Definition: Homer from *Philip's Encyclopedia*

(active 8th century BC) Greek poet. Homer is considered to be the author of the the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, the great early epics of Greek literature. Nothing factual is known about Homer, he is supposed have been blind and lived in Ionia. Literary scholarship revealed that the Homeric poems are a synthesis of oral, bardic stories. The *Iliad* relates the siege of Troy in the Trojan War. The *Odyssey* tells of the post-war wanderings of Odysseus on his way back to Penelope in Ithaca.

Summary Article: Homer
from *The Encyclopedia of Ancient History*

Nothing is certain about the man whom the Greeks simply called "the poet"; not even that he was the author of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. One of the two earliest traditions surrounding Homer's homeland places it in Smyrna, since Homer's original name was Melesigenes (then changed to Homer because of his blindness, for, it was believed, that was the word for "blind" in the Aiolian dialect). Meles, Homer's father, would have taken his name from the river of the same name in Smyrna. The other tradition, pointing to Chios as the poet's birth place, may have sprung from what seems to be a self-reference to a blind bard from that island in the *Hymn to Delian Apollo* (v. 172), and, above all, from the presence of the Homeridae guild (an association of professional bards who claimed descent from Homer) in Chios. Other places disputed Homer's fatherland, first in Asia Minor and the surrounding islands; later, even Athens or Egypt was put forward as Homer's place of birth.

Despite these biographical uncertainties, there was nothing more Greek than Homer: children learned to read and write with his poems and, once the educational curriculum took its definitive shape in the Hellenistic period, the poems were taken as the starting point for all literary and grammatical learning, and even for rhetoric, at the final stage of education (see Education, Greece and Rome). Because Greeks regarded Homer as the basis of education, the poet became an essential key to their identity as a people: it was not only the language of the poems, which, not being recognizable as the language of any particular city, was common to all, but the morals and cultural values received from the Homeric poems were considered to be universally valid.

Of the many works traditionally attributed to Homer (*Margites, Batrachomyomachia, Homeric Hymns, Iliad*, and *Odyssey*, among others), the historical value of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* has long been discussed. They seem to take us back to Mycenaean times, a society ruled by kings who lived in palaces, used bronze weapons, and went to war on chariots (see Mycenaean society and culture). However, unlike the Mycenaean palaces, theirs are not the nucleus of a complex and autocratic political and economic structure. The kings are landowners themselves and rule along with a council and an assembly. They may go to war on chariots, but they abandon them when they arrive at the battle ground. Linguistically speaking, the so-called "Homeric" dialect has been shown to be closely connected to Mycenaean. However, the poems contain Ionian dialectical elements, side by side with Aiolian forms, and even some Attic traits. Thus, the linguistic evidence also points to a process of an ever-evolving text originating from a Mycenaean tradition.

The question, known as the "Homeric question," is in fact manifold. It concerns when and how the text of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* came into existence: was it circulating orally during a long period before it
was committed to writing, or did writing itself fix the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* in the form we know them? While the latter seems more likely, considering the difficulty of maintaining a unitary form through anonymous and multiple recitations over centuries, it still remains to be explained whether the "writer" was also the "creator" of the poems. A creative genius seems to lie behind the construction of the poems, even if they were made up, to a large extent, of previous oral material, as the numerous formulae reveal. The situation is further complicated by the fact that the *Odyssey* seems more "modern" than the *Iliad*, and hence the question arises as to single authorship. Despite the general consensus about a seventh-century BCE composition, some scholars point to the sixth century BCE for a more probable date, in terms of the actual redaction of the poems.

In any event, Homer's influence on subsequent Greek literature is incalculable; he left an indelible impact on Greek historiography, most apparent in Herodotus, but also present in the more prosaic Thucydides and Polybius.

**SEE ALSO:**

Historiography, Greek and Roman; Odysseus; Orality, oral culture, and historiography; Troy.

**References and Suggested Readings**


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