

Modern Homeric scholarship began in 1795 with the Prolegomena ad Homerum of Friedrich August Wolf, who built on the idea of D'Aubignac, a seventeenth-century French critic who had denied the existence of Homer. Following Wolf, many Homeric scholars, arguing from repetitions and so-called inconsistencies, believed that the Iliad and the Odyssey were no more than mechanical collections of epic lays compiled at a relatively late date; or they accepted only a small part of each epic as the work of Homer, assigning the remainder to an earlier or a later date. Extreme separatist views led to the attempted dissection of the poems into Homeric and non-Homeric portions, but all such attempts failed to account for the amazing unity of plot and action in both poems. The older unitarian theory, that Homer himself composed the poems without the aid of earlier epic material, must likewise be abandoned, for such a view does not explain satisfactorily the presence of repetitions, digressions, and minor contradictions.

The most satisfactory explanation, and that of most recent scholars, is that Homer composed like other ancient and modern bards of oral poetry, using lines and groups of lines from earlier poems, but that the Iliad and the Odyssey as we have them are essentially his creation. The unity of plot, the clever manipulation of the threads of the action, the brilliant characterizations, and the expanded similes of great lyric beauty must be assigned to him. Homer's exact date may never be known; Herodotus placed him four hundred years before his own time, in the ninth century B.C., and this date may be approximately correct. The amazing thing is that so great a poetic achievement, which recreated the glories of a lost civilization and pictured events at the end of the Mycenaean Age, should come out of the Greek Dark Ages.

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