

GREEK EPIC

The great epics of Homer, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, were parts of a vast 'epic cycle' which was composed in early Greece, on the whole perhaps somewhat later than Homer's work, which was first written down in the 8th century B.C.E. Though these epics—the *Cypria*, the *Aethiopis*, the *Ilioupersis*, and several others—remain only in fragments, we know both from those fragments, many of them appended to Homer texts in the 9th and 10th centuries C.E., and from scattered references in Greek texts from the time of the Library of Alexandria on, that the material of this 'epic cycle' was largely concerned with the events around the besieging and taking of Troy, and the returning home of the Greek warriors, post-war. From the existence of this cycle, we conclude that there was a loose confederation of oral bards, of whom Homer was one, who plied their trade to aristocratic audiences up and down the Asia Minor coast and the eastern Mediterranean in early Iron Age Greece.

Why did the texts of Homer survive, inspirational and funny to our time, while serving for their own culture as foundations of art, law texts, history books, and guides to the nature of the gods? We have to guess that the reason why Homer alone survived, of the many poems that composed the 'epic cycle,' is his genius, and mastery of the dactylic hexameter, though we cannot be sure of that. Whatever the now lost explanation for Homer's survival we can feel sure that the qualities that drove his text were of unique and universal importance.

In the *Iliad*, Homer deals—and on the highest artistic level—with 'eternal themes': war, lust, battle, heroism, love, self-sacrifice. The same poet who can introduce us to the volatile brilliance and passion of Achilles, can rub our noses in the nitty gritty of cavalry warfare, or the humble pie Priam must eat, in order to beg Achilles for the return of the body of Hector.

Homer's *Odyssey* is as rich as the *Iliad*, in universal values, and for many listeners and readers strikes home more intimately than do the martial themes of the *Iliad*. In the *Odyssey* we track the ten year homeward journey of one of the Greek warriors at Troy, Odysseus. This man 'of many wiles' must pass through fantastic challenges on his ocean return, not the least of which is a multi-year sojourn on a goddess' island, barely fending off the promise of immortality. In the end Odysseus must show himself capable of the ultimate show of strength, by stringing and shooting the bow that none of the suitors in his household could deal with. Odysseus, wily, subtle, cruel, faithful, remains one of western literature's keystones of literary power.

Readings

Gilbert Murray, *The Rise of the Greek Epic*, Oxford, 1924
Burgess, Jonathan, *The tradition of the Trojan War in Homer and the Epic Cycle*, Johns Hopkins, 2003

Discussion questions

What, about Homer's two epics, would qualify them to become a kind of 'Bible for the Greeks,' in the later pre-Christian centuries? There are many practical messages in Homer's work, but is there a religious message, a wisdom about the gods?

Samuel Butler's work, *The Authoress of the Odyssey* (1897), makes a startling claim for the feminine authorship of that epic. Please investigate his book. First, though, give some thought to his proposition: do you see some evidence, in the *Odyssey*, of a female creator?