

## WHO'S WHO IN 'HOMERIC' SOCIETY?

## I. INTRODUCTION

Question and quotation marks tend to proliferate in articles which ask whether Homer can provide any historical information about early Greek society. In this article 'Homeric' society will refer to the society which is portrayed in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. 'The World of Odysseus' will refer to the recension of 'Homeric' society which appears in M. I. Finley's book of that name.<sup>1</sup> Finley claims that 'The World of Odysseus' is a faithful account of 'Homeric' society and that the latter is a literary portrait of a real society that existed in Greece some time during the dark ages. As a result of Finley's influential book, 'The World of Odysseus', or something very like it, has found its way into most of the history books generally available in the classroom.<sup>2</sup> In this article I wish to reconsider 'Homeric' society and to question the propriety of identifying it with either 'The World of Odysseus' or any real society.

Homer thought that he was describing real people and real events of the past (*Il.* 2. 484–92). Thucydides (1. 8. 4 ff.) also was confident that Agamemnon had existed and led an expedition to Troy some time after the thalassocracy of Minos, although Thucydides and his contemporaries had no idea of the remains of the Mycenaeans which lay just under their feet. When Heinrich Schliemann found those remains over two thousand years later, 'Homeric' society was given a Mycenaean background and described as a feudal monarchy. Walter Leaf, for example, described the 'empire of Agamemnon as a central government, ruled from Mykenae by the king of Argos, and supported around its borders by a ring of chieftains, all acknowledging his supremacy and following him in a great national adventure, the Trojan War'.<sup>3</sup> According to Leaf the Homeric poems '... deal only with a small dominant class, the chieftain and his retainers, who live together in the fortresses to feast and sing, while the common folk dwell in the country to till the soil for the benefit of their lords, with whom they share neither arts nor religion'.<sup>4</sup>

Twenty years later Martin Nilsson repeated with approval an opinion that 'Homeric' society was 'a loose feudalism of princes ruled by an overlord who ruled by undisputed divine right'.<sup>5</sup> In his chapter 'State Organization in Homer and in the Mycenaean Age' he had subdivisions called 1. Kingship, 2. The Army Assembly and 3. Vassals and Retainers. He had no section specifically on the lower levels of the social scale, but he mentioned the *thetes*, who, he said, were free labourers. 'Runaway slaves' and 'the great mass of the vagrant population... were compelled to earn a beggarly pittance,

<sup>1</sup> M. I. Finley, *The World of Odysseus* (first publ. 1954; 2nd ed., Harmondsworth, 1979).

<sup>2</sup> For example A. Andrewes, *Greek Society* (Harmondsworth, 1975), 45–7; M. T. W. Arnheim, *Aristocracy in Greek Society* (London, 1977), 13–23; P. Arnott, *Introduction to the Greek World* (London, 1972), 99–103; R. M. Cook, *The Greeks till Alexander* (London, 1961), 25–6; M. I. Finley, *Early Greece: The Bronze and Archaic Ages* (London, 1970), 84–7; P. Green, *A Concise History of Ancient Greece* (London, 1973), 48, 57; O. Murray, *Early Greece* (London, 1980), 38–68; C. G. Starr, *The Origins of Greek Civilization* (London, 1962), 123–33.

<sup>3</sup> Walter Leaf, *Homer and History* (London, 1915), 243; '... I am not afraid of the conclusion, however humorously put, that "Menelaos was a well-known infantry officer with auburn whiskers"' (p. 323).

<sup>4</sup> *op. cit.* 54.

<sup>5</sup> Martin Nilsson, *Homer and Mycenae* (London, 1933; repr. New York, 1968), 214.

by working for hire on the land.' When the great wars and migrations ended, these men were forced to settle down. 'This is the origin of the great mass of the lowest free population, the *thetes*.'<sup>6</sup>

Both these writers, and many others who were writing in this vein at the time, insisted that these descriptions of 'Homeric' society actually emerged from the poetry of Homer. Their descriptions were not incompatible with the archaeological evidence available to them in those days. But they did not base their descriptions upon the archaeological evidence. They claimed that Homer was the source of their information about Mycenaean society.

This view of 'Homeric' society was vigorously challenged by M. I. Finley in 'Homer and Mycenae: Property and Tenure'.<sup>7</sup> He compared the language of social classes and patterns of land ownership on the then recently translated Linear B tablets and in the Homeric poems and concluded that the social system had been transformed after the destruction of Mycenae. 'The Homeric world was altogether post-Mycenaean and the so-called reminiscences and survivals are rare, isolated, and garbled. Hence Homer is not only not a reliable guide to the Mycenaean tablets; he is no guide at all.'<sup>8</sup>

But Finley did not reject Homer altogether as a historical document. He too trusted that Homer would provide information about real-life society. Homer, he said, 'transmitted his inherited background materials with a deceptively cool precision. That enables us to treat his materials as the raw materials for the study of a real world of real men, a world of history and not of fiction'.<sup>9</sup> Finley however accepted Homer as a source of information about the society of the early dark ages rather than of the Mycenaean.<sup>10</sup> Although Homer can supply no evidence for any person or any event of the dark ages, none the less a picture of 'Homeric' society (social institutions and social values) can be extracted from the poems. 'A model can be constructed, imperfect, incomplete, untidy, yet tying together the fundamentals of political and social structure with an appropriate value system in a way that stands up to comparative analysis, the only control available to us in the absence of external documentation.'<sup>11</sup>

I shall be concerned with one particular aspect of Finley's model. His predecessors, impressed by the visible signs of personal authority in the Mycenaean kingdoms, emphasized the position of the king in Homer. But for Finley the king is little more than one of the nobles and the big divide in the social structure is between the nobles and the rest of the population. 'A deep horizontal cleavage marked the world of the Homeric poems. Above the line were the *aristoi*, literally the "best people", the hereditary nobles who held most of the wealth and all the power, in peace as in war. Below were all the others, for whom there was no collective technical term, the multitude. The gap between the two was rarely crossed, except by the inevitable accidents of wars and raids.'<sup>12</sup>

<sup>6</sup> *op. cit.* 244-5.

<sup>7</sup> *Historia* 6 (1957), 133-59, reproduced in *Language and Background of Homer*, ed. G. S. Kirk (Cambridge, 1964), 191-217.

<sup>8</sup> *op. cit.* 217.

<sup>9</sup> Finley, *The World of Odysseus*, 49.

<sup>10</sup> Finley thinks 'The World of Odysseus' belongs to the tenth and ninth centuries and defends his position in *Proceedings of the Classical Association* 71 (1974), 13-31. Others (e.g. O. Murray, *Early Greece*, 298) agree with his description of 'Homeric' society but assign it to the eighth century.

<sup>11</sup> Finley, *The World of Odysseus*, 153.

<sup>12</sup> *op. cit.* 53. Cf. Finley, *Early Greece: The Bronze and Archaic Ages*, 84: 'The world of Agamemnon and Achilles and Odysseus was one of petty kings and nobles, who possessed the best lands and considerable flocks, and lived a seignorial existence, in which raids and local wars were frequent'.

This model, 'The World of Odysseus', has not gone unopposed, but because there is no independent evidence and because archaeology is particularly unhelpful in providing evidence about social institutions and social values it has been difficult to make out a case against Finley's persuasive book. R. Hope Simpson and J. F. Lazenby voiced a feeling of malaise. 'The world depicted in the poems is, after all, essentially a poetic world, not a real world at all, though the material setting is largely realistic: can we really believe that real Greeks ever did behave as the heroes behave?'<sup>13</sup> To this Finley was able to reply 'The will to believe or not to believe is not an argument'.<sup>14</sup>

Professor Snodgrass, having surveyed the archaeological remains of the dark ages, concluded that Homer is unhistorical. The Homeric world with its elaborate gift exchange and ceremonial feasting is 'unimaginable in dark age Greece',<sup>15</sup> to which Finley could reply that the richness of the gifts and the feasts is one of the imaginary features of the 'Homeric' world.<sup>16</sup> In 1974 Snodgrass argued that some features of Homeric society are inconsistent with others.<sup>17</sup> He quoted the work of an anthropologist who claims that human societies as a whole fall into two groups, each distinguished by certain features, and that a society which displays the features of one group will not display many of the features of the other. Snodgrass maintained that features which are not often associated in real life none the less coincide in 'Homeric' society. Not all his readers, however, will easily be convinced that, for example, the use of the plough is incompatible with the transmission of property among the kin of one sex.

In this article I wish to review some aspects of 'Homeric' society. I shall argue that 'Homeric' society has some features which have not received sufficient attention from historians of Greek society. I shall isolate two aspects of 'Homeric' society in particular, the place of the common people and the position of the king. I shall argue that the common people hardly seem to exist in 'Homeric' society and that the king, who does exist, seems to have no function. Whether or not these features were characteristic of the contemporary or near-contemporary societies from which Homer drew his experience, both features make it necessary to revise the model of early Greek society that appears in our history books.

## II. THE MASSES, THE MULTITUDE, THE COMMONERS, THE PEASANTS, THE BULK OF THE POPULATION

As long ago as 1934, G. M. Calhoun argued, in an article called 'Classes and Masses in Homer', that there was no aristocracy in the Homeric world.<sup>18</sup> This article is often referred to in the literature on Homer, but never, to my knowledge, with approval. It is almost as if it regularly produces discomfort but never conviction.<sup>19</sup> Calhoun pointed out that there is in Homer none of the vocabulary with which the low born

<sup>13</sup> *The Catalogue of the Ships in Homer's Iliad* (Oxford, 1970), 6.

<sup>14</sup> Finley, *The World of Odysseus*, 144.

<sup>15</sup> A. M. Snodgrass, *The Dark Age of Greece* (Edinburgh, 1971), 392.

<sup>16</sup> Finley, *The World of Odysseus*, 157.

<sup>17</sup> Snodgrass, 'An Historical Homeric Society?', *JHS* 94 (1974), 114 ff. Cf. also A. A. Long, 'Morals and Values in Homer', *JHS* 90 (1970), 137 n. 58 '... a consistent pattern of society does not emerge from Homer'.

<sup>18</sup> G. M. Calhoun, 'Classes and Masses in Homer', *Classical Philology* 29 (1934), 192 ff. and 301 ff.

<sup>19</sup> In *A Companion to Homer*, ed. A. J. B. Wace and F. H. Stubbings (London, 1962), 438, the editors even include a footnote in the chapter contributed by Calhoun, disassociating themselves from his views.

were, in later Greek literature, distinguished from the well born (e.g. *εὐγενής*, *γενναῖος*, *γεννήτης*, *εὐπατρίδης*, *εὐπατρις*, *εὐπάτωρ*, *δυσγενής*, *δυσγένεια*, *ἀγενής*, *κακόπατρις*). Every time *ἀριστῆες*, *ἄριστοι*, *ἀγαθοί*, *κακοί*, *χέρηες* are used, they can be taken to refer to the talents and the qualities of the person in question. Even when Menelaus greets Telemachus and Pisistratus, saying that he can see that they come from good families (*Od.* 4. 62–4; cf. *Od.* 4. 611), even this does not necessarily imply anything more than that good looks, upright bearing and a fearless expression may be inherited. After all, Athene, disguised as a shepherd boy, looks like one of the children of kings (*Od.* 13. 221–4). Even when Odysseus sets off to perform services for the suitors *οἳά τε τοῖς ἀγαθοῖσι παραδρώωσι χέρηες* (*Od.* 15. 321–4), even this may be no more than what poor relations of a highland chief might do or, one might add, the admirers of a successful sportsman or entertainer.

For every instance where these words suggest inherited class distinction, especially to the ear that is expecting them, Calhoun can quote another where the words just mean brave, strong and successful, and certainly not well born. For example Nestor proposes to marshal the men and decide ... *ὅς θ' ἡγεμόνων κακὸς ὅς τέ νυ λαῶν ἦδ' ὅς κ' ἐσθλὸς ἔησι* (*Il.* 2. 365 ff.). And in another place it is proposed that shields should be exchanged (*Il.* 14. 376 ff.). If a brave man were carrying a poor shield, he should swap with a worse (*χείρονι*) man. From this, and from what Calhoun took to be a lack of interest in genealogies and pedigrees,<sup>20</sup> he argued that the Homeric poems do not reflect a society which had 'definitely crystallized into classes' or in which 'there was a nobility of birth'. He denied that the poet 'was acquainted with well-defined social classes'.<sup>21</sup>

Fifty years later Calhoun's starting point, the absence of a specialized vocabulary of breeding, has not been explained and his point of view has won hardly any understanding or support. While I was preparing this article it was sometimes suggested to me, for example, that the word *βασιλεύς* in itself established the contemporary existence of an hereditary upper class, although, in our own language, the use of 'Ladies' and 'Gentlemen' does no such thing, any more than the word 'Sister' in a convent or a hospital or at a feminist rally establishes a blood relationship. The existence of an aristocracy in 'Homeric' society, and hence in the real world some time during the dark ages, is never, to my knowledge, questioned. The heroes of the poems are taken to be the aristocrats of 'Homeric' society and the equivalent of an aristocratic class in the real world.

If aristocrats did exist or had recently existed in the world that Homer knew, it is only to be expected that his portrayal of them should be particularly prone to distortion. He inherited heroes like Agamemnon and Nestor from his predecessors, perhaps from as far back as the Bronze Age. And they may well have accumulated archaic characteristics, such as, perhaps, Agamemnon's sceptre. If aristocrats existed among the people who listened to him, they might have expected him to explain aristocratic status as being due to superior achievement and talent rather than to the accident of birth. For this sort of reason Homer's heroes are likely to be a particularly complex literary fiction. It might therefore be more rewarding to study his portrayal

<sup>20</sup> Opinions differ about the quantity and extent of the genealogies which are to be expected in an epic poem. Finley refers to 'endless recitation of genealogies' in *The World of Odysseus*, 59, 'innumerable genealogies' in 'Homer and Mycenae: Property and Tenure', *Historia* 6 (1957), 147. H. Jeanmaire on the other hand in *Couroi et Courètes* (Travaux et Mémoires de l'Université de Lille, no. 21, 1939), 51, says '... les questions de naissance et de généalogie n'ont pas dans les poèmes l'importance qu' on s'attendrait à leur voir prendre dans une société à hiérarchie nobiliaire strictement déterminée'.

<sup>21</sup> Calhoun, op. cit. 195, 208.

of non-nobles instead, and therefore in this section I shall attempt to identify the non-noble element in 'Homeric' society.

I shall begin by considering the vocabulary Homer uses to refer to the multitude, the commoners and so on, then I shall consider any instances where individual people are treated as social inferiors, and finally I shall discuss their economic status.

When Homer refers to the people, he sometimes uses the words *δῆμος* and *λαός* or even *πληθύς*. Often he just means everyone, without any suggestion of social distinction. When Apollo's arrows struck the Achaeans' camp and the *λαοί* were killed (*Il.* 1. 10), no-one is to suppose that the god discriminated between the low and the high born. And when upon the shield of Achilles the *λαοί* crowded into the *agora* (*Il.* 18. 497) the poet does not intend to exclude the leaders. (Cf. also *Il.* 20. 166.) *Δῆμος* in fact often refers to a territory, as in the 'rich *demos* of Lycia' (*Il.* 16. 437), and then to the people who live there.

H. Jeanmaire thought that both the *λαός* and *δῆμος* were used in a specialized political sense, that *δῆμος* was for the civil community, the people who did not fight, while *λαός* was for the band of warriors who served the king and were entitled to speak in the assembly.<sup>22</sup> Hence to call someone a man of the *δῆμος* was to imply inferior political status. Thersites was such a man – part of the rabble, 'pauvre hère'. When Odysseus used persuasion for each *βασίλῃα καὶ ἔξοχον ἄνδρα* but hit out at any *δῆμου ἄνδρα* (*Il.* 2. 188, 198), he was recognizing these class differences. To include someone in the *λαός*, on the other hand, was to imply his noble status as a warrior. G. S. Kirk agrees that *δῆμου ἄνδρα* means a 'man of the community', but he does not confine membership of the *λαός* to the young noblemen.<sup>23</sup> He mentions the *λαοὶ . . . ἀγροῖωται* (*Il.* 11. 676) of Nestor's tale, and he refers to the tanning simile, where *λαοῖσιν* (*Il.* 17. 390) seems to mean just 'servants'. 'There is almost certainly some confusion in the tradition about the possible application of the term *λαός*.'

Neither of the two words in fact is a technical term which refers to either an upper or a lower class of man. The whole *λαός* comes to the assembly, and Thersites, whatever his status, had no trouble in making himself heard there, although, as the text makes clear, he should not have spoken. Homer often makes a distinction between the *aristoi* or the leaders and the rest of the people. But when he does the *λαός* and the *δῆμος* are composed, not of a lower class of person, but of those who are (perhaps temporarily) subservient to the leaders. Odysseus, for example, refers to himself and his companions as the *λαοί* of Agamemnon (*Od.* 9. 263) although he was himself a 'king'. And Eurymachus, who had been described as *Πολύβοιο δαΐφρονος ἀγλαὸν υἱόν* (*Od.* 15. 519), begs Odysseus to spare his *λαοί*, meaning himself and the suitors who still remain alive (*Od.* 22. 54–5).

*Δῆμου ἀνὴρ* is not a technical expression for a lower class of man. Polydamas refers to himself as *δῆμον ἑόντα* (*Il.* 12. 213) opposing himself to Hector, his leader.<sup>24</sup> Yet

<sup>22</sup> Jeanmaire, op. cit. 43–58.

<sup>23</sup> G. S. Kirk, 'War and the Warrior in the Homeric Poems', *Problèmes de la guerre en Grèce ancienne*, ed. J.-P. Vernant (Paris and the Hague, 1968), 112. Kirk says that the army at Troy can be seen as a band of young noblemen or a large army of mixed rank from kings to servants. 'Our *Iliad* combines elements of both conceptions (and, no doubt, of others) to form a picture which is vivid and dramatic but, in both tactical and sociological terms, quite unrealistic.' Op. cit. 113.

<sup>24</sup> Jeanmaire, op. cit. 50, gives the following translation of *Il.* 12. 211–15. 'Hector, dit Polydamas, tu me rabroues quand je donne publiquement de bons conseils. Bien sûr nul n'admettra qu'un vilain (démou eonta) ose élever la voix dans le conseil ou dans le rang, au lieu de ne songer qu'à te seconder. Mais moi, (qui ne suis pas le premier venu) j'ai à te dire, frère, ce que bon me semble.' The question is whether *οὐδέ μὲν οὐδέ* introduces Hector's thought about

Polydamas is one of the most important men in Troy (*Il.* 12. 88–9; 13. 756–7; 14. 449; 15. 446; 18. 249–52). It was on this occasion that Hector threatened to hit him with a spear as Thersites had earlier been hit with a sceptre. Twice the poet refers to ἀνέρε δῆμου ἀρίστῳ (*Il.* 11. 328; 12. 447). In neither case is it appropriate that he should be specifying common men as opposed to the nobility. And Hector has a friend, a fellow banqueter of whom it is said μάλιστα δέ μιν τίεν Ἐκτωρ δῆμον (*Il.* 17. 576–7).

Because there does not seem to be any technical vocabulary to refer to a lower class of person in the poetry<sup>25</sup> most historians point to incidents in the poem where the behaviour of the characters of the story might indicate awareness of class differences. The most obvious one perhaps is the point referred to above where Odysseus uses persuasion for some and the stick for others (*Il.* 2. 188, 198). This incident is sufficient to convince Kirk, for example, that there are two classes of men at Troy, those who can be beaten with impunity, ‘certainly not noble’, and those who get spoken to politely.<sup>26</sup> And yet the high-ranking heroes of the poems are not invariably spoken to politely. Even Agamemnon is abused by Thersites, apparently regularly. He is also threatened by Achilles. May not Odysseus have spoken politely to the officers and less politely to those who were not in positions of command, or politely to the brave and distinguished among the men but less politely to those who had little reputation? There is nothing to compel belief that Odysseus is making a class difference.

On two other occasions in the *Iliad* a leader differentiates between two groups of men, as when Odysseus distinguished between the *aristoi* and the men of the *demoi*. In the first incident (*Il.* 4. 231 ff.) Agamemnon makes the rounds of the army and speaks admiringly to those who are being zealous (and they include Idomeneus and Nestor) and very uncivilly indeed to those who he thinks are slacking (and they include Diomedes and Odysseus). In the other the two Aiantes speak politely to some but roughly to those they saw hanging back from the battle (*Il.* 12. 267–8). On neither of these occasions is there any reference to class differences but only to spirit for the fight or its absence. This sort of incident, modified slightly as the context requires, seems to be no more than a convention.

Great significance is often read into the treatment of Thersites at the assembly at Troy. It is claimed that he should not have spoken because he was a commoner. And yet although the poem mentions his ugliness and his lameness it says nothing about his birth. Low birth does not seem to be part of the repertoire of abuse in Homer, unlike the later Greek world. In Eumaeus’ hut Odysseus cheerfully (if falsely) claims to be the son of a slave woman (with, admittedly, a wealthy father), and though it meant that he missed out on his inheritance, he still married a woman from a wealthy family.

It is true that Thersites has no patronymic, but that is not unique in Homer. Neither Aegyptius nor Eurylochus (a relative of Odysseus), nor Mentor until Book 22 of the *Odyssey* (*Od.* 22. 235), has a patronymic, nor have a good few of the minor characters, as a glance at the Catalogue of Ships will show. On the other hand Melantheus, son of Dolius, has a patronymic when he is first introduced, and he is a slave and the son of a slave (*Od.* 17. 212). We are told the father’s and grandfather’s name of both Eurycleia (*Od.* 2. 347) and Eumaeus (*Od.* 15. 414). Even Irus has a πόντια μήτηρ (*Od.* 18. 5).

Polydamas or is a shared reflection about the behaviour of the lower classes. But ἐπεὶ is not ‘bien sûr’ and the bracketed gloss that Jeanmaire needs to make Polydamas’ words yield his sense are not justified in the text.

<sup>25</sup> English translations of Homer on the other hand have a wealth of words, e.g. the folk, peasants, commoners, serfs, the masses, multitude, lower orders, lower classes etc.

<sup>26</sup> Kirk, *op. cit.* 112.

Thersites' name actually seems to have its own meaning rather than to be a genuine name. Like Odysseus himself (possibly), like Harmonides the father of Phereklos, or Harmon, his grandfather (*Il.* 5. 59–60),<sup>27</sup> and the unpleasant-sounding Kopreus (*Il.* 15. 639), who was the 'worse' father of a 'better' son,<sup>28</sup> some of Homer's characters have been named for a reason. And Thersites seems to be one of these characters.<sup>29</sup> He is a buffoon, a comic type, not unlike the gluttonous beggar in Odysseus' hall and very like the characters in later Greek comedy. A scholiast draws our attention to the parallel to this scene in an earlier scene on Olympus, where the tension is broken by a laugh at the expense of Hephaistos, who is a craftsman, lame, like Thersites, but certainly not inferior by birth.<sup>30</sup> The literary function of Thersites is to be comic relief. His fault is not that he is low born – we are not told about that one way or the other. Odysseus says that he is 'worse' (*χειρότερος*) than those who came to Troy with Agamemnon (*Il.* 2. 246–9), but that word, as in the case of Kopreus, does not invariably mean low born and sometimes clearly means a worse fighter or speaker. Certainly Thersites is struck and certainly this was later seen as an intolerable insult and would have seemed so to Homer's audience. But two other men, off the battlefield, are also at least threatened with a blow in the *Iliad*, and their high position did not save them from the threat (*Il.* 1. 190–1; 12. 250).

So much importance is given to the episode which involves Thersites because representatives of free men of the 'lower class' are so hard to find in Homer. The moment when the suitors object to Odysseus having a shot at stringing the bow and when Penelope permits him to try but adds that she will not marry him, whatever happens, because οὐδὲ ἔοικε (*Od.* 21. 319), is also taken as proving the existence of a lower class.<sup>31</sup> But class barriers cannot be the only reason why Penelope might consider it unsuitable for her to marry a strange, old, ill-kempt beggar with no house to take her to and no gifts to offer her. She knows the ancestry of the beggar at this point, or thinks she does, and it is not unrenowned. He is claiming to be the son of Deucalion, the son of Minos (*Od.* 19. 178–81).

If then the non-nobles cannot easily be detected in the poems either by means of the technical vocabulary or in the attitudes of the characters of the poems, perhaps they may be found in an economic category. In Homer the heroes of the poems in peacetime live in households, each producing most of the needs of the household.<sup>32</sup> A variety of people live within the household. There are the slaves, including the woman grinding corn before dawn (*Od.* 20. 105–10), and also the swineherd, who has a house of his own where he can entertain visitors with his master's animals, though not the best animals (*Od.* 14. 80–1), and who says that if Odysseus had returned he would have given him a house, a piece of land and a wife (*Od.* 14. 62–6). Eumaeus has even bought himself a slave of his own, out of his own property (*Od.* 14. 450–1). But there is never any suggestion that slaves have any role outside the *oikos*.

<sup>27</sup> Pace Finley, *The World of Odysseus*, 60 '... of the half dozen or so craftsmen who are dignified with a personal name in the poem, not one has a patronymic, let alone a genealogy'.

<sup>28</sup> Periphetes... τοῦ γένει' ἐκ πατρὸς πολὺ χείρονος υἱὸς ἀμείνων  
παντοίᾳ ἀρετᾷ, ἥ μὲν πόδας ἤδ' ἐμὰ μάχεσθαι,  
καὶ νόον ἐν πρώτοισι Μυκηναίων ἐτέτυκτο' (*Il.* 15. 641–3).

<sup>29</sup> 'Θερσίτης: apparently from an Aeolic form of θράσος' *The Iliad of Homer* ed. W. Leaf and M. A. Bayfield (London, 1962), 306.

<sup>30</sup> H. Erbse, *Scholia Graeca in Homeri Iliadem* 1 (Berlin, 1962), 228. I owe this observation to my colleague Mr Martin Holt of the University of Adelaide.

<sup>31</sup> A. W. H. Adkins, *Merit and Responsibility* (Oxford, 1960), 36; M. T. W. Arnheim, *Aristocracy in Greek Society* (London, 1977), 16.

<sup>32</sup> M. M. Austin and P. Vidal-Naquet, *Economic and Social History of Ancient Greece* (London, 1977), 40.

And in spite of the importance of the wives of the great men of the Homeric poems, women also were subordinate members of the household. Alcinous is called to the council, not his wife (*Od.* 6. 55). 'Talk is the concern of men', Penelope is told (*Od.* 1. 358–9), and she gets sent to her room more than once by Telemachus (*Od.* 1. 356; 17. 49) even though he has trouble with the suitors and is so shy that he has to be encouraged to speak to Nestor (*Od.* 3. 22–4). It is the free men, the actual or potential heads of households, who have a part to play in the larger society.

The women and the slaves were subordinate to the household head. And to them should perhaps be added another set of people, the Phoinixes and the Patrocluses of the Homeric world, who through some misfortune have been forced outside their own *oikos* and have had to attach themselves in some capacity to another *oikos*. Here too might have to be included the very vague 'retainers' with whom Homer fills the houses of his great men, the men who carve the meat and pour the wine. But these subordinate members of the *oikos* do not constitute a lower class in the sense that Finley means when he speaks of the 'multitude' as opposed to the hereditary nobles.

It has however been suggested that there was a class of free men who did not own land, who cannot therefore have been attached to an *oikos*. 'There remains the mass of the people who were landless and tradeless.'<sup>33</sup> And these might have constituted the class of the non-nobility. The nobles were the landowners and the rest were not.

The basic sources of wealth in the Homeric world were warfare and the land, and although the heroes go raiding abroad, people in settled communities like Ithaca do not approve of, for example, the lawless behaviour of the suitors. Nor do the poet's audiences. *A priori* therefore it does not seem that there could have been many landless men living in the settled communities.

Some men might have had a skill like the metal-worker Laerces, who gilded the horns of the heifer for Nestor (*Od.* 3. 425–6), and the blacksmith, whose house is mentioned as a warm place for a beggar to spend the night (*Od.* 18. 328), although there is nothing to suggest that these skilled workers, living as they did in a settled community, did not have some land as well as their skill. But then Eumaeus refers to the *demiourgoi*, men who travel around from place to place, prophets, doctors, builders, singers (*Od.* 17. 383–5), and since they travel, presumably they do not have land to fix them in any one spot.

There was not much need for travelling experts like this in the Homeric world.<sup>34</sup> One of the sons of Priam was a bird diviner (*Il.* 6. 76). Theoclymenus was a *mantis* who would not have left home but for a misfortune (*Od.* 15. 225). The two doctors mentioned in the Greek army are sons of Asclepius and highly regarded fighting men (*Il.* 2. 731–2), and Patroclus is said to have some skill too, which he had learnt from Achilles himself (*Il.* 11. 828–32). Paris had built his own house with the help of some craftsmen (*Il.* 6. 314–15), Odysseus seems to have done most of the work for his single-handed, and just about anyone can roof a temple for a god. Even minstrelsy is not an exclusive trade since the heroes, including Achilles, seem all to be able to sing and play the lyre.

There seems to have been very little aristocratic contempt for supposedly menial tasks in the world of Homer, or many tasks that the heroes were not prepared to do for themselves. The skills were simple and unspecialized. Hera and Hebe put together their own chariot and harness the horses (*Il.* 5. 720–32). Aphrodite carries the stool for Helen to sit on (*Il.* 3. 424–5). Patroclus and Achilles do the cooking (*Il.* 9. 205–11),

<sup>33</sup> G. Glotz, *The Greek City and its Institutions* (London and New York, 1929), 36.

<sup>34</sup> The 'peasant-like' features of the Homeric 'aristocracy' were first pointed out by H. Strasburger, 'Der Soziologische Aspekt der Homerischen Epen', *Gymnasium* 60 (1953), 97–114.



Patroclus grooms the horses (*Il.* 23. 281–2) and makes the bed (*Il.* 9. 620–2). The suitors butcher their own meat and Paris' ship-builder seems also to be a good warrior (*Il.* 5. 59–64). Andromache feeds the horses (*Il.* 8. 185–90).

In fact despised professions are hard to find, although those who expect that an aristocratic society will include some have duly found them.<sup>35</sup> Trading is sometimes suggested, as in the episode when Odysseus, having refused to take part in the games, is taunted with being a trader (*Od.* 8. 159–64). This is a possible example, although despising someone for being preoccupied with profits is not exactly the same thing as despising someone for pursuing an inferior profession. Athene disguised as Mentes does not attract contempt (*Od.* 1. 180–4), and Euneus, the son of Jason, who sent wine from Lemnos to the army at Troy in exchange for war booty, and was careful to make Agamemnon a gift, does not seem to be held in dishonour (*Il.* 7. 467–75). A better example of a despised profession seems to be that of messenger. Heraldry was respectable enough, perhaps especially if they were *demiourgoi*, and so public officials; but the poems seem to have little tolerance for Kopreus, who carried messages from Eurystheus to Heracles (*Il.* 15. 639–40), or for Irus (*Od.* 18. 6–7). Perhaps it was because in taking orders from other men and running to obey them, messengers were playing the part of slaves.

In view then of the range of skills apparently mastered by the heroes in general and their lack of snobbery in performing them, it does not seem as if there would have been many niches for a landless man to earn a living by means of his skill. What other opportunities were there for a landless man? There was always warfare. Men might join an expedition going abroad like that of Telemachus and on other occasions there might have been the prospect of rich booty. Apart from that they might offer their labour for hire or they might beg. The distinction between the two does not seem to be very clear, except that the gods protected the beggar. Twice it is suggested, with malice, that Odysseus, disguised as a beggar, should work rather than beg, as if begging was an easier choice for him, though working would be more to his credit (*Od.* 17. 223–8; 18. 357–64). But that may be nothing more than the expression of a perennial attitude to scrounging. Even Telemachus thinks that a beggar should do something in return for his hospitality (*Od.* 19. 27–8), and Odysseus himself sets off for the suitors' party expecting that he will be able to offer them service of some kind (*Od.* 15. 319–24). Odysseus makes the interesting observation that he prefers begging to labouring for another. He is too old to stay on the farm and take orders (*Od.* 17. 20–1). The man who depended totally on working for another rather than, for example, earning something extra at harvest time, must have had a precarious and degraded existence. To the modern eye there does not seem to be all that much difference between the man who works for hire and the volunteers who go on the night expedition once they are offered gifts (*Il.* 10. 214–16), or between begging in the suitors' hall and asking the Cyclops for a gift (*Od.* 9. 266–8) or Eumaeus for a cloak (*Od.* 14. 459 ff.). But in the context of a world that valued gifts and despised beggary and wages the nuance of the difference might have been clear.

Homer then has a few examples of landless men, men unattached to any *oikos*, beggars and men who work for wages. They would be men such as Achilles mentions, the *μετανάστης* who receives no honour (*Il.* 9. 648), or the man who, Nestor says, loves civil war, *ἀφρήτωρ, ἀθέμιστος, ἀνέστιος* (*Il.* 9. 63). Achilles specifically mentions the landless man once too, saying that he would prefer to work for a landless man rather than rule in hell (*Od.* 11. 489–90). Perhaps he means that he would prefer to work for someone like Melantheus the slave, who had whey to offer a free workman

<sup>35</sup> Finley, *The World of Odysseus*, 69–70.

in return for chores upon the farm. More likely he is using a proverbial emphatic overstatement which says nothing about real social conditions. The few examples of men outside the *oikos* system hardly amount to a lower class.

That leaves the men with some land but not much, the peasants and the free herders who with the *demiourgoi*, Finley thinks, made up the 'bulk of the community'.<sup>36</sup> The archaeological evidence certainly suggests that everyone was rather poor during the centuries when the epic poems were recited. And Homer confirms this in that when he tries to explain the fabulous wealth of his kings he sounds naïve, as when he says that Alcinous' palace has golden doors and a silver threshold (*Od.* 7. 88–90) and when he has Agamemnon head the list of magnificent presents, which will include seven cities, with tripods (*Il.* 9. 122). Nausicaa drives the mule cart to the river to wash her father's clothes (*Od.* 6. 57–65), and the daughter of the Laestrygonian king carries water (*Od.* 10. 107–8). Alcinous himself stows the gifts for Odysseus under the benches of the ship (*Od.* 13. 20–2), and Odysseus has somewhere learnt to cut grass and plough (*Od.* 18. 366–75). His 'palace' has a dung heap by its front door and a dirt floor and is accessible to an alarming number of farm animals, geese (*Od.* 19. 552–3), and pigs (*Od.* 20. 163–4). Goats and cattle are tethered under the portico (*Od.* 20. 176, 189).

It appears therefore that Homer did not know about great men in real life; that in his experience there were not huge concentrations of wealth in the hands of a few at the expense of the mass of the poor. In classical times there is little evidence for large landowners in Attica either, but for rather small holdings, and in spite of his attempt to imagine fabulous wealth there is nothing to suggest that Homer knew otherwise in his day. Laertes' farm might be an example of a small farm, if he had cleared it himself from the wild (*Od.* 24. 205–7). But it was a flourishing farm none the less and Laertes' rags were due to grief, not poverty (*Od.* 24. 205 ff.). Jane Austen introduces Mr Bingley on the first page of *Pride and Prejudice* as a single man in possession of a large fortune: 'What a fine thing for one of our girls'.<sup>37</sup> Homer's heroes, for all their delight in treasure, chose their sons-in-law on other grounds.

ἡγαγόμην δὲ γυναῖκα πολυκλήρων ἀνθρώπων  
εἵνεκ' ἐμῆς ἀρετῆς, ἐπεὶ οὐκ ἀποφώλιος ἦα  
οὐδὲ φυγοπτόλεμος. (*Od.* 14. 211–13)

It is not to be supposed that there were no πολύκληροι ἄνθρωποι, no differences in the wealth of the real men who inhabited Greece during the years when the epic was being recited, or in the size and importance of the *oikoi*. In any human situation these variations are inevitable. In the world of Homer too there were differences of wealth. Odysseus was the wealthiest man on Ithaca, Eumaeus says. But he expressed his wealth in animals, not in land-holdings. There are, in fact, surprisingly few references to land-holdings in the poems. Gardens are mentioned (*Od.* 4. 737; 24. 338) and a *temenos* (e.g. *Od.* 6. 293; *Il.* 9. 577–80). Once Hector talks as if everyone in Troy had a *kleros* as well as a wife and children (*Il.* 15. 497–9). But when wealth is mentioned it is normally reckoned in animals and in movable treasure.

Just as there are few mentions of land-holdings, there are no references at all to any client relationship such as might develop in a land where many peasant farmers struggled for a living and a few wealthy ones dominated them. The only moments (that I know) where such a relationship is hinted at is the mention in the *Iliad* of the man who toadied to Paris in the hope of getting gifts (*Il.* 11. 122–7), and the sneer from

<sup>36</sup> Finley, *op. cit.* 55.

<sup>37</sup> Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (London, 1813), 1–2.

Eurymachus that Halitherses was doing the same to Telemachus (*Od.* 2. 184–6). On both occasions it is treated as a despicable thing to do, and I assume that the men of Homer's world were careful to avoid the accusation, however venal their real motives might have been when they supported one speaker rather than another in the assembly. Men with self-respect would not want to be suspected of this any more than they wanted to take another man's orders for pay.

In Homer's world then there were differences of wealth, naturally, but these differences were calculated without reference to land. More importantly there is no sign of the differences being used by the rich to manipulate the poor, or by the big land-owners to manipulate the small land-owners.

I intended to isolate the lower orders in Homeric society and I have failed. They have not been detected in any technical vocabulary, in the social attitudes of the people of the poem, or in any visible economic category. As far as Homer goes, they hardly exist at all.

The explanation that is commonly given for this is that they were not the subject of epic poetry, that Homer was totally preoccupied with the heroes and ignored the existence of the lower classes. And yet he was not unconcerned with subordinate members of the *oikos*, the slaves and the women, nor with men outside the *oikos* system, the beggars at the gate of Odysseus' palace. If these fall within the epic convention, why not also the poor men and small peasant farmers who form 'the bulk of the population'?

Even though Homer might wish to exclude them from the story (although it is not clear why he should have done), as he wished to exclude iron, even so one would have expected them to creep back into the poem in small ways, in the similes for example. When Finley was arguing against the survival of Mycenaean social categories in Homer he pointed out that in other poems, like the *Song of Roland* and the *Nibelungenlied*, unpoetic words for contemporary social statuses crop up from time to time amongst the grand poetic vocabulary of status. But no unpoetic vocabulary for Mycenaean social statuses appears in Homer. To Finley this suggests that Mycenaean social statuses had been forgotten by Homer's time.<sup>38</sup> Analogously, one might argue that if the small peasant farmers existed in Homer's time then they too would receive a mention in the poems, even if Homer, on the whole, chose to refer to his characters with a special vocabulary appropriate to heroes. But there is no word for a peasant farmer or a small landowner in Homer. The only possible candidates are *χείρων*, *κακός* etc. and these, as has been pointed out, are by no means technical words for peasants.

What conclusion can be drawn from this strange feature of 'Homeric' society? A possible conclusion is that 'Homeric' society bore no relationship to the real world. Just as 'Ithaca' is nothing like Ithaca, so perhaps 'Homeric' society is an epic convention which can tell us nothing about any real-life society. Another possible conclusion is that Homer's real-life society was completely homogeneous, as Calhoun thought, and did not distinguish between aristocrats and peasants. The Homeric poems would then reflect this real-life state of affairs. In either case we should not assume that 'Homeric' society differentiated between the nobility and the non-nobles, simply because the modern reader assumes that real-life society in Homer's day did.

<sup>38</sup> Finley, 'Homer and Mycenae: Property and Tenure', *Historia* 6 (1957), 144.

## III. THE KINGS

While there is no evidence of a lower class of small peasant farmers or landless men in 'Homeric' society, there are certain traces of a large number of kings. And yet there are obscurities and inconsistencies in Homer's description of the kings. He is confused about their formal status. Whatever their formal status, they are only as strong as their own right arms. Most serious of all, in 'Homeric' society the kings do not consistently make political, judicial or even military decisions on behalf of their people.<sup>39</sup> In short, although Homer incorporates the concept of kingship into his poem he does not seem to know much about it. I shall consider first the vocabulary with which Homer refers to the kings, then the formal status of the kings, and finally the function of the king in 'Homeric' society.

The words that Homer uses to describe the leaders of the people include the words *ἄναξ* and *βασιλεύς*, but neither of them helps to assign a position to the king in the Homeric poems. *βασιλεύς*, which has been identified in Linear B in reference to a middle-status officer,<sup>40</sup> applies to a variety of prominent men in Homer,<sup>41</sup> the leaders on the plains of Troy, the thirteen kings of Phaeacia (*Od.* 8. 390–1) (even Nausicaa is *βασιλεια* (*Od.* 6. 115)), a number of men in Ithaca including Antinous (*Od.* 24. 179), whose father was still alive (*Od.* 24. 422). The heroes even use adjectives like *βασιλεύτερος* and *βασιλεύτατος*, which suggests that kingship is not an office which a man either holds or not, but a characteristic of which he can have degrees. *\*Ἀναξ* was the title of the great king on the Linear B tablets, but in Homer's time it could be used in its feminine form to address Nausicaa when all that Odysseus knows about her is that she is a girl washing her clothes in the river (*Od.* 6. 149), and is used by the Cyclops to refer to his relationship with his ram (*Od.* 9. 452–3).

In order then to discover the position of kings in Homer the powers of the individual kings of the poem must be considered, their relationship to other people and their function in society. The kings that are relevant in this context are especially Agamemnon the king of Mycenae, Odysseus of Ithaca and Priam of Troy.

Agamemnon's family had had dealings with the gods, although he was not actually descended from a god. The family is mentioned in the context of the sceptre which Hermes gave to Pelops and which had been handed down from one king to another (*Il.* 2. 46, 100–8). Agamemnon himself was the supreme commander of the Greek forces and the expedition was called together in the first place because of an insult to his family. The crime of Aigisthos lay primarily in seduction (he did not move into Agamemnon's 'palace', but took Clytemnestra to his own house (*Od.* 3. 272)) and murder, but the poet shows that he is aware that Aigisthos had usurped the rule of the city as well (*Od.* 3. 304–5).

Agamemnon's kingship however cannot in itself be taken as providing any information at all about the conditions of the dark ages. In later Greek literature the myths, in their received form, were the given element in the story. Aeschylus, for example, had to incorporate the notion that Agamemnon was the king into his story and, in fact, made dramatic use of the paraphernalia of kingship like the purple carpet, even though there was no king in the Athens of his day. In itself the family of Agamemnon and its kingship at Mycenae is neither here nor there. The sceptre also

<sup>39</sup> The following quotation illustrates to what divergent conclusions reading Homer may lead: 'In Homer the king was at once the chief priest, the chief judge, and the supreme war-lord of his people' (J. B. Bury and Russell Meiggs, *A History of Greece* [London, 1975], 52).

<sup>40</sup> Finley, *op. cit.* 140–2.

<sup>41</sup> H. Strasburger, *op. cit.* 102.

proves nothing. Sceptres certainly were carried by the kings of the east<sup>42</sup> and possibly by the kings of Mycenae,<sup>43</sup> and in Homer kings are characterized by sceptres (*σκηπτοῦχος βασιλεύς*). But a sceptre may also be carried by a number of other people – priests, heralds and anyone who wants to speak in the assembly. Odysseus uses Agamemnon's special sceptre to hit people. Agamemnon is indeed acknowledged commander of the Greek forces, although that is not a particularly powerful position, as will appear later. But when Homer himself explains why Agamemnon is in command he says it is because he brought most ships, just the sort of justification that the Athenians later made for their leadership of the Delian Alliance.<sup>44</sup>

Odysseus' position at Ithaca is in some ways clearer than that of Agamemnon and at the same time more obscure. He had had some sort of authority and had ruled Ithaca like a gentle father (*Od.* 2. 47, 234; 5. 12). Mention is made of the kingship which should now belong to Telemachus: *βασιλῆα . . . ὃ τοι γενεῇ πατρώϊον ἔστιν* (*Od.* 1. 386–7). There is even some suggestion that the man who marries Penelope will become king, and Antinous' main ambition is said to have been the kingship (*Od.* 22. 52–3). In the underworld Odysseus' mother describes what is happening to Telemachus back in Ithaca; nobody has the *γέρας* of Odysseus but Telemachus enjoys the *τέμενος* and the equal feasts (*Od.* 11. 184–6). At the very end of the poem Zeus suggests that the Ithacans swear an oath that Odysseus shall be king for ever (*Od.* 24. 483).

And yet the position is very confused. Laertes had been the king but had surrendered his position to Odysseus and can give no assistance to the defenceless Telemachus. Telemachus himself makes a curious reply to the suitor who referred to his *πατρώϊον* kingship. 'It is not a bad thing for a man to be king, for straightway his house grows rich and he is held in honour. However there are many other kings of the Achaeans in Ithaca . . . one of them can be king' (*Od.* 1. 392–6). We know very little of the system to which Odysseus' mother is referring (*Od.* 11. 184–6), but nothing she says need be taken as proof of inherited power. Whatever she means, when the poet himself comes to say what is happening at Ithaca it is not as she describes it. The suitors are condemned for consuming the wealth of Odysseus, not for usurping his throne. Power in Ithaca, the supreme rule of the island, is a matter of strength. Neither Laertes nor Telemachus is king because both are weak. Odysseus is king only because he can assert himself. Even Zeus thinks to guarantee the loyalty of the Ithacans not by asserting the constitutional position but by exacting an oath (*Od.* 24. 483).

The position of the king at Troy is especially mysterious, and that may be partly because the poet seems to stress the foreignness of the arrangements there. Priam's family is very dominant. He lives on the acropolis with his many wives, fifty sons and twelve sons-in-law (although the Greeks in Homer do not practise polygamy). Homer suggests that the family controlled the city in a special way. Most of the Trojan dead are kinsmen of Priam. Sarpedon, admittedly in a moment of anger, says that Hector thinks he can win the war with his relatives alone, without the help of the people or the allies, as if no-one else counted for anything at Troy (*Il.* 5. 473–4). Aeneas articulates the sense of being excluded. He hangs back from the fighting (*Il.* 13. 459–61)

<sup>42</sup> Sceptres are mentioned in the literature of the ancient near east and frequently represented in art. See *Ancient Near East Texts relating to the Old Testament*, ed. J. B. Pritchard (Princeton, 1969), and *The Ancient Near East in Pictures relating to the Old Testament*, passim. Also ' . . . when Shamash . . . had placed in my hand the sceptre which rules the peoples . . . ' D. D. Luckenbill, *Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylonia* 1 (Chicago, 1926), 141–2.

<sup>43</sup> The young prince (if that is what he is) on the 'Warrior Vase' found in the villa of Hagia Triada and now in the Archaeological Museum at Heraklion seems to be holding a sceptre, but there is no way of telling what it symbolizes.

<sup>44</sup> Thucydides 6. 83. 1.

because Priam gives honour to his own children rather than to him. Achilles taunts him with the thought, asking him whether he is fighting because he hopes to take over Priam's *τιμή*, which, Achilles adds, is a vain hope because Priam will give his *γέρας* to his own children (*Il.* 20. 182–3). Towards the end of the book there are two passages where the final transfer of power from the family of Priam to the family of Aeneas is mentioned, although these passages are suspected on other grounds of being later additions (*Il.* 20. 215 ff.; 293 ff.).<sup>45</sup> At Troy then the poet has emphasized the special privileges that are given to the children of the king and in the person of Aeneas he expresses his distrust of the system. Aeneas (and the poet and the reader) thinks that Aeneas ought to get honour since he is a great warrior, rather than the children of Priam, who are not all necessarily great warriors. Hector is the commander of the forces in the field, but Priam consistently makes it clear that he is so because he is a fighter, not because he is the eldest son or any constitutional heir to the throne.

In addition to the individual kings of the Homeric poems there are some rather odd references to kings which seem particularly out of place. The good king brings fertility and prosperity to his land, says Odysseus (*Od.* 19. 109–14). And yet this attitude to the king (which was a common one in Egypt and Assyria at this time)<sup>46</sup> is nowhere given any other reality in the poem. No-one mentions any barrenness or plague that might descend on the city where the rightful ruler is excluded. Telemachus himself does not make use of any such notion. The only argument that Mentès can find is the ingratitude of the suitors since Odysseus had been kind as a father to them. The kings are often referred to as *ισόθεος*, *ἀντίθεος*, *θείος*, *δῖος*, *διοτρεφής* and so on (as are the suitors themselves). In so far as this language might have some content, it might, for example, preserve some reminiscence of the Mycenaean kings or it might have been borrowed from the near east, where the kings certainly claimed to be gods and the children of gods and the friends of the gods. It does not necessarily reflect any attitude towards any real king.

These difficulties in the way the kings are described in the poetry have long been acknowledged. A common explanation of them has been that the Homeric world was in a period of transition. The power of the kings was waning relative to that of the nobles and the nobles were asserting themselves.<sup>47</sup> What we have in Homer is either an amalgam where the earlier power of kings and the later power of the nobility are both given emphasis, or a picture of a world actually in transition when the king has not disappeared but been reduced to *primus inter pares*.<sup>48</sup> Another suggestion has been that the kings were just emerging to break the power of the aristocrats – the forerunners of the later Greek tyrants.<sup>49</sup> But the confusions are too great to be papered

<sup>45</sup> See the note on these lines in W. Leaf and M. A. Bayfield II (London, 1962), 490–1, 494.

<sup>46</sup> Egyptians had long believed that their king brought fertility to the land (v. J. B. Pritchard, *Ancient Near East Texts relating to the Old Testament*, 31–2). Assyrians shared the belief (v. Luckenbill, op. cit. II, 60–3 and 292: 'After Assur... had caused me to take my seat, joyfully, upon the throne of the father who begot me, Adad sent his rains, Ea opened his fountains, the grain grew 5 cubits tall in the stalk...').

<sup>47</sup> M. I. Finley, *The World of Odysseus* (Harmondsworth, 1979), 84.

<sup>48</sup> M. I. Finley, *Early Greece: The Bronze and Archaic Ages* (London, 1970), 86–7. Cf. P. A. L. Greenhalgh, *Early Greek Warfare* (Cambridge, 1973), 171.

<sup>49</sup> e.g. Peter Rose, 'Class Ambivalence in the *Odyssey*', *Historia* 24 (1975), 129–49, where the suitors are called oligarchs (although the word oligarchy belongs to the political debates of the fifth century: Herodotus 3. 80–2) and are opposed to the king, who appears as the champion of the common people. In 'The *Odyssey* as an Anti-aristocratic Statement', by S. G. Farron in *Antiquity* 1, 1 (1979–80), 95, the king is again the forerunner of the Greek tyrant in opposition to the local aristocrats, although Odysseus is fighting in order to repossess his own private property, he is supported only by members of his household and the families of the suitors seem to be at least half the population of Ithaca.

over in this manner. They reveal an ignorance of the formal position that kings can enjoy elsewhere and did apparently in Mycenae, and also an assumption that kings rule by strength, rather than by formal authority or in virtue of the institution of kingship.

Even more threatening to the idea that Homer copies his kings from real-life dark age kings is the fact that his kings seem to have no function in society. Kings as such, for example (rather than as members of the assembly), seem not to take decisions on behalf of their people. Personal decisions about personal matters are naturally made by individual warriors including the kings. But decisions which involve the whole group are reached in the assembly.

Assemblies and *θέμιστες*, with which they are associated, seemed to Homer the mark of civilised man (*Il.* 11. 807, *Od.* 9. 112). Assemblies are held in every community, on the plain outside Troy, in a special meeting-place in Ithaca (Aegyptius says that they have not had an assembly since Odysseus left (*Od.* 2. 26–7), but as soon as the action of the poem gets going the assemblies occur as part of the normal routine), in Phaeacia, even in heaven, although in heaven the meetings take place in Zeus' palace.

It seems that anyone can call an assembly, though it is the men of standing who do so. Aegyptius asks who has summoned the meeting, an old man or a young one (*Od.* 2. 28–9), as if it might be either, and in fact it is a young one. The assembly is sometimes described as a spontaneous gathering, as when the Ithacans meet after the massacre of the suitors (*Od.* 24. 421–2) and when the combatants at Troy gather together after a day's fighting (*Il.* 18. 245).

Once assembled the men form a circle and normally sit down. There are special seats for some of them, which suggests that the assembly is a feature of settled communities and not just a gathering of warriors. In Ithaca the assembly once gave signs of the formation of a faction with Telemachus walking over to sit with his friends (*Od.* 17. 67–70) (anticipating Thucydides the son of Melesias by some hundreds of years).<sup>50</sup> Men who wanted to speak simply walked to the middle of the gathering, and the herald handed them the stick that they called the sceptre. Twice the poet talks about the proper way to behave in the assembly (*Il.* 2. 279–82; 19. 78–82), not talking so that the speaker can be heard, and so on. This sort of etiquette must have been observed better at some times than at others.

There do not seem to have been rules preventing anyone who wanted from speaking at the assembly. It was conventional in Homer for the leaders of the communities to speak, and for the older men to speak first, e.g. Aegyptius in Ithaca (*Od.* 2. 15). Diomedes is tentative about speaking at what was admittedly a meeting of the older men (*Il.* 14. 110–12), and Nestor gives him what amounts to a reproof when he is the first to speak at a general meeting (*Il.* 9. 53–8). It is a sign that Telemachus was growing up that although he was still young he had the courage to take his grievance to the assembly. The one exception to the rule that only the older and/or influential men speak at the assembly is Thersites, but then what the poet actually says is not that he was forbidden to speak but that he should not have spoken because he was ugly and railed against the kings.

All sorts of matters are discussed at the assembly. In the *Iliad* an assembly is held because Chryses wanted to appeal to the Achaeans and the two sons of Atreus (*Il.* 1. 15–16) to restore his daughter to him, although she had already been distributed as booty and was in private hands. Achilles called an assembly to discuss the plague (*Il.* 1. 54). Topics such as whether to go home or not are discussed in the Greek assembly (*Il.* 2. 84 ff; 9. 9 ff.), and the Trojans talk about whether or not to send Helen home (*Il.* 7. 345 ff.). Heralds from the Trojans with peace proposals are heard in the

<sup>50</sup> Plutarch, *Pericles* 11.

assembly (*Il.* 7. 382 ff.), and the reconciliation between Agamemnon and Achilles is held in public (*Il.* 19. 40 ff.), as had been their original quarrel, and even though Achilles is anxious to get on with the fighting, still everyone else insists that the hand-over of the gifts shall be ceremoniously public. A meeting is held to discuss how to get home after the sack of Troy (*Od.* 3. 137 ff.) and another in Troy about what to do when the wooden horse appears in the city (*Od.* 8. 499 ff.). In Ithaca the first question addressed to the first assembly is whether the army has returned or what other public business there is (*Od.* 2. 30–2). Telemachus' business is the invasion of his house by the suitors. His first step in steeling himself to do something about it is to bring it before the assembly. Then there is the meeting in Phaeacia about sending Odysseus home (*Od.* 8. 1 ff.) and the final meeting of the Ithacans after the massacre of the suitors (*Od.* 24. 420 ff.).

All these meetings are concerned with important matters. There is real debate, not just the formal announcement of the king's decision. Twice the meetings fail to come to a unanimous opinion after a debate (*Od.* 3. 137 ff.; 24. 420 ff.), and the result is that the people divide. The Greeks go home by different ways, and the families of the suitors leave the assembly and go to look for Odysseus. Of course it is true that only the leaders speak and that the rest merely listen to the debate and then shout either dissent or assent. But it is true of any large committee meeting that only a certain number of people speak and that they are likely to be men of influence within the group, who have a special interest in or a special objection to a proposal, and that the rest only give their modern equivalent of shouting, often a show of hands. But that does not mean that the process is unimportant or psychologically insignificant to those taking part.

Government in the Homeric world was at an absolute minimum. There was personal influence exerted by strong men and the leaders, as when they move among the soldiers not ordering them so much as encouraging them and exhorting them to fight. And there was strong opinion about what was and was not acceptable to the gods. But there were very few formal authorities. There were no written codes, no magistrates, nor officers of the law apart from the heralds (*Il.* 7. 183 ff.), and they had little authority without the backing of a strong man (*Il.* 1. 318 ff.). Naturally in these circumstances the assembly had no executive power any more than the gods had. But that does not mean that the public opinion which expressed itself in the assembly had no power at all. In fact Homer is scrupulous in calling attention to the state of public opinion at every stage and makes it clear that he considered it an important factor in the situation.<sup>51</sup> Even without executive power the assembly could reach a decision and implement it in the small communities which archaeology confirms were characteristic of the dark ages. The king except in so far as he was a strong man and an influential speaker at the assembly was superfluous to decision-making. It is commonplace to say that the kings, who had ties of friendship and loyalty to each other, expressed by gift exchange, would send contingents of troops to fight for a fellow king, like Agamemnon, when he called for them. The implication is that the king had power to raise soldiers among his subject people (*Il.* 23. 296 f., cf. 13. 699, 24. 397–400). The passage where Odysseus (lying) says that 'public opinion' drove him to the war is less often cited (*Od.* 14. 239).

Nor does the king intervene in order to settle disputes or redress wrongs. 'Homeric' society achieved these ends perfectly successfully by other means. Although there were no written codes of law, nor established institutions for settling disputes, enforcing

<sup>51</sup> 'An undertone of popular comment pervades the Homeric poems...' Sir Richard Jebb, *Essays and Addresses* (Cambridge, 1907), 130.



rules or redressing wrongs, the world of the poems was not at all anarchic. The insolence of the suitors does not shock the modern reader, drunk from the punches of the modern entertainment industry, so much as their, in the tempting circumstances, admirable restraint.

What is loosely called religion to some extent deterred the wicked man.<sup>52</sup> Apollo was angry when his priest was treated discourteously, Poseidon when his cattle were rustled. And the gods wielded powerful sanctions, plague and shipwreck. In these two instances the gods' anger was the consequence of what they took to be personal insults. But the gods, especially Zeus, were also interested in the infringement of a number of impersonal rules, e.g. the obligation for a host to respect a beggar or a guest (*Od.* 14. 57–8, 402–5). And that meant that there was an area where at any rate most men would tread cautiously. It was assumed that if someone took an oath and swore by the gods then he would not lie or break his word. So when Menelaus suspects a foul during a race, he knows that the matter will be settled by calling upon Antilochus to take an oath, standing in front of his chariot and touching his horses with the whip (*Il.* 23. 581–5).

Public opinion too was a strong deterrent from wrong-doing. Hector was ready to sacrifice his life and family because he felt shame in front of the Trojans and (even) their wives (*Il.* 6. 441–3). Penelope refused to marry again because she feared what people would say (*Od.* 16. 75; 19. 527). 'What people said was a hard constraint', says Odysseus in one of his lying tales, reluctant to fight at Troy (*Od.* 14. 239). In a world where being well thought of was so desirable, being ill thought of was correspondingly repugnant.

There are in the poems some signs of the king as the ultimate source of right. The king holds the golden sceptre and the *themistes* from Zeus (*Il.* 9. 98–9). Minos in the underworld holds the golden sceptre and deals judgements to the dead (*Od.* 11. 569). But in spite of these 'survivals' as Gernet calls them ('Les poèmes homériques perpétuent, mais c'est vraiment une survivance, la conception d'une vertu divine attachée à la personne du roi, et aussi bien immanente à un attribut comme le sceptre: les "sentences" que rend un tel personnage dans les affaires sur lesquelles on l' "interroge" ont le caractère de révélations') the king is never seen in Homer acting as a judge: '... en fait, les jugements que nous voyons rendre sont rendus par d'autres, et nous ne voyons même pas qu'il y préside'.<sup>53</sup> The men whom we see giving judgement in the poems are the 'sons of the Achaeans' and the elders.

When someone has been wronged, various forms of redress can be sought. But, as R. J. Bonner and G. Smith say, 'Neither the king nor the council ever undertook to punish the offender'.<sup>54</sup> In a footnote they go on to say that the king in his capacity as general might punish breaches of discipline and they cite *Iliad* 12. 248–50, where Hector threatens to kill Polydamas, who opposes him. But there is no special indication that Hector is acting in his capacity as general here. Throughout the poems people threaten to kill other people. Odysseus threatens to kill his old nurse, the suitors threaten to kill the beggar, even Achilles threatens to kill Agamemnon. In fact the second most amazing breach of discipline in the whole of the *Iliad* (and there are many) is when Pandarus, on the advice of a god, shoots at Menelaus in defiance of the treaty and the oath sworn by the generals and made effective with wine and blood (*Il.* 4.

<sup>52</sup> Louis Gernet, 'Droit et prédroit en Grèce ancienne', *Anthropologie de la Grèce antique*, 175 ff., describes some of the beliefs and rituals which preceded the rule of law in Greece.

<sup>53</sup> Gernet, *op. cit.* 243.

<sup>54</sup> *The Administration of Justice from Homer to Aristotle* (Chicago, 1930), 22. Nilsson, *Homer and Mycenae*, 223: 'Nor was the administering of justice any essential part of the king's power'.

157–62). Agamemnon has the comfort of knowing that the gods will exact penalty in the long run, but the Trojans make no move to punish Pandarus whatsoever. The poet does not even stop to represent him receiving a reproof. And he is seen fighting successfully and receiving honour in the following book until finally he dies a hero's death with no mention of personal retribution. Responsibility for his action seems to lie with the Trojans as a whole. Similarly all the Danaans are punished when Agamemnon displeases Apollo (*Il.* 1. 9–12).

Although Homeric people could not depend upon the king to redress their wrongs, a few other means were available to them. Fighting is mentioned casually as the natural way for a man to protect his rights (*Il.* 12. 421–3; *Od.* 17. 470–2). Brothers and other kinsmen might help. In cases of homicide, the kinsmen of the murdered man (Orestes for example or the families of the suitors) were supposed to revenge themselves upon the murderer or agree to compensation.

But if the strong man of the household together with the help that he could command disappeared or died, then neither the gods nor the community at large nor the king was particularly interested in the protection of his former dependants. Penelope would have had no redress if she had been left entirely on her own. Achilles in the underworld worries about Peleus because he thinks that his neighbours might oppress him (*Od.* 11. 494–500). When Andromache imagines the future for her orphaned son she assumes – or for the purpose of her lament supposes – that there will be no-one to defend him in spite of the network of his relatives in Troy (*Il.* 22. 484 ff.).

This is not to say that the community had no interest in looking after itself if it was threatened. It was the people of Ithaca who had exiled Eupheides when he had angered them by joining pirates and harrying the Thesprotians with whom the Ithacans were in league (*Od.* 16. 424 ff.). Hector threatens Paris with reprisals from the people (*Il.* 3. 56–7). When Telemachus found the courage, his first action in dealing with the suitors was to summon an assembly, and though in this case the people, being divided, did little to help him, he did find supporters and was loaned a boat and joined by companions who set out with him to ask about his father. Nestor's first question, as was Odysseus' later, when he had heard about the suitors, was to ask whether the people hated him that he should suffer thus (*Od.* 3. 214–15).

If strong men within the community fell out with each other it was in the general interest of everyone that the matter should be settled without fighting and bloodshed. Mediators could be found who made it their business to settle differences, persuade opposing parties to a course of action and so on. These men are mentioned explicitly, *ἦμος δ' ἐπὶ δόρπον ἀνὴρ ἀγορήθεν ἀνέστη κρίνων νείκεα πολλὰ δικαζομένων αἰζήων...* (*Od.* 12. 439–40). And this is the role that Nestor sees for himself when he tells Agamemnon and Achilles how to settle their quarrel (*Il.* 1. 259). The men who go on the embassy to Achilles end their speech with an appeal to personal friendship as if his being persuaded will do their reputation some good. And even in heaven, where the family of the gods is subjected to stronger authority than the communities on earth, there is someone to intervene if two of the gods quarrel in a way that threatens to get out of hand (*Il.* 1. 571 ff.). The mediator in 'Homeric' society is not the king and does not have any formal authority. He is simply an old and respected figure with a reputation for success in mediation.

Although it has been recognized in the past that kings in Homer have very little other function, still they have always been assigned a role as army commanders.<sup>55</sup> And

<sup>55</sup> cf. Nilsson, *op. cit.* 222–3. Nilsson mentions the leadership of Dionysios of Phocaea, who was elected commander-in-chief of the Ionian fleet some time before the battle of Lade, but says that 'Agamemnon's power was evidently much more securely founded' (p. 223).

yet it is hard to believe that any real army could have as little discipline as that before Troy. Agamemnon is contradicted and abused by other men, even by Thersites, for all his claim to be the supreme commander. His reply to Achilles' abuse is

ἀλλ' ὅδ' ἀνὴρ ἐθέλει περὶ πάντων ἔμμεναι ἄλλων·  
πάντων μὲν κρατέειν ἐθέλει, πάντεσσι δ' ἀνάσσειν,  
πᾶσι δὲ σημαίνειν, ἃ τιν' οὐ πείσεσθαι οὔω (Il. 1. 287-9)

and to this Achilles responds as follows:

ἦ γάρ κεν δειλὸς τε καὶ οὐτιδανὸς καλεοίμην  
εἰ δὴ σοὶ πᾶν ἔργον ὑπείξομαι ὅττι κεν εἴπῃς (Il. 1. 293-4)

These are the words of bickering equals, not an exchange between men of different rank. Achilles is saying that he would be degraded by taking orders from another man, even when that other is the leader of the army. Agamemnon asks for advice (Il. 10. 17-20). Indeed Nestor says that that is what kings ought to do (Il. 2. 360; 9. 100). He stands by while others suggest plans and throw lots to see who shall undertake enterprises (Il. 7. 171), the lot which later came to be such an important means of democratic selection. He is threatened by the defection of his men (e.g. Il. 1. 150-1; 2. 235-8). Achilles assumes that the soldiers will only obey him if he earns their respect (Il. 1. 150). Twice he says he thinks it is time to launch the boats, but it makes little difference since the other heroes disagree (Il. 2. 73-4, 14. 74-9). Achilles actually encourages the men to desert (Il. 9. 417-20) and that is what happens at the end when there is a disagreement about how to get home (*Od.* 3. 137 ff.).

It may be that Homer has to show Agamemnon weak because, for the purpose of his poem, he must show Achilles strong. But Odysseus the 'king' of Ithaca setting off home with a crew of Ithacans is served even worse by his men than Agamemnon. 'My friends' he calls them when he is appealing to them to be persuaded by him. But they rarely listen and that is why, in spite of Odysseus' cunning and shrewdness, everything goes wrong.

And in spite of the foreign manners of the Trojans and the lip-service paid to the dynasty there, Hector is no different from the Greek commanders. He, like them, is in command not because he inherits the position but because he is the best fighter, and that is what he hopes for his son (Il. 6. 476-8). Like them he has to persuade and exhort the men, and he too comes in for his share of abuse. Polydamas tells him that different men have different talents and that his is for fighting and not for planning (Il. 13. 726 ff.). Assemblies at Troy are just the same as those of the Greeks, with men like Antenor proposing to return Helen to the Greeks while Paris, the interested party, speaks against the proposition and Priam just listens. Afterwards Priam, whose role is that of the wise elder like Nestor among the Greeks, suggests that they have supper etc. And 'to this plan the Trojans listened and were persuaded' (Il. 7. 379).

The Homeric world was lying alongside a world which understood kingship very well. The kings of Assyria and Egypt were set off from the rest of the people by ceremony and regalia, pomp and circumstance of every kind. In Homer the kings are not distinguished in any way at all from the rest of the community, not in the way they are addressed (*Ἔκτορ* says the maid servant when she speaks to him (Il. 6. 382)) nor the way they are approached, not in their clothes nor their seating arrangements (the throne is more prestigious than the footstool but still total strangers are offered the throne (*Od.* 7. 169)), with no insignia, nothing.

Homer, then, attempts to give a place in his poems to the 'kings', the individuals like Odysseus and Agamemnon who have, he seems to suggest, a special position of authority in their communities. I have argued that the position is worse than confused.

The kings do not seem to have any function at all in the world of Homer. They do not make decisions on behalf of the people, they have no judicial function, even their command of their army seems dependent, far more than efficiency would expect, on their powers of persuasion and their reputation in the eyes of their men. The notion of kingship seems to be empty of content. Homeric kings are like the king and the prince in Cinderella – they reveal nothing about any social structure in the real world.

There seems then here to be a serious inconsistency in the picture of society that Homer is presenting. He speaks of Agamemnon, King of Mycenae, and Odysseus, King of Ithaca, but neither of them has a function. It is possible to suggest a number of reasons for the inconsistency. It may be that Homer heard about kings from the legends that were handed to him just as Aeschylus heard of King Agamemnon but that, since he had forgotten how kings are, he simply added the empty concept to the world he knew, which ran smoothly without them.<sup>56</sup> This article does not attempt to explain the origins of Homeric 'kings', only to point them out as anomalous. 'Homeric' kingship cannot be used as evidence for kingship in the dark ages because there are inconsistencies in the Homeric picture of Homeric kings which suggest that they were not copies from real life but a complicated literary fiction.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

In this article I have been considering two aspects of 'Homeric' society, the role of the kings and the very existence of the common people. I have attempted to show that the one is anomalous and the other is not proven. Two conclusions must be drawn. First, the poetry should be read again with less prejudice in order to understand exactly what 'Homeric' society really is. Second, Homer is not simply reproducing in his poetry the structure of the society of the world in which he lived.

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<sup>56</sup> P. A. L. Greenhalgh, *Early Greek Warfare* (Cambridge, 1973), 2, 170, would call this a piece of 'archaizing veneer'.