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Homer's Epic Poetry as History

Homer's epic poems the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are universally regarded as great works of art. They are most often referred to as works of legend or mythology, for these qualities are strongly apparent in the telling of the story, but the question of how much actual history is present in the poems has been under debate for thousands of years. That the heroic battle Homer describes in the *Iliad* on the Plains of Troy might have actually taken place adds much to the poem for many readers. How much of the *Iliad* is based on historical events, and to what extent scholars have been able to illustrate or support this position, is a fascinating question. My goal in this paper is to show that the historical aspects of the *Iliad*, the tome I will focus on, work together with Homer's storytelling to form a great work of art.

HISTORICAL ASPECTS OF HOMER

While there is much debate on the Trojan War upon such issues as how long it lasted, what were its causes, and who the victors were, that it was an actual event that happened many years ago is supported by the majority of scholars on this subject. Richard Lattimore, in the introduction to his translation of the *Iliad*, states that "for most persons, at least, it was a piece of history, not a piece of legend or myth; and the main characters and the essential course of events were matters of general agreement" (12). Another Homer scholar, Michael Reck, reinforces Lattimore's

position: "The Trojan War was verified as historical fact by the archaeological discoveries in the late nineteenth century by Heinrich Schliemann and his successors though it was not the legendary battle described in the *Iliad*" (468). Referring to Schliemann's work, Reck can even provide a date—1210 B.C.—and a place—"on a hill four miles inland from the Dardanelles" for the fall of Troy (2).

Presumably, from that time and place, the story of the fall of Troy, over unknown decades or centuries, made its way to the poet known as Homer. Or as Lattimore states, "From the event, the legend, and from the legend, Homer; but between the event and Homer, we see now, the legend had time to grow" (20).

THE ART OF HOMER

The goal of Homer was not, however, to chronicle the history of an important event. As large in scope, as the *Iliad* would seem, it is really only concerned with a narrow portion of the Trojan War and the fall of Troy. Lattimore writes, "The *Iliad* is not the story of Troy. Neither the beginning nor the end of the war is narrated in the *Iliad*. We begin in the tenth year of the siege . . ." (17). Homer's goal, it would seem, was to tell a story, and the focus of that story was the character of Achilles. From the time of his quarrel with Agamemnon to his jealousies and wounded pride, to his mourning of his friend Patroklos, and to his vengeance on Hektor, Achilles occupies the center of the *Iliad*. To render the tragedy of Achilles in memorable fashion, Homer employed all of the elements of the oral tradition of his time, or what is often called the Homeric Style. These included the dactylic hexameter of the poetry, the intriguing

characterizations of the heroes, dialogue, conflict, the presence of the gods, the arresting use of simile, and many more.

CONCLUSION

The historical aspect of the *Iliad* cannot be separated from its story. That a people, the Mycenae civilization, lived many centuries ago, that they dwelt in a specific place with a climate and customs and dress, and that they fought battles, was certainly used by Homer, and his precursors, to great advantage, to tell a story. Lattimore writes that the plight of Achilles “cannot be completely torn loose from the story of Troy . . . “ (17). In fact, the mysterious history of the region adds an element of legend and myth to the *Iliad* that wouldn't be there without it, and which compliments the epic poem of Homer.

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Works Cited

Lattimore, Richard, trans. *Illiad*. By Homer. Richard Lattimore. London: The University of Chicago Press, 1951. Print.

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