

Warfare and Society in Ancient Greece

Lecture 3 The World of the Homeric Hero I: Why



Cultural significance of the Trojan War

Thucydides I.3

Before the Trojan War there is no indication of any common action in Hellas, nor indeed of the universal prevalence of the name [...]. The best proof of this is furnished by Homer. Born long after the Trojan War, he nowhere calls all of them by that name, nor indeed any of them except the followers of Achilles from Phthiotis, who were the original Hellenes [...]. He does not even use the term barbarian, probably because the Hellenes had not yet been marked off from the rest of the world by one distinctive appellation. It appears therefore that the several Hellenic communities, comprising not only those who first acquired the name, *city by city*, as they came to understand each other, but also those who assumed it afterwards as the name of the whole people, were before the Trojan war prevented by their want of strength and the absence of mutual intercourse from displaying any collective action.



The Bronze Age

Hesiod, *Works and Days* 260-275

Their armour was of bronze, and their houses of bronze, and of bronze were their implements: there was no black iron. These were destroyed by their own hands and passed to the dank house of chill Hades, and left no name [...]. But when earth had covered this generation also, Zeus the son of Cronos made yet another, the fourth, upon the fruitful earth, which was nobler and more righteous, a god-like race of hero-men who are called demi-gods, the race before our own [...]. Grim war and dread battle destroyed a part of them, some in the land of Cadmus at seven-gated Thebe when they fought for the flocks of Oedipus, and some, when it had brought them in ships over the great sea gulf to Troy for rich-haired Helen's sake: there death's end enshrouded a part of them.

Homer, *Iliad* 1.259-279

In earlier times I moved among men more warlike than you, and never did they despise me. Such warriors have I never since seen, nor shall I see, as Peirithous was and Dryas, shepherd of the people, and Caeneus and Exadius and godlike Polyphemus, and Theseus, son of Aegeus, a man like the immortals. Mightiest were these of men reared upon the earth; mightiest were they, and with the mightiest they fought, the mountain-dwelling centaurs, and they destroyed them terribly. With these men I had fellowship, when I came from Pylos, from a distant land far away; for they themselves called me. And I fought on my own; with those men could no one fight of the mortals now upon the earth. Yes, and they listened to my counsel, and obeyed my words. So also should you obey, since to obey is better. Neither do you, mighty though you are, take away the girl, but let her be, as the sons of the Achaeans first gave her to him as a prize; nor do you, son of Peleus, be minded to strive with a king, might against might, for it is no common honour that is the portion of a sceptre-holding king, to whom Zeus gives glory.



Heroic ethics

Homer, *Iliad* 6.474-481

He kissed his dear son, and fondled him in his arms, and spoke in prayer to Zeus and the other gods: “Zeus and ye other gods, grant that this my child may likewise prove, even as I, pre-eminent (*aripepea*) amid the Trojans, and as valiant in might, and that he rule mighty over Ilios. And some day may some man say of him as he cometh back from war, ‘He is better far than his father’; and may he bear the blood-stained spoils of the foeman he hath slain, and may his mother’s heart wax glad.”

Homer, *Iliad* 6.206-210

But Hippolochus begat me and of him do I declare that I am sprung; and he sent me to Troy and straitly charged me ever to be bravest and pre-eminent above all, and not bring shame upon the race of my fathers, that were far the noblest in Ephyre and in wide Lycia. This is the lineage and the blood whereof I avow me sprung.”



Shame culture

Homer, *Iliad* 11.401-410

Now Odysseus famed for his spear, was left alone, nor did anyone of the Argives abide by him, for that fear had laid hold of them all. Then mighty moved he spake unto his own great-hearted spirit: “Woe is me; what is to befall me? Great evil were it if I flee, seized with fear of the throng; yet this were a worse thing, if I be taken all alone, for the rest of the Danaans hath the son of Cronos scattered in flight. But why doth my heart thus hold converse with me? For I know that they are cowards that depart from battle, whereas whoso is pre-eminent in fight, him verily it behoveth to hold his ground boldly, whether he be smitten, or smite another.”

Homer, *Iliad* 12.310-328

“Glaucus, wherefore is it that we twain are held in honour above all with seats, and messes, and full cups in Lycia, and all men gaze upon us as on gods? Aye, and we possess a great demesne by the banks of Xanthus, a fair tract of orchard and of wheat-bearing plough-land. Therefore now it behoveth us to take our stand amid the foremost Lycians, and confront the blazing battle that many a one of the mail-clad Lycians may say: “Verily no inglorious men be these that rule in Lycia, even our kings, they that eat fat sheep and drink choice wine, honey-sweet: nay, but their might too is goodly, seeing they fight amid the foremost Lycians. Ah friend, if once escaped from this battle we were for ever to be ageless and immortal, neither should I fight myself amid the foremost, nor should I send thee into battle where men win glory; but now—for in any case fates of death beset us, fates past counting, which no mortal may escape or avoid—now let us go forward, whether we shall give glory to another, or another to us.”



The catalogue of the ships

Homer, *Iliad* 2.569-590

And they that held Mycenae, the well-built citadel, and wealthy Corinth, and well-built Cleonae, and dwelt in Orneiae and lovely Araethyrea and Sicyon, wherein at the first Adrastus was king; and they that held Hyperesia and steep Gonoessa and Pellene, and that dwelt about Aegium and

throughout all Aegialus, and about broad Helice,—of these was the son of Atreus, lord Agamemnon, captain, with an hundred ships. With him followed most people by far and goodliest; and among them he himself did on his gleaming bronze, a king all-glorious, and was pre-eminent among all the warriors, for that he was noblest, and led a people far the most in number. And they that held the hollow land of Lacedaemon with its many ravines, and Pharis and Sparta and Messe, the haunt of doves, and that dwelt in Bryseiae and lovely Augeiae, and that held Amyclae and Helus, a citadel hard by the sea, and that held Laas, and dwelt about Oetylus,—these were led by Agamemnon's brother, even Menelaus, good at the war-cry, with sixty ships; and they were marshalled apart. And himself he moved among them, confident in his zeal, urging his men to battle; and above all others was his heart fain to get him requital for his strivings and groanings for Helen's sake.



Why heroes fight

Homer, *Iliad* 1.147-171

Glaring from beneath his brows spoke to him swift-footed Achilles: “Ah me, clothed in shamelessness, thinking of profit, how shall any man of the Achaeans obey your words with a ready heart either to go on a journey or to fight against men with force? It was not on account of the Trojan spearmen that I came here to fight, since they have done no wrong to me. Never have they driven off my cattle or my horses, nor ever in deep-soiled Phthia, nurse of men, did they lay waste the harvest, for many things lie between us—shadowy mountains and sounding sea. But you, shameless one, we followed, so that you might rejoice, seeking to win recompense for Menelaus and for yourself, dog-face, from the Trojans. This you disregard, and take no heed of. And now you threaten that you will yourself take my prize away from me, for which I toiled so much, which the sons of the Achaeans gave to me. Never have I prize like yours, whenever the Achaeans sack a well-inhabited citadel of the Trojans. The brunt of furious battle do my hands undertake, but if ever an apportionment comes, your prize is far greater, while small but dear is the reward I take to my ships, when I have worn myself out in the fighting. Now I will go back to Phthia, since it is far better to return home with my beaked ships, nor do I intend while I am here dishonoured to pile up riches and wealth for you.”



Heroic society

Homer, *Iliad* 2.188-206

Whenever I encountered a noble and prominent man, he restrained him with gentle words: “Friend, it is not fitting for you to be frightened like this. Sit down and restrain the people. You do not clearly understand the words of Agamemnon. He now makes test; soon he will press upon the son of the Achaeans. Did we not all hear what he said in council? May he not in his anger harm some of the Achaeans? For the anger of a Zeus-bred king is great. Honor comes for him from the god and Zeus of the Counsels loves him”. When he came upon some man of the people and saw him shouting, he struck him with the scepter and issued a sharp command to him. “Fool, be still and listen to others who are your betters, you who are useless in war and a coward. Not all Achaeans can be kings. Many lords are a bad thing. Let there be one leader, one king to whom devious Zeus gave the power to judge and to rule over his people”.