

THE FLESH AND BONES OF EPIC: HOMERIC AND INSULAR PERSPECTIVES

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1. The Homeric poems began to be charter texts at the moment when, about 750 bce, they were inscribed in phonetic script. Their importance as the possession of Greek-speakers everywhere was recognised immediately; knowledge of them became a passport into a psychological community spread over countless coasts and islands. (Hall 2008: 8)

2. *So you know that the man in the audience is the last of these rings, which as I said take their power from each other under the influence of the stone of Heraclea. You, the rhapsode and the actor, are in the middle, and the first is the poet himself, and the god through all of these draws the soul of men in whatever direction he wishes, suspending their power from each other.* (Plato, *Ion* 535e7 ff.)

3. Νῦν αὖθ' ὀπλοτέρων ἀνδρῶν ἀρχώμεθα, Μοῦσαι (*Epigoni* fr. 1 Bernabé)



4.

5.

traditional	formulaic	epic
primary	bardic	saga
archaic	oral	poetry

6. The Minstrels were an order of men...who subsisted by the arts of poetry and music, and sang to the harp verses composed by themselves, or others...The Minstrels seem to have been the successors of the ancient Bards, who under different names were admired and revered, from the earliest ages...by almost all the first inhabitants of Europe... Their skill was considered as something divine; their persons were deemed sacred; their attendance was solicited by kings; and they were everywhere loaded with honours and rewards...But as the Saxons, soon after their establishment in this island, were converted to Christianity; in proportion as literature [i.e. literacy] prevailed among them this rude admiration would begin to abate; and Poetry would be no longer a peculiar profession. (Percy, "Essay on the Ancient Minstrels of England", §1, in his *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*, ed. 4 (1780))

7. *...et bardi quidem fortia virorum illustrium facta heroicis composita versibus cum dulcibus lyrae modulis cantitarunt* (Ammianus Marcellinus 15.9.8).

8. πληθὺν δ' οὐκ ἂν ἐγὼ μυθήσομαι οὐδ' ὀνομήνω
οὐδ' εἴ μοι δέκα μὲν γλῶσσαι, δέκα δὲ στόματ' εἶεν,
φωνὴ δ' ἄρρηκτος, χάλκεον δέ μοι ἦτορ ἐνείη...(*Il.* 2.489-91)

9. ἀργαλέον δέ με ταῦτα θεὸν ὥς πάντ' ἀγορεύσαι

(*Il.* 12.176; cf. 17.260-1, noted by Hainsworth ad loc.)

10. καί ποτέ τις εἴπησι καὶ ὀψιγόνων ἀνθρώπων,
νηὶ πολυκλήϊδι πλέων ἐπὶ οἴνοπα πόντον,
"ἄνδρὸς μὲν τόδε σῆμα πάλαι κατατεθνηῶτος,
ὃν ποτ' ἀριστεύοντα κατέκτανε φαίδιμος Ἑκτωρ."
ὥς ποτέ τις ἐρέει, τὸ δ' ἐμὸν κλέος οὐ ποτ' ὀλεῖται. (*Il.* 7.89-91)

11. Quamobrem non tam id mirabamur errasse in ea re M. Tullium, quam non esse animadversum hoc postea correctumque vel ab ipso vel a Tirone, liberto eius, diligentissimo homine et librorum patroni sui studiosissimo. Ita enim scriptum in eo libro est: 'Apud eundem poetam Ajax cum Hectore congregiendi causa agit, ut sepeliatur, si sit forte victus, declaratque se velle, ut suum tumulum multis etiam post saeculis praetereuntes sic loquantur:

*hic situs est vitae iam pridem lumina linquens,
qui quondam Hectoreo percussus concidit ense.*

Fabatur haec aliquis, mea semper gloria vivet.

Huius autem sententiae versus, quos Cicero in linguam Latinam vertit, non Ajax apud Homerum dicit, neque Ajax agit, ut sepeliatur, sed Hector dicit, et Hector de sepultura agit priusquam sciat an Ajax secum depugnandi causa congressurus sit. (Aulus Gellius, *Noctes Atticae* 15.6.2-3; cf. Holford-Strevens 2003: 282¹,

12. Σᾶμα τόδε Ἀρνιαδά· χαροπὸς τόνδ' ὄλεσεν Ἄρες
βαρνάμενον παρὰ ναυσὶν ἐπ' Ἀράθθοιο ῥοφαῖσι
πολλὸν ἀριστεύοντα κατὰ στονόφεσσιν ἀφυτάν. (CEG no. 145 Hansen; cf. 112, 118, 177)

13. Hātað heaðomære hlæw gewyrcean
beorhtne æfter bæle æt brimes nōsan
se scel to gemyndum mīnum lēodum
hēah hlifian on Hronesnæsse
þæt hit sæliþend syþþan hātan
Bīowulfes biorh ða ðe brentingas
ofer flōða genipu feorran drifaþ. (*Beowulf* 2802 ff.)

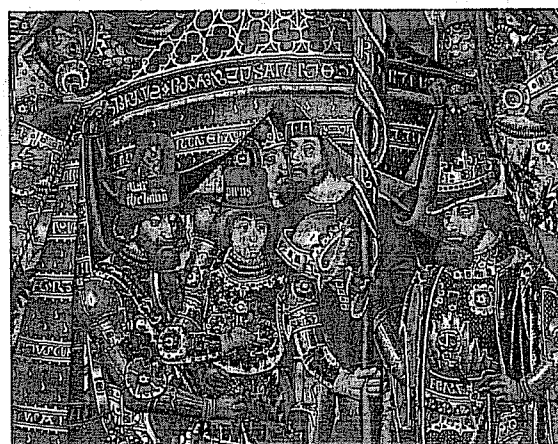
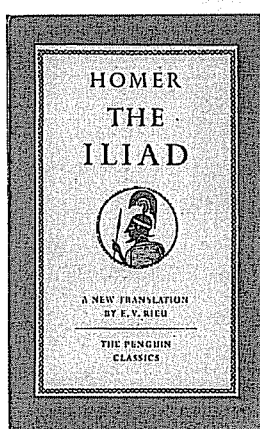
*Bid men of battle build me a tomb
Fair after fire, on the foreland by the sea
that shall stand as a reminder of me to my people,
towering high over Hronesness
so that ocean travellers shall afterwards name it
Beowulf's Barrow, bending in the distance
their masted ships through the mists upon the sea.'* (*Beowulf* 2802 ff., tr. Alexander; cf. H.M. Chadwick, *The Heroic Age* (London 1912) 326).

¹ Holford-Strevens 2003: 282 points out that this is "the one mistake in Cicero that Gellius admits" – and even then he tries to pin it on Tiro

14. Ro gab Dond cosin in leith aile iar n-uird innaiss,
 ba marb ic ascnam cen chomais descert hIrraiss.
 Co tuarcbad carn le lia a cheneoil as lir lethach
 sentrab tontech conid Tech Duinn de dongarar.

*Donn went with the other half in progressive order;
 He died travelling without power at the south of Irrus.
 A cairn was raised for him with the stone of his people over the broad sea
 an ancient dwelling of the waves, so that it is called the House of Donn.
 (LL 134b 8-11, p. 3.520 Best & O'Brien)*

15.



16. *There was a certain Dares among the Trojans, wealthy and blameless,
 a priest of Hephaestus; and his two sons stood beside him,
 Phegeus and Idaios, both of them with good knowledge of all warfare... (Il. 5.9ff.)*

17. (41.1) Apud veteres enim nemo conscribebat historiam, nisi is qui interfuisset, et ea quae conscribenda essent vidisset. Melius enim oculis quae fiunt deprehendimus, quam quae auditione colligimus. Quae enim videntur, sine mendacio proferuntur... (42.1) Historiam autem apud nos primus Moyses de initio mundi conscripsit. Apud gentiles vero primus Dares Phrygius de Graecis et Troianis historiam edidit, quam in foliis palmarum ab eo conscriptam esse ferunt. (Isidore, *Origines* 1)

18. Quidam autem poetae Theologici dicuntur, quoniam de diis carmina faciebant. Officium autem poetae in eo est ut ea quae vere gesta sunt in alias species obliquis figurationibus cum decore aliquo conversa transducant. Unde et Lucanus ideo in numero poetarum non ponitur, quia videtur historias composuisse, non poema. (8.7.9-10)

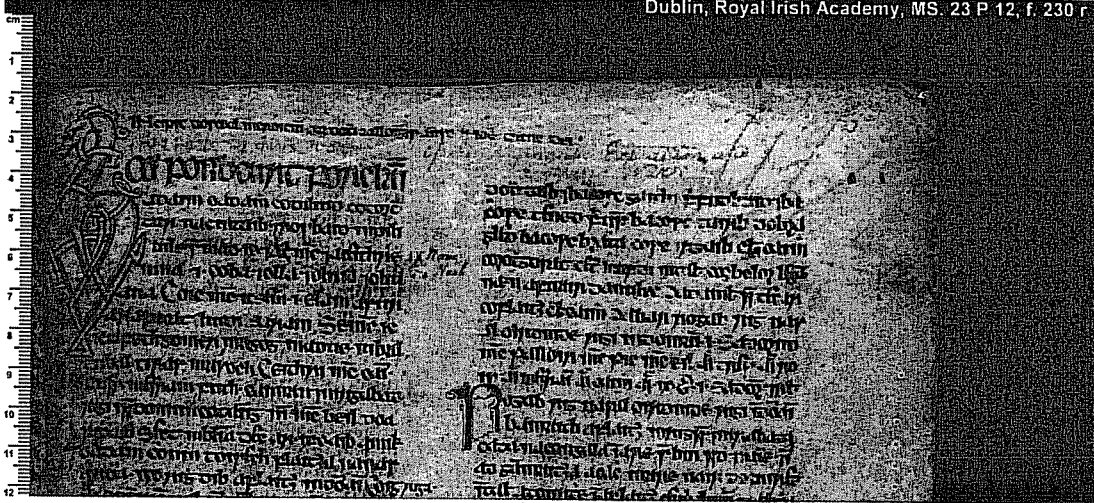
(19a) Dares Phrygius, qui hanc historiam scripsit, ait se militasse usque dum Troia capta est: hos se vidisse cum induciae essent, partim proelio interfuisse. A Dardanis audisse, qua facie et natura fuissent Castor et Pollux. (ch. 12; cf. Dictys Cretensis 1.13)

(19b) Hectorem blaesum, candidum, crispum, strabonem, pernicipibus membris, vultu venerabili, barbatum, decentem, bellicosum, animo magnum, civibus clementem, dignum et amoris aptum. (ch. 12)

(19c) Merionem rufum, mediocri statura, corpore rotundo, virosum, pertinacem, crudelem, impatientem. Briseidam formosam, alta statura, candidam, capillo flavo et molli, superciliis junctis, oculis venustis, corpore aequali, blandam, affabilem, verecundam, animo simplici, piam.(ch. 13)

20. The opening of *Togail Troí* in the Book of Ballymote version (MS date, c. 1390)

Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, MS. 23 P 12, f. 230 r



21. “Cía no-bétis émh” ar íat “secht tengtha i cind cech áin acanne, ní fétfaimis aiséis cech neich atchondcammar.”

“Though indeed there were seven tongues in the head of each of us” said they “we would not be able to give the description of everyone that we saw.” (Togail Troí I 774-6 Stokes)

22. Homeri est: οὐδ’ εἴ μοι δέκα μὲν γλῶσσαι, δέκα δὲ στόματ’ εἶεν... (Macrobius, *Saturnalia* 6.3.6. (See Miles (forthcoming), ch. 3, with further refs.; cf. C. Wright, *The Irish Tradition in Old English Literature* (Cambridge, 1988), 145-56)

23. Tanic íar sin fó shlúag na Moesiánda amal leoman londcrehtaig íarna thocrád fo chuileanaib, no amal tarb ndasachtach díá tabar drochbéim.

Then [Achilles] came through the host of Mysians like a fiercely-wounding lion worried on account of its cubs, or like a furious bull to which an evil blow is given. (Togail Troí I 727)

24. For them Peleus’ son [Achilles] began the close-packed lamentation, groaning deeply like a lion born to strength, whose cubs a deer-hunting man has stolen from out of the dense wood, and the lion comes after him in anger, and goes through the thickets hunting after the man’s traces, in case it can find him, for bitter anger has seized it... (*Iliad* 18.316ff.)

25. Do-impo fan samla sin risna sluagaib amal leoman lanfhergach risna gabaid gaiscedaig arna chrad
¶ma chuileanaib, conid cuma leis bas 7 betha d’ fagbail. (*Togail na Tebe* 4017-19)

He turned in this way upon the hosts like a lion full of anger whom warriors attack when he is vexed on account of his cubs, so that it does not matter to him whether he dies or lives.

26. Ut lea, quam saevo fetam pressere cubili

Venantes Numidae, natos erecta superstat,
 Mente sub incerta torvum ac miserabile frendens;
 Illa quidem turbare globos et frangere morsu
 Tela queat, sed prolis amor crudelia vincit
 Pectora, et a media catulos circumspicit ira. (Statius, *Thebaid* 10.414 ff.)

27. “Is maith ane in láa” ol Cathbad. “Is glé bid airdairc 7 bid animgnaid (anetargnaid *Strachan*, followed by O’Rahilly) intí gébas gaisced and acht bid duthain nammá.”

“Amra brígi són!” ol Cú Chulaind. Acht ropa airderc-sa, maith lim cenco beind acht oenlá for domun. (TBC 1 638-41)

“It is indeed a day of good omen”, said Cathbad. “It is certain that he who takes up arms today will be famous and renowned, but he will, however, be short-lived.”

“A mighty thing!” said Cú Chulainn. “Provided I be famous, I am content to be only one day on earth.” (tr. O’Rahilly)

28. Apud Homerum Achilles refert, matrem deam sibi dixisse, ut si bello Troiano se subtraheret et reducem patriae daret, alta senecta viveret, sed inglorius; si vero apud Troiam pugnando perseveraret, adeptus magnam gloriam primaevus obcumberet. (Servius Danielis at *Aeneid* 4.696, cited by Miles ch.4)

29...quos nec apud Frigios, mediis nec repperit undis,
 credit esse deos sterilique reversa favore
 diis urbes auxit, thure aras, marmore templa.
 sic Britonum ridenda fides et credulus error
 Arturum expectat exspectabitque perenne. (Joseph of Exeter, *De Bello Troiano* 3.469-72)

They found them not among the Trojans nor in the midst of the waves, so they believed them to be gods. Turned back, with useless devotion they increased their cities with gods, their altars with incense, their temples with marble. Just so does the laughable trust and gullible error of the Britons wait for Arthur, and will wait for ever.

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