

HOMER'S ODYSSEY

General Introductory Notes

ORAL EPIC

The *Odyssey*, like the *Iliad*, is an epic poem (Greek *epos* = verse). It was composed to be recited to the accompaniment of a lyre to a listening audience, not written to be read out or by them.

It is characteristic of oral poetry in its constant repetitions, both of phrase and line (*formulae*) and whole scenes (*typical scenes/themes*). These are the building blocks of the oral poet/bard in his recitation, enabling him to compose on the spot, although not without prior knowledge of these linking repetitions, e.g. *resourceful* Odysseus, *thoughtful* Telemachus. Because of this, the epithets applied to people may not always be appropriate to the context - they assisted in composition of poetry written in metre (dictated by syllable length and number of syllables).

COMPOSITION

The *Odyssey* was composed by a Greek living in Ionia (w.coast of Turkey) probably during the late 8th. Cent. BC. We do not know how or when it came to be written down, who Homer was or whether he was also the poet of the *Iliad*, as is traditionally thought.

Both *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are set in the Mycenaean Bronze Age (c.1600-1100 BC). From 1000 BC onwards, iron became the predominant metal in the Greek world, but Homeric armour, etc. is always of bronze. We assume the 8th. Century for composition of the epics because there are so few post 8th. Cent. customs, practices and artefacts referred to in the poems (e.g. writing, which is never mentioned in the *Odyssey*).

The *Odyssey* is 12,110 lines long and would have taken c.20-25 hours to recite - so possibly intended in serial form. It is divided into 24 books, one for each letter of the Greek alphabet - probably a later division since 'Homer' probably did not write. The *Odyssey* as we have it falls into six four-book groups, a possible clue to its recitation units.

Only by the 6th. Cent. was there a written text of the *Odyssey*, and our earliest ms. dates from the 10th/11th. Cent. AD.

BACKGROUND TO THE STORY

Odysseus, King of Ithaca, son of Laertes, husband of Penelope and father of Telemachus, had gone off to the Trojan War twenty years previously, when the *Odyssey* begins. The War lasted for ten of these years; the remaining time has been spent by O. in trying to return home. In his absence, various suitors for his wife's hand have recently been constantly hanging about in his palace, no one knowing whether he will return. Book 1 opens prior to his return, when O. himself is with the nymph Calypso on her island where he has been for seven years.

SOME IMPORTANT TECHNICAL TERMS/THEMES

xenia: 'guest-friendship' - shown by exchange of gifts/goods/services between individuals from different places; it involved the correct treatment of strangers and the duties of hospitality; a *xenos* (plur. *xenoi*) was a 'guest-friend' but can also mean 'foreigner'/'stranger'.

kleos: 'reputation'/'what people say of you' - how people will remember you after your death. A noble *kleos* is the hero's consolation for dying. The Greeks' value-system put more emphasis on successful performance and reputation in the eyes of others than on an inner consciousness of right and wrong.

dike: 'characteristic behaviour'/'way in which people should behave' and occasionally 'justice' in the sense of judgment or principle of law.

The introduction by Peter Jones in the 1991 ed. of the Penguin translation also establishes a number of these points. Other books should also be consulted - do not rely solely on the Penguin, especially for essays.

Information to find out:

- i) background to the Trojan War - clues: Paris, Helen, Agamemnon, Menelaus, the Judgment of Paris
- ii) the fall of Troy - clues: the wooden horse, length of the war
- iii) the Curse of the house of Atreus - clues: Thyestes' banquet
- iv) Aegisthus and Clytemnestra - clues: Agamemnon, Orestes