

Homer, the Iliad

1. Historical context and content

Content:

Trojan War, historicity disputed but nothing argues against its existence (multiple conflicts)

Schliemann's excavations

Troy's strategic position makes many wars inevitable

Even a dynastic conflict cannot be excluded

Absolutely no indications

Some weaponry, however, points at Mycenaean warriors (types of helmets and swords)

Some linguistic evidence as well (although that is dangerous to use)

XIII – XII BC is sometimes assumed, but we have not a single indication for this

Context:

Old aristocracy, kings and kingdoms fighting for power

Iliad:

- heroism, battles

- warriors and anonymous soldiers

- suffering for all, but commoners almost invisible (Thersites is an exception)

- ruler decides, others follow

Odyssey:

- changes, challenges and upheaval (?) seem ongoing as can be seen by the suitors' behaviour

- and claims, and by Odysseus' travels and his painstaking efforts to regain power

- trickery, magic, fairytales, deceit, ...

- Akhilleus in the Hades: I would rather live as a day-labourer than be the king of the Underworld

??? Do we need to look for the reasons for the writing down / the creation of a written version of the epics in this societal change ???

2. Homer

1.1 Person

As person many uncertainties: has he ever existed at all?

Autobiographic data in later works such as the Certamen (text describing a mythical contest between Homer and Hesiod, which Hesiod won)?

Blind?? (mythical)

1.2 Literature

First piece of Western literature (texts existed before, Linear B tablets)

Ideals of the aristocracy

Epic poetry: dactylic hexameter (later also used for other genres)

Orally transmitted: formulaic language, repeated verses, some inconsistencies in the content.

Bards wandering from court to court to sing about the heroic past of the aristocratic families? (cf. Akhilleus who sings himself or Demodokos and Phemios in the Odyssey) Were these families still in power or had the new power bases already been established?

Initially, the old rulers were still in charge but probably during the transmission of the poems the ruling power switched hands and sides.

Different linguistic stages due to different spheres of influence or different regions of wandering by the poets?

Writer (!) of the poem?

Writer of the poems (!)?

Homeric Hymns

Dating? IX, VIII, VII BC?

Peisistratidean redaction because too many different versions?

Mythical person created for the sake of the myth?

⇒ Why would that happen? Cui bono? Creation of the aristocracy?

1.3 Hesiod

Hesiod: no doubts

Ideals between the two differ and do not differ

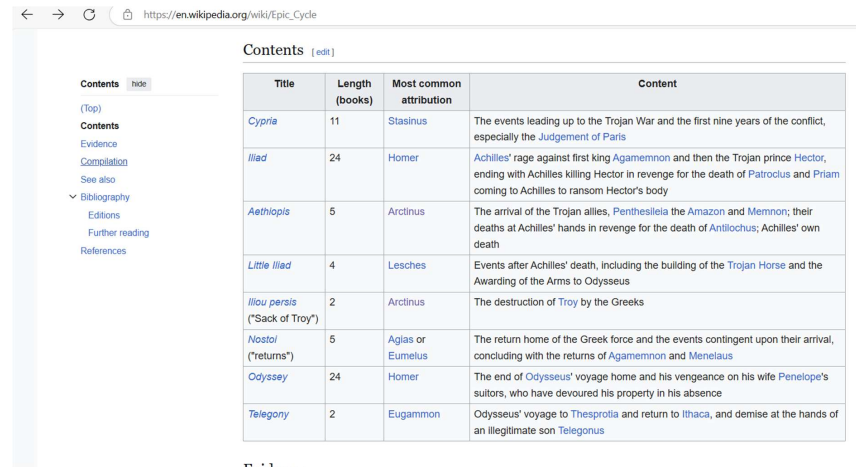
Hesiod: origin gods (theology, mythology) and everyday life (virtue and hard labour), human misery, almightiness of the gods

Homer: aristocracy, honour but also human misery, almightiness of the gods

3. Epic Cycle

Epic Cycle: stories about the War on Troy.

Final verse Iliad alternative version transmitted to make the transition to another epic work



Title	Length (books)	Most common attribution	Content
<i>Cypria</i>	11	Stasinus	The events leading up to the Trojan War and the first nine years of the conflict, especially the <i>Judgement of Paris</i>
<i>Iliad</i>	24	Homer	<i>Achilles'</i> rage against first king Agamemnon and then the Trojan prince Hektor, ending with Achilles killing Hector in revenge for the death of <i>Patroclus</i> and Priam coming to Achilles to ransom Hector's body
<i>Aethiopis</i>	5	Arctinus	The arrival of the Trojan allies, Penthesileia the Amazon and Memnon; their deaths at Achilles' hands in revenge for the death of Antiochus; Achilles' own death
<i>Little Iliad</i>	4	Lesches	Events after Achilles' death, including the building of the <i>Trojan Horse</i> and the Awarding of the Arms to Odysseus
<i>Ilou persis</i> ("Sack of Troy")	2	Arctinus	The destruction of Troy by the Greeks
<i>Nostoi</i> ("returns")	5	Aglas or Eumelus	The return home of the Greek force and the events contingent upon their arrival, concluding with the returns of Agamemnon and Menelaus
<i>Odyssey</i>	24	Homer	The end of <i>Odysseus'</i> voyage home and his vengeance on his wife Penelope's suitors, who have devoured his property in his absence
<i>Telegony</i>	2	Eugammon	Odysseus' voyage to Thesprotia and return to Ithaca, and demise at the hands of an illegitimate son Telegonus

Example: Odyssey relates a story about a rift between Odysseus and Akhilleus and how Agamemnon rejoiced (!) in this.

These stories survive also in many tragedies

Later Epic works:

Quintus Smyrnaios (III AD?), between Iliad and Odyssey (destruction of Troy)

Triphiodoros (V AD?): capture of Troy

Traditional ending Iliad 24.804: ὧς οἱ γ' ἀμφίεπον τάφον Ἑκτορος ἱποδάμοιο.

“So they prepared/gathered around the burial of horse breaking Hektor”

Other ending and initial verse of Aithiopis

ὧς οἱ γ' ἀμφίεπον τάφον Ἑκτορος· ἦλθε δ' Ἀμαζών,

Ἄρης θυγάτηρ μεγάλητορος ἀνδροφόνιοιο.

“So they prepared the funeral of Hektor; then the Amazon Penthesileia came, daughter of great-hearted man-slaughtering Ares.”

Other elements/episodes from the Trojan War saga

Story is known

The details differ (this allowed the poets to “create” new stories)

Other works almost certainly not by Homer

BUT: there are many allusions to other stories in Homer (sometimes even differing from what we “know” of from what has come down to us).

4. Iliad 1

Synopsis

New thematic, not in the main story of the Trojan War

Iliad is not the song of the War

It treats only 50 days of the entire 10 years of the War.

MHNIS, oulomenen: self-destructive as well (middle)

Wrath, not anger, not rational, not impulsive and short-term

Agamemnon ruler without psychology, simple physical and political power

Akhilleus: younger generation, physical power and honesty

War booty

Khryses - Apollon

Divine justice

Nobody transgresses with impunity

Kalkhas – Akhilleus

Akhilleus rebukes Agamemnon

Agamemnon abuses his power

Akhilleus reacts

Language of Akhilleus points at Agamemnon's constant transgressions (bis)

Akhilleus wants to kill Agamemnon but Athene stops him

Akhilleus announces his withdrawals, Agamemnon is not impressed

Nestor mediates in vain: your behaviour will cause pain to us all and joy to the opponent

Akhilleus withdraws and pleads with Thetis

Thetis to Zeus

Zeus imposes his will

Hephaistos mediates in vain and reveals himself as vulnerable

Zeus threatens and wins

Akhilleus withdraws and hurts himself

Resumed in 24

Books 2-8: in the last year?

Probably flashback towards the **first** year? (so among others Latacz)

5. Iliad 6

Most touching book of the Iliad (with 24)

Glaukos and Diomedes: aristocratic traditions

gift exchange,

mentioning one's genealogy,

they are related, hence they will avoid each other in battle

Hektor and Andromakhe:

Hektor puts honour and duty over family happiness

Hektor predicts the doom and slavery, pronounces the famous words that she is the wife of the brave Hektor

Speech-within-the-speech in which Hektor already reveals what he really thinks

Famous goodbye with the little son, Astyanax: little one frightened by the helmet

Trojan women offer to Athena but are refused

Paris as *Versager*, chastised by Hektor.

This cannot have happened in the first year (against Latacz' theory of book 2-8 as flashbacks)

6. Iliad 9

Embassy to plead for the return: Odysseus, Phoinix, Aias son of Telamon (“the daring, enduring”)

Akhilleus sings as a rhapsode about the heroic acts of men (reminiscent of the travelling bards)

Honour is worth more than gifts

Phoinix as a sort of guardian of Akhilleus like Patroklos

Old habits and customs

Odysseus revealed as deceiver and opportunist

Akhilleus scathingly rebukes him, 9.312-313

Language of Akhilleus points at Agamemnon’s constant transgressions (bis)

Phoinix speaks, mythical exemplum of Meleagros: do not wait until it is too late to intervene

Akhilleus answers

Aias rebukes him

Akhilleus then slightly opens the door: I will only come back when the fire is at the ships

Phoinix stays with Akhilleus

The others return and bring the message

Diomedes responds: Akhilleus cannot be swayed by us, let us continue without him

Diomedes, new ruling class, upcoming hoplites (?), younger generation?

After this embassy, there is the interpolated Book 10.

The battle proceeds relatively even with Diomedes and Odysseus facing Hektor and Paris also challenging Diomedes. Then, however, the Greeks become more and more cornered, with Makhaon, the physician, being wounded (and also in the course until book 16, Diomedes, Odysseus and Agamemnon). Also Nestor is being returned from battle.

Akhilleus will ask Patroklos to enquire what is going on. Eventually, this visit and the ensuing battles culminate in a point of no return, which will force Akhilleus to revisit his stance. The battle reaches its height with Hektor pushing the Greeks to the limit, ignoring warnings of the other Trojans that he is beginning to act overconfidently (Book 12-13).

Many attempts will be made by mortals and gods to reverse the fates, even by seducing and temporarily neutralising Zeus (book 14) but Zeus will reestablish the situation as it was, with the Trojans having the upper hand (book 15).

7. Book 16

Patroklos reproaches Akhilleus for the Greeks’ abysmal situation.

He begs Akhilleus to let him disguise himself as Akhilleus and support the Greeks.

Reluctantly, Akhilleus agrees.

Akhilleus tells him to ward off the attack but **not** to assail the city.

Patroklos enters the battle with the Myrmidons (Akhilleus’ contingent) and obtains successes, even killing Zeus’ son Sarpedon.

Zeus considers saving his son.

Gods are bound by Fate as well.

Aineias is spared.

Apollon holds back Patroklos, telling him nor he nor Akhilleus are fated to take the city.

Hektor had in the meantime withdrawn into the city walls but is led out by Apollon again into fighting Patroklos.

Hektor kills Patroklos with help of Apollon.

Hektor vaunts Patroklos, assuming that Akhilleus incited him to overstep the boundaries, which is what Akhilleus had not done.

Patroklos warns Hektor with his dying words.

Hybris and Ate by Patroklos.

After Patroklos’ death a new episode starts.

The Greeks need to rescue the body.

Akhilleus foregoes his wrath as if it never existed.

He requests a new body armour from his mother Thetis.

Thetis asks Hephaistos to assemble one.

Akhilleus already shouts over the battlefield and scares the Trojans.

Then, he reenters the battle and starts a relentless killing spree.

Apollon succeeds in keeping him away from Troy and Hektor, but this cannot continue for ever.

8. Book 22.

Crescendo towards the climax of the Iliad: the two best meet.

Hektor avoids the battle.

Apollon initially protects Hektor.

Destiny as a weighing scale: the lots are cast, Hektor's falls down and his fate is sealed.

Akhilleus kills him.

Hektor begs for respect but is denied.

Hektor threatens Akhilleus in his dying words (cf. Patroklos).

Akhilleus dismisses this.

Trojan women wail as if the city had already fallen.

9. Iliad 24

Akhilleus surpasses all boundaries of humanity and respect for the fallen opponent.

Gods are shocked and demand action.

Thetis is summoned to pass the message.

Note: Zeus -> Thetis -> Akhilleus in the reverse sequence of Book 1

Akhilleus agrees

Priam is informed by Hermes that he can ransom Hektor's body

Description of the journey in which they meet Hermes the thief and trickster god who will act here as Priam's protector.

Priam sneaks into the camp and succeeds entering Akhilleus' tent without being noticed.

Awe and anger with Akhilleus.

Dramatic depiction of Priam as a suppliant in a strange country in exile after having killed a man in his own land...

Priam reminds him of his own father.

Awe, respect: cleaning the body.

Anger: Priam asks to be quick, Akhilleus loses his temper.

Echo (verbatim!) of obeying in fear by Priam to Akhilleus and that of Khryses to Agamemnon

Emotional encounter: man-killing hands, I grasp the knees of the man who killed my son

Cf. Troy (the movie), but with one difference: Priam **is** afraid.

Akhilleus settles down, regains his composure and they eat together.

Mythical exemplum of Niobe: mortals are mercilessly punished by the gods for the slightest mistake.

Mutual admiration.

Akhilleus warns Priam that he has to go, because of Agamemnon.

They agree on a truce for ten days.

Priam returns

Announced by Kassandra.

Mourning speeches by the female protagonists.

Andromakhe: now I am unprotected and our son is an orphan

Hekabe, his mother: killing you did not bring back Patroklos

Helen, even she was well-treated by him.

10. The most important characters

Agamemnon:

monolithical, one-sided

fails to see beyond his own power,

assumes that money and power will “fix” everything,

does not seem to know that deceit exists nor does he understand psychology (cf. Iliad 2, the mutiny and rush to the ships),

other stories of the Epic Cycle show his tragic nature, Iphigeneia, Klytaimnestra.

Hektor:

did nothing wrong and was always virtuous but fell eventually victim to his own overconfidence (which he often feared).

Hektor was blinded and thus caused his own downfall.

Speeches-within-the speech: Hektor brought doom on Troy by his actions.

Ersatz-Akhilleus in the battle with Patroklos

Akhilleus:

one-sided in his own way,

sees everything in the light of honour, pride and excellence,

loses everything because of his pride, his own death is nothing less than a liberation,

shows on occasion the same vices as Agamemnon,

transgresses the boundaries of the acceptable: cannibalism, mutilation of Hektor, threatens to kill Priam.

Is he the exponent/indication of a change in ruling class?

Not certain, because he is not a community-person, he fails to see, just as Agamemnon, that individual actions have consequences for the entire community.

Priam:

most tragic figure of all,

does nothing wrong and makes no mistakes (contrary to Hektor),

assumes his responsibilities,

welcomes Helen,

ransoms Hektor,

is well aware of his own is depicted a suppliant in a strange country in exile after having killed a man in his own land fate, especially when he scoffs his surviving sons for not having died instead of Hektor,

is depicted as a suppliant in a strange country in exile after having killed a man in his own land (the only man who does not kill in the poem...),

will nevertheless lose everything and die when Troy is captured.

Odysseus:

secondary character,

needs to intervene to save the expedition and quench the mutiny in Book 2,

opportunistic,

scathingly debunked by Akhilleus in book 9,

not yet a protagonist as he will be in the Odyssey and in the other epic stories (Aias, Palamedes).

Diomedes:

secondary character,

adjunct to Odysseus,

comical figure,

seems an indication of a new class rising to power,

knows very little boundaries (cf. fight against the gods).

Patroklos:

seems invention of the Iliad,

Akhilleus' alter ego, needed for Akhilleus' introspection and change of action,

when he dies, Akhilleus loses a part of himself.

Nestor:

anachronism of an earlier age,

“grandpa tells stories”,

earlier generations, earlier society,

never challenged, as if he does not matter anymore or as if it is useless to challenge him,

Agamemnon often flatly ignores his advice as well.

Menelaos and Paris, the actual causes of the conflict, play a very secondary and backstage role: the former as victor without victory in the duel and as victim of Pandaros, and the latter as powerless puppet in Aphrodite's hand (cf. book 3), object of ridicule and anger by Hektor and example of cowardice (shooting arrows).

Their secondary role is easily understood when we take into account that the *Iliad* does not treat the Trojan War but only a single event in the tenth year.

The only two “victors” of the Homeric poems seem to be Nestor and Menelaos because they reach their homes without much danger (cf. *Odyssey*) and their power is not challenged.

Female characters

goddesses:

Athena

Hera

Thetis

Aphrodite

mortals

Helen

Andromakhe

Briseis

(Hekabe)

11. Why this selection?

12. Some additional considerations

Ringcomposition of the *Iliad*.

Allusions to other elements in the Epic Cycle: death of Akhilleus, Kassandra, Agamemnon's death, Oidipous (in *Odyssey*, with another name for his mother), Nostoi (fatal homecomings), rift between Aias and Odysseus

Aristotle: one tragedy out of the *Iliad*, many out of the Epic Cycle.
true, but many could be made, as each hero has his tragic “lifecycle”.

“Page's Law”: Denys Page argued (I do not know if he was indeed the first to do so) that the poet of the *Odyssey* never referenced events of the *Iliad* (and assumed therefore that they were different). Patroklos is not mentioned in the *Odyssey*.

13. Simone Weil

1909-1943

Jewish descent, fled from France to the UK.

Died of tuberculosis, refusing treatment in order to suffer what her fellow countrymen in Nazi-occupied France were enduring (she is said to have basically starved herself to death).

1940: *L'Iliade ou le poème de la force*.

The horrors of the nazi-extermination-camps were not yet known)

The Iliad is a poem of force, violence imposed on human beings. They are the subjects (patients) of what happens and not the actors.

Le vrai héros, le vrai sujet, le centre de l'Iliade, c'est la force.

Violence reduces humans into objects, even if they have not died yet.

There are no strong ones, no weaklings, no victors, only victims.

This spirit lives on in the tragedies by Aiskhylos and Sophokles.

Latacz, Joachim. 1989. *Homer. Der erste Dichter des Abendlandes*. München: Artemis-Verlag.
(used in the Dutch translation from 1991. *Homeros. De eerste dichter van het Avondland*.
Nijmegen: SUN)