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HOMERIC SOCIETY

'Homeric society' is the social background against which the epic heroes live, act, excel, and suffer.¹ Hesiod believed that this society existed in a somewhat distant past, between the Bronze and the contemporary Iron Ages (*WD* 157–68); ancient tombs were venerated as those of heroes, and ancient sites and ruins attributed to them.² With the modern distinction between myth and history the historicity of Homeric society has become an important problem. If this society corresponds mostly not to poetic fiction but to historical reality and can be dated plausibly, historians gain a valuable literary source to illuminate a period for which they would otherwise have to rely on archaeology. Several scholars have used a commonsense approach and assumed that the poet would naturally model epic society on that of his own time.³ Others accept this only for part of the picture; they focus on real or perceived inconsistencies, treating the supposed 'amalgamation' of heterogeneous elements as an insurmountable obstacle to the historicity of this society, which they consequently see as an artificial product of poetic tradition and imagination.⁴ In the first section of this chapter, I discuss this question, turning in the second to the main features of Homeric society: polis and oikos, social groups and classes, and the political sphere. I consider economic aspects in connection with the oikos and with the appropriate groups of persons (craftsmen, traders, and gift exchange among the elite). In the third section, I draw some conclusions on the place of Homeric society in early Greek history.

¹ I use Richmond Lattimore's translations throughout this chapter, albeit often with substantial modifications. I do not discuss aspects of Homeric society that are treated in detail in separate chapters of this volume (e.g., religion, ethics, warfare, economy, Near Eastern connections, the archaeology of the Iron Age). For more detailed analysis of some aspects see Raaflaub (1993); (1996); (1997); forthcoming.

² van Wees (1992) ch. 1; Patzek (1992) pt. 3; Antonaccio (1995).

³ E.g., Hasebroek (1931); Calhoun (1962).

⁴ See n. 16 below.

*Historicity and Date of Homeric Society*⁵

The question of the historicity of Homeric society is related to two other much-debated problems: the 'Homeric Question,' dealing with the formation of the extant epics, and the 'Trojan War Question,' concerned with the origin of the Trojan War myth and the possibility that memories of a genuine Bronze Age war formed the core of Homer's story.⁶ In this chapter I follow the conventional view that the extant epics were produced, whether or not by the same poet, roughly in the second half of the eighth century, the *Iliad* about a generation before the *Odyssey*: close enough to each other to be examined as a unit.⁷

Excavations in Troy, Mycenae, Pylos, and other sites, and the decipherment of the Linear B tablets, allow us to reconstruct the economic, social, and political structures of Aegean Bronze Age societies.⁸ Many have believed, and some still do, that such essentially was the society described by Homer.⁹ Yet the Mycenaean palaces are a world apart from the houses of the Homeric leaders, and the centralized, hierarchical system revealed by the tablets resembles contemporary Near Eastern civilizations but is incompatible with anything found in Homer or known from later Greek history. Comparing the evidence from the tablets and epics in the sphere of property and tenure, M. I. Finley concluded that '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.'¹⁰

Finley insisted that the break after the Mycenaean period was deep, complete, and permanent. By contrast, E. Vermeule suggests that 'There was no break between the Mycenaean and Homeric worlds,

⁵ See Kirk (1975); I. Morris (1986); van Wees (1992) ch. 1; Patzek (1992); Ulf (1990) ch. 6; O. Murray (1993) 35–38; Raaflaub (1997), summarized in this section.

⁶ Turner (this vol.); Finley et al. (1964); Foxhall and Davies (1984); Mellink (1986); Patzek (1992); C. G. Thomas (1993).

⁷ Kirk (1985), ch. 1; Latacz (1985) 77–90. M. L. West (1995), Crielaard (1995), and others opt for the early seventh century. I use 'Homer' as a shorthand for the poet(s) who composed the extant epics.

⁸ Dickinson (1994); Bennet (this vol.).

⁹ This view dominates in Wace and Stubbings (1962), especially part 2B. See McDonald and Thomas (1990); I. Morris (1997).

¹⁰ Finley (1982) 232. Cf. Finley (1970); (1982) 199–212; Austin and Vidal-Naquet (1977) 37.

only change. The degree of change is arguable.¹¹ When, we ask, is 'change' profound enough to represent a 'break'? True, recent discoveries have shed welcome light on the Dark Ages; in some outlying areas (Cyprus, Crete) continuity was broad and substantial, and we now know that not all components of Mycenaean civilization were wiped out immediately when the palaces fell.¹² But it is still clear that in the Aegean most traces of this civilization had disappeared by the Submycenaean period (c. 1075–1025). In dialects (probably pointing to the influx of new populations), settlement patterns, material culture, meaning and function of terminology (despite identity of many words) and much else, despite continuity on elementary levels, the changes are deep and pervasive. The general impression remains one of a massively reduced population living in small and scattered villages, in simple conditions and in relative isolation.¹³ The Proto-geometric period (c. 1025–900 in Athens, but lasting a generation or two longer in some places) represents a new beginning with features that soon resemble those of Homeric society. Not surprisingly, therefore, Bronze Age survivals in the Homeric picture are rare and non-essential exceptions.¹⁴

Another question is whether this picture is sufficiently coherent to be historical. On sociological and anthropological grounds, Finley answered this question positively:

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 . . . The critical point is . . . that the model is so coherent, and this also rules out the common statement that what we find in the poems is either a fiction . . . or a composite drawn from different eras . . . [S]uch a composite would be blatantly artificial, unable to withstand careful social analysis.¹⁵

¹¹ Vermeule (1964) 309; C. G. Thomas (1993) 69.

¹² See Musti (1985); Musti et al., eds. (1991); Deger-Jalkotzy (1991); Ward and Joukowsky, eds. (1992); Patzek (1992) part 2; Karageorghis, ed. (1994). Van Effenterre (1985), however, goes too far.

¹³ Snodgrass (1987) ch. 6; Donlan (1989a); (1989b); Blome (1991).

¹⁴ Coldstream (1977); Patzek (1992) 104–20; I. Morris (this vol.). Survivals: n. 17 below.

¹⁵ Finley (1978) 153.

Several other scholars have since confirmed a high degree of consistency which, overall, by far outweighs the inconsistencies and contradictions, serious as they are.¹⁶

The understanding of Homeric society that emerges from these discussions can be summarized as follows. First, the picture includes some anachronisms, some archaisms, and some genuine memories of the Mycenaean period and the 'Dark Ages.' The list of such items is short and under constant revision; in several cases there are alternative explanations.¹⁷ Moreover, archaisms had their proper place in such poetry. Second, exaggeration and fantasy form important elements in heroic poetry; in most cases, they can easily be identified and do not impede serious reconstruction.¹⁸ Third, persons, events and a few other components may have formed an old, perhaps even historical core of old traditions. Even if so, in the course of long-term transmission and constant reinterpretation, such core stories were probably transformed so profoundly that we cannot trace their beginnings. Fourth, the poet was an artist, not a historian or sociologist. He did not intend to give a complete picture, and so arguments from silence are rarely valid. As G. Calhoun said,

Little can be said for the type of criticism . . . that fails to take account of the conventional use of numerals, of ornamental epithets, and of other formulaic elements . . . ; or makes no allowance for exigencies of the plot; or proceeds upon the assumption that the poet tells everything he knows upon a given subject every time it comes up, and cannot know anything that is not to be found somewhere in the poems.¹⁹

Fifth, most of the material used to depict the social background to heroic action is sufficiently consistent that we can recognize a society that makes sense from an anthropological perspective and can be fitted into a scheme of social evolution among early societies. This society must have existed in time and space outside of the epics. The place most likely was Ionia, but, given the panhellenic outlook and aspiration of the epics,²⁰ this question seems secondary.

¹⁶ Confirmation: Adkins (1971) 1; (this vol.); Donlan (1981/82) 172; Carlier (1984) 211; Herman (1987) xi; Ulf (1990); van Wees (1992). Inconsistencies: Long (1970); Snodgrass (1974), contradicted by, e.g., Adkins (1971); Quiller (1981); Donlan (1981/82) 146 n. 18; (1989a) 4; I. Morris (1986) 102–120. See also n. 63 below.

¹⁷ E.g., Kirk (1960); Patzek (1992) 186–202.

¹⁸ van Wees (1992) ch. 1.

¹⁹ Calhoun (1962) 431.

²⁰ G. Nagy (1979); Patzek (1992) 98–101.

How should this society be dated? Research on oral tradition and oral poetry is helpful here.²¹ In preliterate societies, collective memories of the past are preserved beyond a period of roughly three generations only if they are important to the present; even so, they are constantly reinterpreted to fit the changing needs of the present. Despite its formulaic nature, oral epic diction is highly flexible and adaptable. Oral poetry depends on the interaction between singer and audience; in each performance the singer, using traditional diction, elaborates traditional material into a new and unique full story. Its success depends on how meaningful it is to the audience. Entertainment value is essential, but so is the potential for identification. Hence oral song focuses on typical conflict situations and ethical dilemmas. Heroic epic, nourished by historical consciousness, embeds such stories in a 'historical context,' but this context is incidental and secondary—no matter whether it is based on vague but authentic memories or results from historicizing fiction that is artificially connected with monuments of a distant past.²² Hence heroic epic is historical in appearance but contemporary in meaning. The heroically elevated actions of individuals are set in a social context that is familiar to the audience. Many scholars believe, therefore, that Homeric society should be dated not, as Finley thought, to the tenth or ninth centuries, but to the poet's own time.²³

Yet in many respects, as Finley recognized, this is not the late eighth-century society we know from other sources. Even taking into account some lag-time for adjustments which must have been normal in traditional poetry, the poet clearly did not want heroic society to appear blatantly contemporary. Hence his effort to preserve 'epic distance' or to use an 'alienation effect,'²⁴ to preserve traditional elements and to endow his social picture with a 'patina.' The social background of heroic poetry needed to be modern enough to be understandable, but archaic enough to be believable. We should therefore consider Homeric society near-contemporary rather than contemporary with the poet and date it within the time-span that could be covered by the audience's collective memory: in the late ninth and eighth centuries.

²¹ J. M. Foley (this vol.); Vansina (1985); von Ungern-Sternberg and Reinau, eds. (1988); R. Thomas (1992).

²² Patzek (1992) part 3.

²³ Finley (1978) 47–48. Contra: I. Morris (1986); Ulf (1990); van Wees (1992).

²⁴ Redfield (1975) 35–39; Vidal-Naquet (1986) 15–38; Giovannini (1989) 25–39.

Main Features of Homeric Society

Polis and oikos

According to Finley, 'neither poem has any trace of a *polis* in its political sense. *Polis* in Homer means nothing more than a fortified site, a town.' By contrast, F. Gschnitzer claims that the eighth-century polis was fully developed. Recent scholarship tends to disagree with both positions and argues that the Homeric polis is an early forerunner of the classical polis, that most if not all the constituent elements of the latter exist in the former, albeit in an undeveloped form, and that this polis occupies a central place in Homeric society.²⁵

In fact, the epic world is full of poleis. Odysseus has seen the cities (*astea*) of many peoples (*Od.* 1.3), and the foreign visitor identifies himself by land (*gaia*), people (*dēmos*) and polis (8.555) or polis and parents (1.170). Poleis feature in similes (*Il.* 18.207–214) and on the shield of Achilles (18.490–540). The natural assumption is that people live in poleis, all important human figures are connected with a polis, and its crucial social function and symbolic significance are emphasized frequently.²⁶ The terminology used for these communities is consistent: *dēmos* (land, district, and people) designates the largest conceivable social unit; beyond its boundaries, there is no community. *Gaia* (land) and *patrē* (fatherland) are often synonymous with *dēmos* and polis. Polis and *asty*, interchangeably, describe the main settlement, but *polis* also refers to the larger political community (the state), comprising both town and territory. Hence Odysseus asks Nausikaa (*Od.* 6.177–78) about the people (*anthrōpoi*) who live in this land (*gaia*) and community (polis), and about the way to town (*asty*).²⁷

The action of the epics takes place largely in and around four poleis, Troy and the temporary polis (fortified camp) of the Achaians²⁸ in the *Iliad*, Scheria (the polis of the fairy-tale Phaiakians) and Ithaka in the *Odyssey*. These poleis have considerable differences, but also share important elements. Yet is what Homer calls a 'polis' really a polis? Definitions of 'the polis' pose notorious problems. Neither

²⁵ Finley (1978) 34, 155–56. Contra: I. Morris (1986) 100–104; Raaflaub (1991) 239–47; (1993) 46–59 (of which this section is a summary); van Wees (1992) ch. 2; Gschnitzer (1981) 42. See further Hoffmann (1956); C. G. Thomas (1966); Starr (1986); Scully (1990); O. Murray (1993) 42–46, 62–68.

²⁶ Scully (1990).

²⁷ Donlan (1970); Lévy (1983).

²⁸ C. G. Thomas (1966) 7; Raaflaub (1993) 47–48.

independence nor an urban center, though normal, seem crucial. Minimally, the polis is a community of persons, of place or territory, of cults, customs and laws, and capable of (full or partial) self-administration (which presupposes institutions and meeting places). The Homeric polis, comprising a main settlement and its hinterland, is indeed a community of space and territory. The main settlement contains not only the homes of the inhabitants, including the large house of the overall leader (*basileus*), where the other *basileis* meet and are entertained, but also communal buildings and spaces. Walls offer shared protection. Shrines and temples (*Il.* 6.297; *Od.* 6.9–10), sacrifices and rituals (*Il.* 6.286–311; *Od.* 3.4–8) mark it as a community of cult. It certainly is a community of customs. There are no written laws but much attention is devoted to observing customary norms and procedures and to protecting justice. Most poleis are independent, self-administered entities with deliberative and decision making institutions and a meeting place (agora), often with permanent seats at least for the leaders.

The decisive question is whether the Homeric polis is, in any meaningful way, a community of citizens rather than a loose agglomeration of largely autonomous households (*oikoi*) banding together only in times of emergency. Many scholars consider the *oikos* the primary and virtually the only important social, economic, and organizational unit, which absorbs the hero's primary allegiance.

The authoritarian household, the *oikos*, was the centre around which life was organized, from which flowed not only the satisfaction of material needs, including security, but ethical norms and values, duties, obligations and responsibilities, and relations with the gods. The *oikos* was not merely the family, it was all the people of the household together with its land and its goods.²⁹

Although the *Odyssey* shows us various types of *oikoi*, such as Laërtes' farm in an outlying area (24.205–31) and Eumaios' pig-farm (14.5–28), that of Odysseus, paralleled on Scheria by the fairy-tale *oikos* of Alkinoös (6.291–94; 7.84–132), is described in most detail.³⁰ It is exceptional because it is the *oikos* of the paramount leader, the wealthiest and most powerful man in the polis. Its center is the house (*dōma*) in the town of Ithaka. It contains the great hall with fireplace (where normally, as in Scheria, the *basileus* entertains the other nobles

²⁹ Finley (1978) 57–58.

³⁰ Richter (1968) 24–32; Finley (1978) chs. 3–4; Hanson (1995) ch. 2.

and occasional guests but now the suitors hold their unruly feasts), the living quarters of family, retainers, servants, and slaves, and buildings and rooms for animals and storage. The leader's *dōma* thus is an especially large version of a farmhouse (not even the dung heap is missing, 17.297–99), the center of an extended estate which comprises gardens, orchards and fields near the town, and herds of cattle, goats, sheep and pigs (14.100–108) in the country, often independently managed by trusted servants and slaves (such as Eumaios).³¹

The system of land tenure seems clear. The most fertile land near the town and suitable for agriculture and gardens is divided up and held as private property. Outlying land suitable for pasturage is undivided and open to common use, although it is *de facto* used mostly by the elite owners of large herds. Cultivation of marginal land (*eschatia*) bestows property rights; again, elite families are most likely to profit from this opportunity (24.205–31; 18.356–61). They are also the primary recipients of a *temenos* (land cut out from undistributed territory), assigned by the *dēmos* in recognition of outstanding service to the community (*Il.* 6.194–95, 12.313–14). Wealth is still counted in herds but land obviously is important as well (section 3 below).³²

Within his *oikos*, the master is in absolute control: he punishes unfaithful servants (*Od.* 22.419–77) and rewards the faithful: Eumaios and Philoitios, one certainly, the other probably a slave, are promised a wife and possessions, and a house built next to the master's own; they will be treated as companions (*hetairoi*) and brothers (*kasignētoi*) of Telemachos (21.214–16; cf. 14.62–66). Rewards and promotion thus take place within the *oikos*. With good reason: the *oikos* offers protection; those outside the *oikos* (*thêtes* and foreigners) are vulnerable. Hence the *oikos* is populated by various categories of dependent persons, among whom free retainers or followers (*therapontes*) are especially important; they include refugees from other communities, who enjoy safety and comfort in exchange for loyal service to the master, both in war and peace.³³ All the heads of large *oikoi* thus have their groups of followers; their status and power is largely determined by the number of followers they can muster.³⁴

³¹ Richter (1968) 32–69; Strasburger (1953); Drerup (1969) 128–33.

³² Gschnitzer (1981) 35–38; Donlan (1989c) Hennig (1980).

³³ Refugees: Phoenix, Patroclus (*Il.* 9.447–83; 23.84–90). *Therapontes*: Greenhalgh (1982); van Wees (1992) 42–44, 104–105, 118–20.

³⁴ Hence Agamemnon, leading the largest contingent, is overall leader of the Achaian army (*Il.* 2.576–80).

Undoubtedly, then, the *oikos* is centrally important and a primary focus of loyalty and identification. This remained true for centuries to come. But did it exclude loyalty to, identification with, and a sense of responsibility for the polis? Those who see a sharp division between *oikos* and polis can refer to the fact that throughout Greek history among the elite private obligations and interests clashed with the loyalty demanded by the polis, and all too often the former prevailed. Even in Homer, though, the polis plays a bigger role in people's lives than is often assumed.³⁵ Of course it is not a community of citizens (*koinônia politôn*) in the classical and legally defined sense, but it is developing in that direction.

Two aspects should be distinguished. One, I will show, concerns the existence of a public sphere, clearly distinguished from the private, in which the commoners are significantly involved. The other, identification with the community, is visible in the emphasis put on the individual's affiliation with a polis, and in the fact that responsibility for communal well-being is an essential part of the 'heroic code' which perhaps reflects contemporary elite ethics.³⁶ Distinction in the service to the community is rewarded with honors and privileges, and public status is tied to such service. Hektor is a positive model precisely because he understands his leadership primarily in terms of saving his polis (*Il.* 6.403, 441-46). Conversely, leaders who violate this code are criticized harshly (e.g., Paris, 3.39-57, 453-54) and find their position threatened by rivals and loss of followers (e.g., Agamemnon, *Il.* bks. 1-2). As Agamemnon's quarrel with Achilles shows, such conflicts among leaders and the damage they do to the community are taken seriously: efforts to prevent further splits (2.203-206) and to effect reconciliation are recounted in great detail, including a careful description of how a leader can admit his mistake, make up for it, and thereby enhance his reputation (bks. 9, 19).³⁷

In sum, the individual's primary focus on family and *oikos* does not exclude a high valuation of service to and responsibility for the polis. Hence the praise of the just king and of the blessings he bestows on the community.³⁸ The hero is aware that the well-being of his

³⁵ Herman (1987); Strasburger (1954); Greenhalgh (1972); Walter (1993) ch. 2.

³⁶ *Il.* 2.233-34; 12.310-21. Redfield (1975); Adkins, this volume.

³⁷ Havelock (1978) ch. 7; but see Donlan (1989a) 5-6. Generally, Raaflaub (1988); Nicolai (1993).

³⁸ *Il.* 16.384-92; *Od.* 19.106-114; 2.230-41; 4.687-95.

family depends on that of the community. Hektor and Meleagros demonstrate in different ways how the heroic code relates to polis and family: 'He has no dishonor who dies defending his country, for then his wife shall be saved, and his children afterwards, and his house and property shall not be damaged, if the Achaians must go away with their ships' (Hektor, *Il.* 15.496-99).³⁹ Therefore, 'One omen is best, to defend the *patrê*' (12.243). Odysseus yearns for house, wife, and son, but also for *gê* and *patrê*; he is thus thinking of 'home' as *oikos/family and country/polis*. Cumulatively, the evidence suggests that the Homeric polis is indeed a community of persons or citizens and, as such, is more than the sum total of autonomous *oikoi*.

*Social groups and classes*⁴⁰

The poet focuses on the spheres of life that are most important to the plot and to the heroic actors (war, seafaring, and the *oikos*); his description of society is therefore selective and informed by an elite perspective. Other spheres (such as the polis or economic activities) and other social groups enter the limelight only when it suits the poet's needs. Apparent rareness or unimportance of such groups or situations does not necessarily reflect real-life situations.

The heroes form an elite, distinguished from all others by birth, wealth, power, and skills, and who maintain close relations among each other. They are called *basileis*, but are they really 'kings' in any meaningful sense? There is much evidence to the contrary.⁴¹ True, some passages imply a ruler who, though listening to others, makes his own decisions, who cannot be challenged effectively, and who has the power to give away entire cities if it suits him (*Il.* 9.149-56; *Od.* 4.174-77). There is also Odysseus' stern warning in the crisis of *Iliad* 2: 'Having many masters (*polykoitranîê*) is no good thing. Let there be one master (*koiranos*), one leader (*basileus*), to whom [Zeus] gives the scepter and the right of judgment, to watch over his people' (2.204-206).⁴² However, during war or expeditions abroad challenges to the overall leader may threaten common success, and cannot be

³⁹ Lacey (1968) ch. 2; C. Patterson, *The Family in Greek History* (in preparation).

⁴⁰ Finley (1978); Gschnitzer (1981) 27-47; Donlan (1985); (1989b).

⁴¹ Finley (1978) 83-84; Arnheim (1977); Donlan (1980) ch. 1; Gschnitzer (1981) 38-47; Cobet (1981); Carlier (1984) ch. 2; Stein-Hölkeskamp (1989) ch. 2; van Wees (1992).

⁴² Easterling (1989).

tolerated.⁴³ Scholars disagree on how to explain the giving away of cities.⁴⁴ And whenever a paramount leader ignores the opinion of his people or fellow *basileis* (as Agamemnon in *Il.* bk. 1, and Hektor in 18.243–313), his decision leads to disaster; hence these examples are meant to describe, not the norm, but the negative exception.

Moreover, as Alkinoös says, 'twelve are marked out as *basileis* in our *dêmos* and hold power (*kraïnousi*) as leaders (*archoi*), and I myself am the thirteenth' (*Od.* 8.390–91). In every community there are many *basileis*; they are described functionally as leaders, councilors or elders (*prôtoi*, *archoi*, *hêgêtores*, *medontes*, *gerontes*: e.g., *Il.* 3.146–53; *Od.* 8.10–11). Despite differences in wealth, power of the *oikos*, personal qualities, and influence, they form a fiercely competitive group of equals, among whom the paramount *basileus* holds an inherited, though precarious, position of preeminence as *primus inter pares*—or 'a bit more.' 'How much more (or less) was a personal matter in each case.'⁴⁵ Their status is based on family, personal accomplishment, and reputation, all of which are stressed when the need arises to speak in the assembly. Their goal is 'always to be the best and to excel among the others' (*Il.* 6.208). Indeed, these are not 'rulers' or 'monarchs,' rather, they are best explained as an aristocracy-in-formation (see section 3 below).⁴⁶

Elite ideology is exclusive; non-elite persons are not to be taken seriously. 'Sit still and listen to what others tell you, to those who are better men than you, you skulker and coward and thing of no account whatever in battle or council,' says Odysseus to the commoner, striking him with his staff (*Il.* 2.200–202). The elite seem to hold a monopoly in politics and war. This impression, though quite wrong, combined with other instances of the poet's selective focus on the elite and its ideology, has led many scholars to consider the role of the commoners negligible. Finley concludes that the decisive gap in society runs between the elite and all the rest. By contrast, C. G. Starr emphasizes that the economic gap between elite and free farmers is relatively small; he calls the latter, not very aptly, 'semi-aristocrats,' the term perhaps rather fits the former.⁴⁷ In fact, the economic gap,

⁴³ Patzek (1992) 131–35.

⁴⁴ Hainsworth (1993) 77–78; Raaflaub (1993) n. 35.

⁴⁵ Finley (1970) 86.

⁴⁶ Weiler (1975). How exactly to define the *basileis*' function is much debated; see nn. 40–41 and Donlan (1981/2); Qviller (1981); Ulf (1990) 223–31; Raaflaub (1991) 230–38.

⁴⁷ Finley (1978) 53; Starr (1977) ch. 6; O. Murray (1993) 68.

though varying greatly, may well be large without being decisive. Certainly, the elite families are landowners and farmers; their 'roots in the soil' are unmistakable.⁴⁸ But scale and attitude are different: although the master of the elite *oikos* is experienced in much of the work on his estate (*Od.* 18.365–75; 23.189–201), he usually does not work himself. Rather, he supervises the workers and makes sure they are well taken care of (*Il.* 18.550–60). In addition, plentiful resources make it possible for the elite to enjoy a refined life-style.⁴⁹ The non-elite farmer, virtually absent in the epics, probably corresponds rather to the model of Laertes in *Od.* bk. 24 or Hesiod:⁵⁰ a hard-working man, with few servants, slaves and animals, and even fewer resources to spare even if he is not constantly threatened by poverty; he relies more on his neighbors than on the elite or leaders of the polis; if he is not living in town, he goes there only when forced by specific needs (*Il.* 23.826–35).

However, these men play an important role in the assembly and warfare. On the battlefield, the *laoi* (warriors) have an equal chance to gain *aretê* and *kleos*. Apart from honorary gifts for the leaders, they receive an equal share of the booty (*Il.* 9.318–19; *Od.* 9.39–42).⁵¹ Those who are especially successful on raiding expeditions might achieve higher status and social distinction at home as well (*Od.* 14.199–234). Hence class boundaries are not completely fixed: while noble birth is often emphasized, Calhoun rightly points to 'the conspicuous absence from both poems of specific terms for nobility of birth, of the antonyms of these terms, of words for ancestors and descendants, of the words later used in connection with the aristocratic *genê*, and the appellations later given to the lower classes.'⁵² The epics reflect a transitional phase in social development 'from individual achievement, dependent solely on skill and prowess, toward the idea of a social class in which membership alone allowed one to claim excellence.'⁵³ Correspondingly, the relationship between commoners and elite is more complex than many scholars assume. Submissiveness and blind obedience are not typical of the *laoi*. Positive

⁴⁸ Strasburger (1953); but see Hoffmann (1956) 124 n. 6, 127 n. 13.

⁴⁹ Latacz (1984); Hölischer (1990) 21.

⁵⁰ One of the most obvious omissions due to poetic selection. Hanson (1995) ch. 2; Millett (1984).

⁵¹ van Wees (this vol.); Detienne (1965); Nowag (1983).

⁵² Calhoun (1962) 438. Contra, Finley (1978) 53, 59–60.

⁵³ Donlan (1980) 18.

terms like *agathoi* or *hērōes* are used for them as well. Odysseus treats his followers as comrades and friends with care and respect: they are tied together by bonds of mutual dependence. The *basileus* is a 'shepherd of his people' (*poimēn laôn*), not a commander or distant ruler. For high status with concomitant honors and privileges he depends on the *dēmos*.

In sum, a *dēmos* with such power cannot be negligible. On the contrary, the commoners play a significant role in the community, and it appears that the three determinants of citizen status, known from later centuries (land ownership, military capacity, political participation), although not formalized, are already in place.⁵⁴

Outside the class of free, land owning farmers we find several categories of free persons. The retainers (*therapontes*), already mentioned, are members of the powerful elite *oikoi* and visible in a communal function only in war. *Demiourgoi* (who do *dēmia erga*, 'works for the people') form an elite of professional craftsmen and specialists, often wandering from town to town: seers, doctors, woodworkers and other builders or artists, and bards (*Od.* 17.382–86).⁵⁵ Their skills, always in high demand, compensate for their being outsiders; the ambivalence of their status is reflected in the portrait of the divine smith and artist, Hephaistos, who is envied, admired, and ridiculed at the same time.⁵⁶

Most other craftsmen seem to belong to a specific community or *oikos*; they are mentioned in passing (goldsmith, carpenter, builder or shipwright, leather worker and arms manufacturer, smith, potter, etc.), and little is known about whether they are full- or part-time professionals or about other details of their situation. The impression is that the *oikos* is largely self-sufficient and most of the work is done 'in-house'.⁵⁷

Hardly anything is said about local trade and markets, which must have existed (*Il.* 7.467; 9.71–72 for wine, 23.834–35 for iron) — another indication of the poet's selective description. Long-distance trade (*Od.* 9.125–30) is firmly in the hands of foreigners, especially Phoenicians. Trade, handled professionally and with the explicit purpose of gain, is a low-prestige occupation, often associated with

⁵⁴ Gschnitzer (1981) 35–36.

⁵⁵ Murakawa (1957); Eckstein (1974) 34–38; Finley (1978) 36–37, 56.

⁵⁶ Finley (1978) 72–73.

⁵⁷ Eckstein (1974) part 1; Rössler (1981); Schneider (1991); S. P. Morris (1992) ch. 1. On economic aspects, see also Donlan (this vol.).

piracy (*Od.* 3.71–74).⁵⁸ There is no greater offense to a traveling nobleman than to be called a trader, 'one who plies his ways in his many-locked vessel, master over mariners who also are men of business, a man who, careful of his cargo and grasping for profits, goes carefully on his way' (8.159–64).⁵⁹ Like others who are not members of the community, foreign traders are unprotected. Odysseus' Cyclops adventure in *Od.* bk. 9 and the suspicious attitude of the Phaiakians toward strangers (7.32–33) illustrate this reality; another side is visible in the common view that foreigners like other outsiders enjoy the protection of Zeus himself and should be treated hospitably (14.56–58).⁶⁰ 'Resident aliens' (*metanastai*), unless integrated in an *oikos* (as the refugees Phoinix and Patroklos are), are no better off: Achilles complains that Agamemnon has disgraced him in front of all the Argives, 'as if I were a *metanastēs* without *timē*.' This clearly refers to the difference between citizens (*politai*, *astoi*) and non-citizens who, though resident in the community, do not partake in the privileges of its members.⁶¹

Two other forms of the acquisition or exchange of goods are highly visible in the epics. One is raiding by warrior bands led by elite leaders, as it is practiced by Achilleus in the environs of Troy (*Il.* 6.414–28; 20.188–94), by Odysseus on his way home from Troy (*Od.* 9.39–61), and by 'Odysseus the Cretan' (14.222–34).⁶² Another is gift exchange among elite persons. 'There was scarcely a limit to the situations in which gift-giving was operative. More precisely, the word "gift" was a cover-all for a great variety of actions and transactions which later became differentiated and acquired their own appellations.'⁶³ Gift-situations and relationships include

traders' dues, ransom, peace compacts, rewards for services, tribute to chiefs, donations from chiefs, recompense for insult, marriage transactions, and guest friendship... Within this diversity, all gift transactions share basic features. Gifts are given either as compensation for specific acts, positive or negative, or in expectation of some future service or favor. The gifts themselves are always things of high value...

⁵⁸ Nowag (1983); Garland (1978); (1989) ch. 8.

⁵⁹ Finley (1978) 66–71; Coldstream (1982); Reed (1984); Kopcke (1990); von Reden (1995) ch. 3. See also Cartledge (1983).

⁶⁰ Finley (1978) 100–102; Havelock (1978) ch. 9.

⁶¹ *Metanastai*: Gschnitzer (1981) 29; *politai*: Lévy (1985); Walter (1993).

⁶² Nowag (1983); van Wees (1992) 207–258.

⁶³ Finley (1978) 66, and index *s.v.*; Austin and Vidal-Naquet (1977) 42–44; Donlan (1981); (1981/2); von Reden (1995) chs. 1–2.

There is always a social element present in the transaction . . . [Gifts are] an exchange system whose purpose was not the maximization of material profit but the establishment and maintenance of personal relations. In such 'gift economies,' the highest premium is placed on generosity and display; superiority in gift-giving equates to superiority in social prestige.⁶⁴

Knowing the rules of gift-giving, in part with the help of comparative anthropology, we are able to understand the great variety of possibilities in the system⁶⁵ and to 'decode' the intricacies of specific episodes, such as the ongoing competition for honor and status between Agamemnon and Achilles (especially in *Il.* bk. 19) or the seemingly bizarre exchange between Glaukos and Diomedes of golden against bronze armor (6.119–236).⁶⁶

Lowest on the status scale of free men is the worker for hire (*thês*). He is vulnerable and liable to be cheated and insulted by arrogant masters—as happened even to Poseidon and Apollo after they built the walls of Troy (*Il.* 21.441–52). What makes the *thês* contemptible is not the need to work but his dependence on others to earn his living, and thus his helplessness (*Od.* 18.356–75). Hence Achilles, preferring to be last among the living rather than first among the dead, mentions not a slave but a *thês* (11.489–91).⁶⁷

Slaves, then, are supposed to be better off.⁶⁸ In the epics they mostly are: the master's wife cares for slave children as if they were her own (*Od.* 15.363–65; 18.321–23); and, as the examples of Eumaios, Eurykleia, and Laertes' Dolios show, some slaves hold trusted positions in the *oikos*, and are virtually members of the family. Conversely, they have no control over their lives; they can be worked to the limits of their endurance (20.105–19); if they betray the master's trust, they are liable to cruel punishment (22.420–77). Homer is aware of the psychological effects of slavery: 'servants (*dmôes*),' says Eumaios, 'when their masters are no longer about to make them work, are no longer willing to do their rightful duties. For Zeus . . . takes away one half of his quality (*aretê*) from a man, once the day of slavery closes upon him' (17.320–23). From the perspective of the free and

⁶⁴ Donlan (1989a) 1, 3.

⁶⁵ Overlooking this fact is the main weakness of Snodgrass' (1974) challenge to Finley.

⁶⁶ Donlan (1989a).

⁶⁷ Finley (1978) 57–58, 71.

⁶⁸ Finley (1978) 58–59; Gschnitzer (1981) 29–33; Garland (1988) 29–37. See also n. 70.

noble who find themselves threatened by loss of liberty, the slave's condition, of course, is utterly pitiable: no thought of future defeat is worse, says Hektor to Andromache, than 'the thought of you, when some bronze-armoured Achaian leads you off, taking away your day of liberty, in tears; and in Argos you must work at the loom of another, and carry water from the spring Messeis or Hypercia, all unwilling, but strong will be the necessity upon you' (*Il.* 6.454–58).

Still, the 'paternalistic' view of slavery prevailing in the epics is understandable: slaves, in the strict sense of the word, are relatively rare—despite the 'heroic' numbers, few are actually mentioned.⁶⁹ Men usually do not survive defeat in war; hence male slaves are victims of piracy, and female slaves are more frequent. Skilled slaves are valuable: the equivalent of four or even twenty oxen (*Il.* 23.705; *Od.* 1.430–31). Moreover, the technical terms for slaves or slavery (*doulos/ê*, *douleia*, *doulosynê*) are used rarely. The prevailing terminology for servants is functional and status neutral: *dmôs* or *oikeus* (persons working in the *dôma* or *oikos*), *drêstêr* (the 'doer'), *amphipolos* (the person 'being around' the lady). Some of these persons clearly are slaves but others are not, and unless the context makes this explicit, we cannot know. At any rate, function in the *oikos* and closeness to the master count for more than personal status: Eumaios and Philoitos are promoted within the *oikos* rather than emancipated from it (*Od.* 21.214–16).⁷⁰

Finally, the portrait of women and wives is also ambivalent.⁷¹ Their sphere and function are clearly marked: they produce and raise heirs, they preside over the household and supervise the slave women and storerooms, and they practice the principal women's craft, weaving (*Il.* 3.125–28; *Od.* 2.93–110). They are not confined to the women's quarters: they speak with foreigners, sometimes hear bards perform, are involved in religious rituals, especially propitiating the gods (*Il.* 6.269–80, 286–311), and move around town freely. But these same women are pointedly reminded of the separation of men's and women's spheres: 'Go back in the house, and take up your own

⁶⁹ The figures given (*Od.* 20.107; 22.420–24: fifty slave women, among them twelve working the mills, and twelve unfaithful) are round, presumably exaggerated to fit the splendor of a heroic *oikos*.

⁷⁰ Ramming (1973); Gschnitzer (1976); Wickert-Micknat (1983); Raaflaub (1985) 29–46. See also Finley (1982) chs. 7–9; Strasburger (1976).

⁷¹ Arthur (1973); Wickert-Micknat (1982); Felson-Rubin (1994); Fantham et al. (1994) ch. 1; Blundell (1995) ch. 4; Cohen, ed. (1995).

work, the loom and the distaff, and see to it that your handmaidens ply their work also; but the men must see to discussion' or to the fighting (*Od.* 1.356–59; *Il.* 6.490–93).

While her husband is absent and her son still young, Penelope is in charge of the *oikos* (*Od.* 18.257–70; 19.525–27), defends it with intelligence, skill and courage (16.409–33), trying to make up for the losses caused by her suitors with the courtship gifts she extracts from them (18.274–303). Reverse similes comparing her actions and feelings with typically male situations (19.107–114; 23.233–40) indicate that hers is not an experience typical and expected of women. Arete, Alkinoös' wife, seems to play an even more powerful role (6.303–315; 7.66–77). As S. Blundell observes, 'In the utterly magical countries inhabited by Calypso and Circe, it is possible for women to be in complete control: while in a place like Scheria, midway between the everyday and the fantastic, a female can be accorded a measure of power.'⁷² Helen's unusual role in Troy and Sparta (*Od.* 4.120 ff.) may also be explained by her divine descent.

To Finley 'there is no mistaking the fact that Homer fully reveals what remains true for the whole of antiquity, that women were held to be naturally inferior and therefore limited in their function to the production of offspring and the performance of household duties, and that the meaningful social relationships and the strong personal attachments were sought and found among men.'⁷³ True, the epics contain a few generalizing negative statements about women, most obviously provoked by Klytaimnestra's evil deed (24.191–202); even Athena, urging Telemachos to protect his mother from the suitors' aggressive wooing, says 'You know what the mind is like in the breast of a woman. She wants to build up the household of the man who marries her, and of former children, and of her beloved and wedded husband, she has no remembrance, when he is dead, nor does she think of him' (15.20–23). Otherwise, however, as M. Arthur writes, the epic 'focuses almost exclusively on the positive side of the position of women; it emphasizes women's *inclusion* in society as a whole, rather than her *exclusion* from certain roles, it celebrates the importance of the function that women do perform, instead of drawing attention to their handicaps or inabilities.' Apart from the 'marital squabbles' of Zeus and Hera—the only example of a 'war of the

⁷² Blundell (1995) 55.

⁷³ Finley (1978) 128; Fantham et al. (1994) 39–44.

sexes' in the epics—Arthur sees the social position of women as ideologically upgraded and romanticized.⁷⁴

Indeed, the social portrait of women is complex and rich—fuller than that of any other category of persons except the heroes. It shows them in all functions and statuses of life and in their wide range of emotions. Marital harmony is praised (*Od.* 6.180–85) and illustrated by the examples of Hektor-Andromache and Odysseus-Penelope, marital fidelity is considered the norm,⁷⁵ and in the case of Nausikaa the young woman's transition to marriage is sketched in delicate tones.⁷⁶

Politics and the public sphere

The nature and significance of politics and the political sphere in Homeric society have been much debated among 'primitivist' and 'modernist' scholars.⁷⁷ As often in such debates, the truth lies somewhere in the middle. Finley omits a systematic analysis of the political sphere and discusses assemblies and councils in two different chapters. The community with its institutions, he argues, is a low priority after class, kin, and *oikos*. The epics 'are filled with assemblies and discussions, and they were not mere play-acting.' Although 'a large measure of informality . . . marked all the political institutions of the age,' the assembly's function was 'to mobilize the arguments pro and con, and to show the king or field commander how sentiment lay,' while 'the council of elders revealed the sentiment among the nobles.' The function of this council too was limited because actions and reactions were dictated by the heroic code. There were disagreements over issues or tactics, there was need for information, but there was little need for 'genuine discussion.'

The significant fact is that never in either the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey* is there a rational discussion, a sustained, disciplined consideration of circumstances and their implications, of possible courses of action, their advantages and disadvantages. There are lengthy arguments . . . but they are quarrels, not discussions, in which each side seeks to overpower

⁷⁴ Arthur (1973) 13–14; Latacz (1987).

⁷⁵ *Il.* 9.446–52; *Od.* 1.429–33; Zeitlin (1995). There is much evidence that concubines and their children often were part of the household. Priam, with several wives, is a unique exception: Finley (1978) 127 n.

⁷⁶ Fantham et al. (1994) 22–27.

⁷⁷ Gschnitzer (1991) surveys both positions. Further, Gschnitzer (1983); Carlier (1984) ch. 2; (1991); Bannert (1987); Raaflaub (1993) 54–57.

the other by threats, and to win over the assembled multitude by emotional appeal, by harangue, and by warning.⁷⁸

Finley has persuaded many scholars, and the prevailing tendency is to emphasize the pre-political nature of the polis, the informal nature of political institutions, and the insignificance of the assembly. This picture is one-sided.

Again we should keep in mind that the epics' perspective and purpose are not those of political or historical treatises. Hence we should appreciate the fact that the epics mention so many meetings of assembly and council.⁷⁹ This reflects a basic reality: an assembly is called, often combined with a council meeting, and public debate is arranged in a polis, army, or band of warriors whenever an important issue requires discussion and decision. Informal assemblies of smaller or larger groups meet occasionally, and it seems perfectly normal for Telemachos, as for the *basileus* of the Laistrygonians and other leaders, to spend time in the *agora* (*Od.* 20.146; cf. 10.114–15; 15.466–68). The assembly thus is a traditional institution, deeply embedded in the structures and customs of society. Some of these assemblies are formalized to a considerable degree: they are convened by the herald's announcement, the 'right' to speak is determined by status, rank, and experience, and the speaker assumes a position of high communal authority by holding the leader's staff. Themis, the goddess of customary and divinely sanctioned law, and Zeus, the protector of justice, are the divine sponsors of assemblies (*Od.* 2.68–69).⁸⁰ Normally, the leader makes conscious efforts to convince the assembly (hence the great importance attributed, among the leader's qualities, to persuasive speaking)⁸¹ and, although there is no formal vote, respects the people's opinion. If he refuses to do so and fails in executing his plan, he is liable to censure and makes himself vulnerable: in the cases of both Agamemnon (*Il.* bks. 1, 2, 9, 19) and Hektor (18.243–313; 22.99–110) the consequences are serious. The assembly has an important function in witnessing and legitimizing communal actions and decisions, from the distribution of

⁷⁸ Finley (1978) 78–82, 113–16.

⁷⁹ 12/12 (*Iliad*), 10/8 (*Odyssey*); Carlier (1984) 183 nn. 219–20. *Il.* 2.84–394; 9.9–79; *Od.* 2.6–257; 8.4–45 are especially important. The twenty-year hiatus on Ithaca is not to be taken literally.

⁸⁰ Gschnitzer (1991) 196.

⁸¹ Vernant (1982) 45–50; Kennedy (1963) 35–39.

booty to 'foreign policy' to the resolution of conflicts.⁸² Before the booty is distributed, it is 'common good' (*Il.* 1.124) and 'put in the middle' (*es meson*; cf. *en messēi agorēi*, 19.249). The same concept is visible in Homeric political and judicial decision making: the middle is the communal sphere (*koinon*), shared by all citizens, elite and non-elite alike.⁸³ Overall, although it lacks the right of initiative, free speech, and vote—restrictions which are typical of most ancient societies anyway—the assembly plays a crucial role that should not be underestimated.

Most of this is true for the council of *basileis* or *gerontes* as well. It is convened and consulted frequently by the paramount *basileus*, whether before an assembly or separately. In peace and at war, the *basileis* spend much time in consultations and at common meals. The *Iliad* describes several council debates: there is, among an elite of roughly equals, a recognizable hierarchy of speaking, and exceptions are explained carefully (*Il.* 14.109–27); the *basileis* consider it their duty to challenge the paramount leader (9.8–76), and he is expected to follow the best advice or the shared opinion of the others (9.74–76, 96–103). Two technical terms (*gerousios oinos*, the wine the *gerontes* drink in council, and *gerousios horkos*, the councilor's oath, *Il.* 4.259; 22.119) confirm that the council of *gerontes* is an established institution, and there are hints that it is, at least in some situations, held responsible for communal decisions: Hektor complains about 'our councilors' (*gerontes*) cowardice who would not let me fight by the grounded ships, though I wanted to, but held me back in restraint, and curbed in our fighters' (*Il.* 15.721–23).

Assembly and council are seen as such normal methods of communal interaction that they are attributed to divine society as well; although this society is equivalent, not to a polis, but to a family or an *oikos*, the gods are imagined to meet in assembly whenever discussion, decision, or announcements are necessary. E. Flaig points out that at least in one case (*Il.* 4.1–72) the principle of decision making is based on establishing consensus rather than securing victory for one side over the other. This principle is still visible in the Spartan assembly of historical times.⁸⁴ The rules applying in Homeric assemblies may thus have been very different from those familiar in later periods.

⁸² Havelock (1978) ch. 7.

⁸³ Detienne (1965).

⁸⁴ Flaig (1993); (1994); cf. Patzek (1992) 131–35.

In assessing the significance of these institutions, we should keep in mind that the men (*laoi*, *dêmos*) meeting in the assembly are the same who fight in the army and are militarily indispensable to the community. It is the *dêmos* who assigns the prize of honor in booty (*geras*) and land (*temenos*) to the meritorious leader (*Il.* 12.310–28) and compensates the *basileis* for exceptional expenditures incurred in representing the community (*Od.* 13.13–15).⁸⁵ The *dêmos* plays a role in jurisdiction as well (*Il.* 18.497–508) and provides the forum for foreign policy decisions: the Achaian embassy demanding the return of Helen and the treasures Paris stole from Menelaos' house speaks and is rebuffed in the Trojan assembly (*Il.* 3.205–224; cf. 7.345–78); hence the Trojan *dêmos* shares the responsibility for the deed that provokes the Achaian attack, and collectively suffers for it. This is a recurrent pattern: though elevated to a heroic and panhellenic level, the Trojan War, like the war between Pylians and Epeians remembered by Nestor (*Il.* 11.668–762), reflects a conflict that begins with a private raid and escalates into a full-blown war between communities if diplomatic requests for restoration of the stolen goods (*Od.* 21.16–21) are turned down. In order to prevent such escalation, elsewhere the perpetrator's community threatens to punish him and redress the wrong he did (16.424–30). The term *thôê* designates a penalty imposed by the community on an individual for actions violating communal interests (*Il.* 13.669).⁸⁶ The essential point is that the *dêmos* is held responsible for an individual's deeds, decides whether or not to accept this responsibility, acts accordingly or bears the consequences. Procedures, sanctioned by sacrifice and oath, exist to conclude and guarantee agreements between communities (*Il.* 2.339–41; 3.67–120).⁸⁷ Not surprisingly, the epics often emphasize collective, demotic will, experience and action.⁸⁸

Dêmos and *basileis*, then, share the political sphere: the agora is the center of the community; communal affairs (*koinon*, *dêmion*) are put in the middle (*es meson*), to be handled by the assembly. Private and public are clearly distinguished. The traveler is asked whether he is underway in private or public business (*Od.* 3.82), and the assembly does not deal with private matters. As an old man says when the

⁸⁵ Donlan (1980) 19–20; Nowag (1983) 36–40; Carlier (1984) 151–62.

⁸⁶ Vatin (1982); foreign policy: Wéry (1967); Raaflaub (forthcoming).

⁸⁷ Wickert-Micknat (1983) 18–21, 90–92; Karavites (1992); Baltrusch (1994) 104–108.

⁸⁸ Donlan (1989b) 14.

first assembly in a long time convenes on Ithaka, 'Who has perceived such an urgent need . . . ? Has he perceived news of an army that is approaching . . . ? Or has he some other public matter (*dêmion*) to set forth and argue?' (*Od.* 2.28–32). Political decision-making takes place in public. So does jurisdiction, which is a crucial obligation and prerogative of the *basileis*, individually and collectively.⁸⁹ The *basileis*, though holding the scepter that comes from Zeus (*Il.* 2.101–108) and thus 'sponsored' by the king of the gods, are subjected to praise and censure by the *dêmos* (*Il.* 6.401–403, 441–46; 22.104–110) and owe much of their position to the *dêmos*.

Conclusion: Homeric Society and History

Contrary to Finley and others who interpret Homeric society as a pre-polis society that gives priority almost exclusively to the individual's claims and the private sphere, I locate this society in the early polis, and emphasize the importance of the community in the individual's life, actions, and thinking. Except for the poor and landless, all citizens have a communal function in army and assembly. There are loose but well established communal structures: assembly and council, though not formalized, play an important and fairly regular role. There is a sense of a public realm, separated from the private, and an awareness of communal will and action, attributed collectively to the *dêmos*, both domestically and in dealing with other *poleis*. There is the capacity for communal accomplishment, both in war and peace (as walls and temples attest), and there is a sense of communal responsibility and solidarity. It does not seem, as Finley thought, that 'the social organization of the world of Odysseus was inadequate for the tasks we know some *poleis* contemporary with Homer to have performed.'⁹⁰

Confirmation for all this is found in the description of the society of the Cyclopes. These, although overbearing and lawless, live in a setting of golden-age abundance. But 'they have neither assemblies for holding council (*agorai boulêphoroi*) nor laws (*themistes*), but they inhabit the crests of the lofty mountains, in hollow caves, and each one

⁸⁹ Hence the *basileis* are *dikaspoloi* ('realizers of law, judges' *Il.* 1.258; *Od.* 11.186). Bonner and Smith (1930), ch. 1; Gagarin (1986), ch. 2; Havelock (1978) chs. 7–10.

⁹⁰ Finley (1978) 156.

dispenses the laws (*themisteuei*) for his children and wives, and is not concerned for the others' (*Od.* 9.105–15). This society lacks all that constitutes a polis: it has no shared settlement and communal center, no shared law and no institutionalized communication, not even a shared religion (9.273–78) or communication by ship with other communities and the outside world (9.125–30). In other words, there is no community at all, only autonomous families. This description of the ultimate 'anti-polis' represents a deliberate effort to conceptualize the polis by defining its constituent components and attitudes. Its positive counterpart appears in the ideal polis of the Phaiakians. They too are blessed by the gods and live in fairy-tale abundance, but they do everything right and fully share their communal experience; they are hospitable to foreigners and they are the ultimate sailors. As S. Scully concludes, the concept of the polis in Homer represents civilization, progress, community, justice and openness; not to live in a polis means primitiveness, isolation, fragmentation, lack of community, and lawlessness.⁹¹

The fact that the epics presuppose an early form of the polis fits well with the period suggested above for Homeric society (late ninth and eighth centuries). Archaeology dates the 'crystallization' of the polis to the eighth century; in Ionia cities may have emerged slightly earlier.⁹² Colonization, beginning in the same period, both presupposed and advanced the concept of the polis. In the epics, Troy and Scheria are founded cities (*Il.* 20.215–18; *Od.* 6.3–10);⁹³ the latter reflects colonization, as does the description of Goat Island opposite Cyclops country (9.125–41). The earliest communal wars are attested by historical tradition for the last third of the eighth century. The earliest known polis constitution, regulating the powers of and relations between leaders, council of *gerontes* and assembly, is the Spartan Rhetra, probably dating to the mid-seventh century: an immediate descendant of the informal Homeric institutions. The list could be extended.⁹⁴

The late ninth and eighth centuries were a period of rapid change. Within a few generations, the Hellenic world was profoundly trans-

⁹¹ Scully (1981).

⁹² Snodgrass (1977); (1993a); I. Morris (this vol.). Old-Smyrna: Drerup (1969) 44–47.

⁹³ Scully (1990) 24–25, 48.

⁹⁴ Colonization: Graham (1982); (1995); Malkin (1994); Raaflaub (1991) 218–22. Wars: Raaflaub (1991) 223–25. Rhetra: Raaflaub (1993) 64–68.

formed.⁹⁵ Old and new thus overlapped in people's experience and memory. Such *Gleichzeitigkeit des Ungleichzeitigen* made it easy for the poet to ignore very recent developments and apply to the society he was describing an archaizing patina, or to combine traditional, old-fashioned but dramatically attractive elements with more recent ones that were part of the audience's life. His listeners would have had no difficulty in understanding such mixture and juxtaposition: they knew well that things had been very different only a short time ago.⁹⁶

Here perhaps lies at least part of the explanation for many inconsistencies that keep bothering modern scholars. The following examples all reflect a society in transition. The heroes count their wealth in herds; they are meat eaters, and conspicuous consumption of meat is crucial for sacrifices, funerals and other feasts (*Il.* 1.447–68; 23.26–34; *Od.* 3.5–8). At the same time, land is clearly important—as we know it was in the eighth century. As Donlan says, 'The Greeks of the epics were apparently stockbreeders who had adapted to farming.' Gardens, orchards and vineyards, all forming part of the great estates, are work-intensive and prestigious; they too point to the future.⁹⁷ The assignment of a *temenos* to a deserving leader is prominent in the epics, although by Homer's time increasing scarceness of land may already have eliminated this custom. In the same period, communal wars were fought between poleis for the control of fertile land. The poet describes communal wars—which, as in history, coexist with private raids by aristocratic warrior bands—but emphasizes the older, more heroic purpose of fighting about women, booty, honor and status. In war, the heroes monopolize the battlefield and the *laoi* seem little more than fodder for their killing sprees. Yet upon close inspection, the latter are constantly and equally involved in the fighting; mass fighting is the norm, the phalanx looms on the horizon.⁹⁸ In the community, institutions are informal and dominated by the elite. Yet a closer look reveals that the *dēmos*' role is significant. The individual seems almost autonomous, and foreign relations are conducted through elite guest-friendships. Yet public embassies and treaties between poleis are known and the *dēmos* is capable of taking decisive action. The elite, reflecting the contradictions of a transitional stage,

⁹⁵ Snodgrass (1980) 13–14; Schadewaldt (1959) 87–129.

⁹⁶ Raaflaub (1991) 251.

⁹⁷ Donlan, (1981/2) 173; (1989c) 139–43; Snodgrass (1980) 35–37; (1987) 193–209.

⁹⁸ Raaflaub (1996); van Wees (this vol.).

is an aristocracy-in-formation—as we should expect it in the time when poleis were formed, under the pressure of rapidly growing population, from clusters of little villages and follower groups, and the elite of local and regional chiefs slowly evolved into the stratified aristocracy known in the Archaic polis.⁹⁹ Gift-giving is pervasive and at the core of social relationships. Yet there are indications that the customs and values connected with it are losing importance and other considerations are taking over.¹⁰⁰ Again, the list could be continued.

All these seemingly contradictory elements are woven into a social picture that indeed represents an amalgam, but with very few exceptions not, as is often assumed, an artificial or unhistorical one that arbitrarily combines components from wildly divergent periods and cultures. Rather, this is a natural and organic amalgam, reflecting real historical development and perfectly understandable to the poet's listeners.

One final point. Like much else, the complex customs regulating the process of decision-making in the assembly and the equally complex rules and implications of gift-giving, though puzzling to the modern scholar, have their analogies in other cultures and can be decoded with the help of anthropology and sociology. What matters here is that the poet never explains these rules. He takes them for granted. His audience therefore must have been intimately familiar with all that was going on in these interactions.¹⁰¹ Hence such customs cannot have been artificial poetic constructs or fossilized memories of things long gone. They are historical and belong to a culture that had existed in the recent past or still existed so that the poet's audience was able to recognize and understand them. The same, with few exceptions, is true for Homeric society as a whole.¹⁰²

⁹⁹ Donlan (1989b) 18–26; Stein-Hölkeskamp (1989) ch. 2; Raaflaub (1991) 230–38.

¹⁰⁰ Donlan (1981); Starr (1977) 58–60.

¹⁰¹ Donlan (1989a).

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THE HOMERIC ECONOMY

An 'Embedded' Economy

Ever since the original publication of M. I. Finley's *The World of Odysseus* in 1954, scholars have become accustomed to think of the Homeric economy as submerged or 'embedded' in non-economic social relations. This concept is fundamental to understanding the Homeric economy.¹ Finley argued that the core feature of Homeric economy and society was *reciprocity*, the symbol of which was the gift. The transfer of valuables from one person or group to another both within and outside a community almost always took the form (or the guise) of gift-giving. Thus, even compulsory donations were expressed as freely given gifts. The moral foundation of a gift economy is that every act of giving, whether of things or services, incurs a debt which carries a strong obligation to repay. Inherent in this construction of give and receive is a powerful ethical bias towards fair-play.²

In what follows, I assume that Homeric society—the social background for the dramatic action—reflects Greek society around 800 B.C. Although it is not an 'historical society' in any sense of the word, we can, in a scientific manner, extract a real society from it. The basic economic situation is especially clear and consistent in the texts, and to some extent matches up with the archaeology of the period.³

The Basic Economy

Most of the free population in Homer make their livings as farmers, herders, or craftsmen. Women are completely dependent on men for their existence. Although the collapse of the Mycenaean states brought major changes in the way production was organized and distributed,

¹ K. Polanyi is the important figure: see Polanyi (1944); Tandy and Neale (1994).

² Finley (1978 [1954]) 66–67, 120–26. See also Raaflaub (this vol.).

³ See Raaflaub (this vol.); I. Morris (this vol.); Bennet (this vol.).