

Finley, M. I., The World of Odysseys. The Viking Press, New York. 1954, revised edition 1965.

Homer in Error

What was the world of Odysseus?

p. xiv Was it essentially the world of the Mycenaean kings and their palaces, in which the Trojan War was supposed to have occurred; or the world in which "Homer" (the quotation marks are explained in the book) lived, many centuries later; or somewhere in between; or a Never-Never Land? My answer was - and still is - that allowing for anachronisms and fictions, the society revealed in the poems existed in the centuries following the end of the Mycenaean Age, but before the rise of the Greek city-state civilization, near the beginning of which I believe the Iliad and Odyssey to have received substantially the form in which we now have them. If that is right, then the new information that can be squeezed from the Linear B texts ought to help confirm the view by pointing to conditions very different from those seen in the poems. In my judgment the tablets do just that. They show us a complicated, palace-centered, hierarchical society, unmistakably reminiscent of other societies of their own age, in the Near East, and unmistakably different in fundamentals from both the world of Odysseys and the Greek civilization which came later. Some of us had guessed that before the decipherment, as my book shows. By no means all scholars agree, I hasten to add, though I think many more would agree now than ten years ago.

Evidences of Error in Odyssey

p. 25,26 This is not to say that the travels of Odysseus in Never-Never Land can be retraced on a map. All attempts to do just that, and they have been numerous from ancient times on, have floundered. Even the topographical detail of Odysseus' home island of Ithaca can be shown to be a jumble, with several essential points appropriate to the neighboring isle of Leucas but quite impossible for Ithaca.

Not Contemporary in Outlook
p. 26 These are things about which we know a little as regards the seventh century, in which the Odyssey was apparently composed, and what we know and what the Odyssey relates are simply not the same. It is enough to point to the polis (city-state) ^{form} of political organization, widespread in the Hellenic world by then. On the island of Chios, which made the strongest claim of being "Homer's" birthplace, the polis was even to ~~move~~ to democracy, on evidence of a fragmentary stone inscription perhaps a century later than the Odyssey. Yet neither poem has any trace of a polis in its classical political sense. Polis in Homer means nothing more than a fortified site, a town. The poets of the Iliad and Odyssey, unlike Hesiod, were basically neither personal nor contemporary in their reference.

p. 37 The historian's verdict, obviously, can rest neither on faith in the divine origin of the poems nor on the once common notion that sufficient antiquity is a proper warrant of truth - . . . The historian, having established the point that neither the Iliad nor the Odyssey was essentially contemporary in outlook, must then examine their validity as pictures of the past. . . . was there a Trojan War?

. . . . The historicity of the Homeric tale had been demonstrated archaeologically. + #
. . . . Nevertheless, there are enough disturbing facts to compel the conclusion that "there is something wrong either with Schliemann's Troy or with Homer's." 17

Footnote 17 - Carpenter, Folk Tale, Fiction and Saga, p. 51