction in Ancient Greece* (Oxford 1998) 154-5. I discuss the issue in greater detail in 'The Sources of *Iliad* 7', in H.M. Roisman and J. Roisman (eds.), *Essays on Homeric Epic. Colby Quarterly* 38.2, forthcoming in June 2002.

⁹ Cf. Slatkin (n. 6) 108.

¹⁰ See e.g. Strabo's discussion of Odysseus' wanderings in 1.2.11-18, pp. 21-6.

as misguided as looking for the Mycenaeans'.¹¹ That is to say, if the Homeric epics do allow for reconstruction of a consistent social picture, this picture would rather belong to the time of the poet himself. This is why contemporary scholarly opinion tends to see the eighth century BCE as providing a more suitable historical background for the Homeric poems.

Malkin's general approach to Homer is along the lines of the consensus that locates the historical background of Homer in the first rather than in the second millennium BCE. His originality lies in that, while other scholars are mostly interested in social norms and institutions reflected in the Homeric poems, he focuses his attention on the traditional stories themselves and their articulation in iconography, ritual, and social practice. At the same time, Malkin's view of Homer's historical background differs from the majority opinion in that his interpretation of the *Odyssey* as relating to the period of protocolonization automatically places Homer, as in Finley's original hypothesis, in the ninth or even tenth century BCE (see especially pp. 268-73). Yet, as noted above, in so far at least as the Homeric *Odyssey* is concerned, this position is hardly tenable. But is it really the Homeric *Odyssey* that Malkin has in mind? Corcyra, the Bay of Naples, Sicily, which emerge in 'the *Odyssey*'s alternatives' as restored by Malkin, are replaced in the Homeric poem by the land of Scheria, 'far removed from toiling mankind' (*Od.* 6.8), and by the fabulous islands of Circe, of the Sirens, and of the Cyclops. The *Odyssey*'s geography moves between the social Utopia of the Phaeacians at one pole and the primitive society of the Cyclopes at the other: the real society of Ithaca is placed between these extremes and examined against their background. No actual map, let alone a map of protocolonization, can be drawn on the basis of this geography. To uncover such a map, one has to penetrate into the hidden depths of the *Odyssey*, where 'the *Odyssey*'s alternatives' — or rather, 'the *Odyssey*'s predecessors' — still abide. It is these latter rather than the *Odyssey* as we know it that should be credited with a ninth-century historical background.

This is not to say that the ninth century BCE was also the time when the Greek myth of Returns, including that of the Return of Odysseus, first came into being. Everything suggests that originally the myth of the Heroes who dispersed to the 'ends of the earth' referred to the great migrations by which the historical cataclysm that marked the end of the Bronze Age was accompanied.¹² The extent of the Mycenaean diaspora is immediately obvious in the East, where the locally made Mycenaean III C:1b pottery is found in abundance along the entire Mediterranean coast from Tarsos in the north to Ashkelon in the south.¹³ The eastern *Nostoi* also supply our only example thus far of the tradition of

¹¹ I. Morris, 'The Use and Abuse of Homer', *CA* 5 (1986), 127. Cf. K.A. Raaflaub, 'Homer und die Geschichte des 8.Jh.s v. Chr.', in J. Latacz (ed.), *Zweihundert Jahre Homer-Forschung* (Stuttgart and Leipzig, 1991), 212: 'Finleys Argumente sind aus historischen Gründen nicht zwingend, und seine Datierung ist schlecht mit den Charakteristika von *oral tradition* im allgemeinen und *oral poetry* im speziellen zu vereinbaren'.

¹² For the historical background see R. Drews, *The End of the Bronze Age. Changes in Warfare and the Catastrophe ca. 1200 B.C.* (Princeton 1993), 8-30.

¹³ See esp. V. Hankey, 'Pottery and People of the Mycenaean III C Period in the Levant', in *Archéologie au Levant. Recueil à la mémoire de Roger Saidah* (Lyons 1982) 167-171; M. Dothan, 'Archaeological Evidence for Movements of the Early "Sea Peoples" in Canaan',

Returns being corroborated by historical record. I mean the legendary seer Mopsus, the story of whose wanderings and competition in divination with Calchas, Agamemnon's seer in the *Iliad*, was an integral part of Greek tradition about the end of the Heroic Age.¹⁴ Like Odysseus, Mopsus was credited with founding many cities, among them Aspendus and Phaselis in Pamphylia, Mallus in Cilicia, and Ashkelon in Palestine;¹⁵ in historical times, he shared with Amphilocheus an oracle at Mallus and was commemorated in Cilician and Pamphylian place names. But Mopsus (*Mps*) is also referred to as the founder of the royal house of Adana on the ninth-century Phoenician-Hieroglyphic Luwian inscription discovered in 1946 at Karatepe in Cilicia.¹⁶ The emergence of Mopsus in the text of the Karatepe inscription allows us not only to explain the toponyms bearing his name but also to provide the tradition of Mopsus' wanderings over Asia with a proper historical background.

In the West too, after the first wave of destruction in the Peloponnese (ca. 1200 BCE), a considerable population influx was attested not only for Achaea in the north-west Peloponnese but also for the Ionian islands, in particular for the island of Cephallenia opposite whose shores Polis Bay is situated.¹⁷ Significantly, it is as the leader of the Cephallenians that Odysseus figures in the Catalogue of Ships in *Iliad* 2: 'And Odysseus led the great-hearted Cephallenians, those who held Ithaca and Neritus with shaking leaves and inhabited Crocyleia and rough Aegilips, and those who held Zacynthus and inhabited Samos, and those who held the mainland and inhabited the lands opposite'.¹⁸ The association of Odysseus and his men with Cephallenia, which at the end of the Bronze Age was apparently flooded by refugees from the Peloponnese, makes it likely that the story of Odysseus' wanderings was once meant to evoke the Mycenaean migration into this region. This would mean that, just as the seventh-century *Odyssey* reshaped for its own purposes ninth-century poems of protocolonization, so also those latter had reshaped eleventh-century *Odysseys*, which dealt with the collapse of Mycenaean Greece.

The sources at our disposal do not allow us to go farther than that, but it would be reasonable to suppose that even the earliest Odysseus myths that we are able to discern were built on still earlier foundations. At the same time, there is no doubt that, like the ninth-century *Odysseys* so convincingly restored in Malkin's book, these irretrievably lost myths were also used for establishing meaningful continuities, no matter whether

ASOR 49 (1989) 59-70. Cf. T. Dothan and M. Dothan, *People of the Sea. The Search for the Philistines* (New York 1992) 89-92, 159-70.

¹⁴ The tradition of the migration of Mopsus, Amphilocheus and Calchas was treated in the epic poem *Melampodia*, see Hes. fr. 278, 279 MW. Cf. Hdt. 7.91.

¹⁵ See esp. Strabo 14.4.3, p. 668; Xanthus 765 F 17 Jacoby.

¹⁶ For comprehensive summaries of the relevant evidence see Ph.H.J. Houwink ten Cate, *The Luwian Population Groups of Lycia and Cilicia Aspera during the Hellenistic Period* (Leiden 1965), 44-50; R.D. Barnett, in *CAH*, 3rd ed., 2.2 (1975) 363-6; N.G. Hammond, in *CAH*, 3rd ed., 2.2 (1975) 679-80; J.D. Hawkins, in *CAH*, 2nd ed., 3.1 (1982) 429-31.

¹⁷ See V.R.d'A. Desborough, *The Last Mycenaean and their Successors. An Archaeological Survey c. 1200 - c. 1000 B.C.* (Oxford 1964), 222. Cf. J. Rutter, *The Prehistoric Archaeology of the Aegean*, Lesson 28 (Dartmouth College 1996; revised 26.6.1997; devlab.dartmouth.edu/history/bronze age/).

¹⁸ *Il.* 2.631-635.

real or fictitious, by means of which the collective identities of those who chose these myths to be their own were articulated. This is what makes historical myths no less indispensable guides to the past than the 'hard facts' of documentary accounts and archaeological findings. In that they encapsulate the essentials of a given community's self-consciousness, the historical myths supply full-scale evidence as regards the world in which people actually live. The same would of course be true of historical myths of our own times. Malkin's magisterial study effectively drives this simple and unavoidable truth home.

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