

## Homer

### A minimal comment about a prince among poets

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#### ABSTRACT

This article addresses, in a few lines, some aspects of Homer's life and poetical output, whose influence for building what we now call "Western culture" is only exceeded by that of the Gospels and the Bible as a whole. Especial emphasis is given to Christopher Columbus, whose extraordinary achievements as navigator had in Odysseus, one of the principal Homer's characters, their source of inspiration. Last but not least, I thank my colleague Júlio Tadeu Carvalho da Silveira for the important suggestions.

**Keywords:** Homer, Western Culture, Christopher Columbus, Dante Alighieri, literature.

*Of all creatures that breathe and move upon the earth, nothing is bred that is weaker than man.*

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Let us begin with this passage from Cicero: "Tradition says that Homer was blind; however, his work resembles more painting than poetry. Which is the region, the beach, the place in Greece, which is the kind of battle, army, navy and mobilization of men, which is the aspect and variety of animals that Homer does not paint for us, leading us to see what he himself did not see?"<sup>1</sup> Homer is the father of Western culture.<sup>2</sup> As for the controversy over Homer's existence ("One cannot be sure if Homer existed or not, but everybody knows that he was blind", as the saying goes), I echo Maurice Bowra's argument: there being no compelling reason not to, we are naturally led to accept that Homer existed.<sup>3</sup> One can still evoke these lines of Alexis Pierron: "The *Odyssey*, as well as the *Iliad* and much more than it, proves the existence of a poet, just as the Universe proves that of God".<sup>4</sup> In the *Iliad*, the scenario is mostly of centrifugal character: Greeks depart from different parts of Greece towards the Asian coasts of Troy; in the *Odyssey*, a centripetal dynamic prevails:

Greeks return to Greece, geographical pole or civilization and culture in general.

Homer lived between the ninth and eighth centuries BC, in a Greece recently emerged from its Dark Ages (c. 1200 – c. 900 B.C.), on the eve of the Greek archaic era.<sup>5</sup> His poems date back to an earlier and largely forgotten period, in which writing had disappeared in the Greek world: it begins in the thirteenth century B.C. and extends until Homer's time; those are the centuries called "obscure" by some, and "Homeric" by others.

Homer's characters do not have their existence historically attested; but that has not prevented them from influencing the course of History. Consider, for example, the alabaster urn of Etruscan origin, in which the subject of the rescue of the body of the hero Patroclus, friend of Achilles, is carved. Nowadays part of the collection of the Archaeological Museum of Florence, that work came to belong to Michelangelo, who seems to have taken inspiration from it for creating his *Pietà*,

<sup>1</sup> *Tusculanae*, V, 39, 14.

<sup>2</sup> See Strabo, *Geography*, I, 2, 3.

<sup>3</sup> See *La literatura griega* (translated by Alfonso Reyes), México, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1948, p. 15.

<sup>4</sup> *Littérature grecque*, Paris, Hachette, 1894, p. 50.

<sup>5</sup> "The Greek Archaic Period (c. 800 - 479 BC) started from what can only be termed uncertainty, and ended with the Persians being ejected from Greece for good after the battles of Plataea and Mykale in 479 BC" (James Lloyd. "Greek Archaic Period", in [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Archaic\\_Greece](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Archaic_Greece) [2019]).

destined to adorn the dome of the Tuscan capital.<sup>6</sup> Seer of worlds (some real, others not), Homer refers to the old Mediterranean sea, crossed by Phoenician vessels from North to South, from East to West. His *Odyssey* is one of the literary sources that triggered the Great Iberian Navigations – let it be remembered that Lisbon, the name of Portugal's capital city, derives from “Odysseus”: Olysipo > Ulysbone > Lissabone > Lisbon.<sup>7</sup> Francesco de Sanctis, one of the greatest exponents of the literary criticism of the *Novecento*, saw in Odysseus a precursor of Christopher Columbus.<sup>8</sup>



*Homer (Drawing made by the Author, based on a sculpture carved by an unknown Greek artist)*

In some aspects, Columbus was an early modern man.<sup>9</sup> In fact, navigating in a 15<sup>th</sup> century caravel through the uncharted waters of the *mare tenebrosum* (“sea of darkness”) – ancient name for the Atlantic Ocean, given by the same Phoenicians, so accurately described by Homer in his verses more than two thousand years before Europe could emerge as

a cultural entity – was a much more daring achievement than that of travelling to the Moon “and beyond” in a rocket during the 1960’s, as it was the case of Neil Armstrong (1930-2012) in 1969. In other aspects, however, Columbus was a typical man of the Middle Ages, imbued with a limited worldview: the Genoese *Almirante* did not conceive the existence of other continental masses in addition to those already included in the *orbis homericus*, that means, half of Europe and tiny portions of Asia and Africa; having visited and explored fractions of America four times between 1492 and 1504, Columbus died in 1506 in Spain, his “Ithaca” by choice, in the sure knowledge that he had reached the eastern extremity of East Asia. America was not exactly an unknown world to Europeans, taken into account that some of them had been there before Columbus, namely a great number of medieval Norsemen.<sup>10</sup> Amerigo Vespucci (1454-1512), another leading figure in the era of Great Navigations, called it *mundus novus* for the first time, a pioneering that resulted in the name “America” for that until then isolated part of the world.

The Genoese saw himself as a predestined man; his very name leads to such a conclusion: Christopher (in Ligurian Cristòffa Cómbo, in Italian Cristoforo Colombo and in Spanish Cristóbal Colón), stems from the Latin *Christumferens* (which, in turn, descends from the Greek Χριστόφορος = “bearer of Christ”), an etymological expedient the *Almirante* used to justify his historical role of carrying the Gospel far and wide to the ends of our planet. New Ulysses, Colombo, tireless navigator, also planned to give continuity to the Crusades: he intended to make the Great Khan a Western ally in the struggle to liberate the Holy Land from the Muslim grip. A worthy heir to Homer, Columbus gave birth to what the Venezuelan thinker Arturo Uslar Pietri (1906-2001) called the greatest cultural impact of all times: “Societies which had never before been in direct contact with one another, suddenly met abruptly and irretrievably. Some Europeans knew about the existence of black people, black people knew very little about Europeans; but neither group knew anything

<sup>6</sup> See Katja Fieder et alii. *Brockhaus, die Bibliothek: Kunst und Kultur*, Leipzig, Brockhaus, 1997, t. II, p. 101.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. G. Freund. *Grand dictionnaire de la langue latine* (translated by N. Theil), Paris, Firmin Didot, 1866, t. I, p. 1.062.

<sup>8</sup> See Francesco de Sanctis. *Storia della letteratura italiana*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed., Naples, Antonio Morano, 1890, t. I, pp. 205-206.

<sup>9</sup> “The early modern period of modern history follows the late Middle Ages of the post-classical era. Although the chronological limits of the period are opened to debate, the timeframe spans the period after the late portion of the post-classical age (c. 1500), known as the Middle Ages, through the beginning of the Age of Revolutions (c. 1800) and is variously demarcated by historians as beginning with the Fall of Constantinople in 1453, with the Renaissance period, and with the Age of Discoveries (especially with the voyages of Christopher Columbus beginning in 1492, but also with Vasco da Gama’s discovery of the sea route to the East in 1498), and ending around the French Revolution in 1789” (Jan De Vries et alii. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Early\\_modern\\_period](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Early_modern_period)).

<sup>10</sup> See Juan Gil. “De los mitos de las Indias”, in *Descubrimiento, conquista y colonización de América a quinientos años* (org. Carmen Bernand), 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., México, FCE/Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, 1998, p. 286.

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about the Indians, and Indians knew nothing about Europeans nor black people”.<sup>11</sup>

Having “followed the light of the Sun, and so leaving the Old World”, Columbus is certainly one of the worthiest heirs of Homer, the “mythical seer that dwells at the confluence of two millennia”<sup>12</sup>, an era in which Greece’s city states were born; nonetheless, the content of his narrative takes place in a more distant past, namely the Mycenaean age (c.1600-1200 BC), whose hierarchical society turned into a model for the feudal and aristocratic religion of the Greeks. Old Greece lacked a priestly caste, as it was the case with Egypt and Mesopotamia; its inhabitants were satisfied with a handful of common sanctuaries, led by a few priests. Difficult, very difficult indeed, would be to find a branch of Western culture that is not indebted with Homer and the Greeks in general. It is not putting it too strongly to say, parodying Alfred Whitehead (1861-1947), that European cultural tradition consists of “a series of footnotes do Homer”.



*In literature, for instance, Homer is at least as important for Virgil (70-19 BC) as Virgil is important for Dante (1265-1321) – always bearing in mind that there are two Western literatures: one created before Dante Alighieri, and another created after him. Here he is in a drawing I made based on a painting by Giovanni dal Ponte (1385-1438).*

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<sup>11</sup> *La creación del Nuevo Mundo*, México, FCE, 1992, p. 12.

<sup>12</sup> Pierre Lévêque. *I greci. L'alba di una civiltà* (translated by Carlo Montrésor), Trieste, Stampa, 1993, p. 53.