

p. 79 The social and political picture painted by the Homeric epics is nothing more, of course, than the incidental backdrop before which are played the marvelous dramas of the anger of Achilles and the return of Odysseus. Human character and action are the main themes. Yet the backdrop is richly detailed, and the details are also wonderfully vivid and convincing. There are a few difficulties, to be sure, like the odd fact that although chariots and chariot-teams are lovingly described, chariotry is never used in actual combat; instead, Homeric chariots are only employed, like the taxis of the Marne, to get to the scene of the fight. Over-all, however, the picture painted is logical and consistent. Even the political relationships implied in the account of the Greek coalition against Troy make perfectly good political sense. So does the larger picture of an heroic society, warrior-led, heroic in outlook and standards, in which the common folk count for very little and the scene is always dominated by the ruling elite of bronze-armed fighting men. Both the consistency of the over-all (p.80) picture and the vividness of the details are best explained, I feel sure, by Milman Parry's theory of the composition of the Homeric epics, of which Sir Maurice Bowra is now the leading proponent. According to this theory, the epics were composed, or perhaps one should say, put into something like their surviving form, in the eighth century B.C., and therefore some centuries after Agamemnon's Mycenae and Nestor's Pulos had fallen into dust. But this great feat (or feats, if the Odyssey is later than the Iliad, as some suppose) was only the climax of a long tradition of oral poetry, deriving from Mycenaean times, and carried on through the centuries by bards who composed for recitation. From generation to generation, they passed on to their successors the main outlines of stories, the names of characters, devices of composition such as similes, and above all a whole mass of formulaic phrases varying from two words to several lines, which dealt not only with the ordinary mechanical matter of the epics, but also quite specifically with all sorts of details of daily life (p.81) in the much earlier time when the oral tradition began. These details might sometimes be altered or understood very imperfectly, as in the case of the heroes' highly peculiar chariot tactics. But this too is a common phenomenon of epic traditions.

p. 81 Despite the great gap in time between the destruction of Pylos in 1200 B.C. and the composition or assemblage of the Homeric epics in the eighth century, there is no reason to be surprised that Homer has now been justified by the archaeologists, and every bit as fully as old Schliemann could have wished. The heroic warrior class, still using bronze weapons which had long since given place to iron in Homer's time; the numerous kingdoms, located just where Homer placed them, with Mycenae first for wealth and power, just as Homer said; the richly decorated Mycenaean palaces like that of King Alcinous in Scheria, which must have seemed wholly mythical to the Greeks of Homer's time, who had no comparable palaces - all these main features of the Iliad and the Odyssey (p. 82) were based, as we now know, on the solid facts of the Mycenaean age of Greece. Some Greek scholars - although they are now a minority - are still engaged by the belief of their colleagues like Bowra and Wace and Blegen that Homer is generally a reliable guide, at least as far as he goes. Bitter criticism from this minority greeted a recent pro-Homer publication, the Companion to Homer jointly edited by the late Professor Wace and F. H. Stubbings. But to an outsider this sharpness sounded like an echo of the sort of thing that Schliemann was subjected to after his discovery of Mycenae, which finally drove him to accept the Phoenician trading post theory. The point is that Homer has been proved reliable as far as he goes on so many occasions, and in such odd ways.