

M. I. Finley – The World of Odysseus

1 & 2 – Lays out basics of oral transmission, evidence from other cultures, etc. Argues that Homer does not at all represent Bronze Age Greece, or any sort of historical event, but does offer a view of social life in 10-9th century Archaic Greece.

3. Wealth and Labor

Homeric economy was such that there was no social mobility. But the only important difference is between aristocrat and commoner. No sharp social hierarchy. “Drester” worker, used of both free and slave. A few specialist classes like smiths too who are outside this order. Least fortunate were thetes, or beggars, who had no land of their own but worked for hire. Basic distinction between ordinary land owner and aristocrat was the scale. Fundamental unit was oikos. Gift-giving was a major part of virtually everything, but you weren’t supposed to profit by it. Trade was frowned upon, but labor was not, even if the aristocrat didn’t do any of it. This whole arrangement was reflected in the gods too.

4. Household, kin, and community

The poems focus on the individual. A man’s status resulted from his position in the oikos, his class, and his kin. The kingdoms in Homer are largely based on kinship and household, not any sort of central authority. The king could call an assembly to garner public opinion, but the assembly did not have any real power. Chief nobles did serve as a “council” but the king could ignore them as he pleased. Main job of a king was war and defense – all the “kingdoms” did pretty well in the 10 years the kings were at Troy. Kings ruled by might (iphi) and so could be overthrown by others. Unclear how exactly Penelope fit into this, since there are signs that whomever she married would become king. Very few signs of the demos in the poems. The base of royal wealth was the king’s holdings of land and stuff. There was a special bit of land, the temenos, for him, but no separate state treasury or anything – only his oikos. Again, lots of gift giving. And the need for alliances, not between communities, but households. Hence all the genealogies, and the importance of guest-friendship. There were also retainers (therapon). Ultimately, it was the oikos at the center of all this.

5. Morals and Values

Homer naturally reflected views of aristocracy. There was a heroic code that did not need to be expressed. There was no discussion – there were arguments, and advice, but no discussion. Even Nestor never gives advice, but only encouragement. Counsel in Homer is the decision itself. No room for prudence in Homer – Hector is proof of that. Competition is key – Achilles honors Patroclus with funeral games. Gift giving, especially of things with a lineage, was also important. Ceremonial meals always happen when a guest arrives. Greek wives are always referred to as bedmates, just as the

concubines, and were always inferior to the men. An important sanction of aristocratic merit was the lineage, preferably to a god. And the Homeric gods have exactly the same characteristics. No mystery cults, or Demeter for Homer. Man's fate was determined by chance, so there was no sin to atone for, and no reverential fear of the gods. But there are signs in the Odyssey of Zeus being transformed into a source of justice. It wasn't until Hesiod that this was all formally laid out.