

Anthony Kemp\*

*HOMER'S ARCHITECTONICS OF WAR:  
ATROCITY AND SYMMETRY*

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**Abstract:** *In the earliest extensive "fiction" of war that we possess, there is a marked contrast between the content of the work and the form in which that content is told. The content of the Iliad, its subject, is atrocity and catastrophe, both particular and universal. In the particular, the Iliad gives us perhaps the most grotesque, detailed, accurate and anatomical descriptions of combat deaths in any war literature. And all paths lead to such deaths: the most magnificent actions lead their actors both to impose and to suffer appalling and pitiable violence. In the universal, the subject of the poem may be said to be a mourning for what historians have recently come to term "The Bronze Age Collapse," which Robert Drews has described as "the worst disaster in ancient history, even more calamitous than the collapse of the Western Roman Empire." By contrast, the form of The Iliad is symmetrical both spatially and chronologically. I will show how the disorder of temporal violence and cultural collapse in the poem is intimately connected to, how it necessitates its rigorous order of the architectonic, atemporal form.*

In a conference on war and reconciliation, I want to go back to the very beginning, back to the first, most extensive, and possibly still the most profound writer who has told us of war. I want to accomplish two things with Homer. First, I want to remind us of what we have forgotten about him, of what familiarity and the enormous technical apparatus of Homeric criticism (and the previous centuries of Homeric adulation, "realms of gold") tends to obscure, to dull: I want to remind us what a terrible, disastrous, cruel, atrocious and calamitous world Homer describes. Second, I want to examine what forms of reconciliation, or of consolation, are available in such a world.

On the broadest, societal scale, Homer's subject is what has only recently become known as the "Bronze Age collapse." Between about 1200 and 1150 BC the high level of civilization of the Bronze Age Mediterranean fell in what Robert Drews terms simply "the Catastrophe" (Drews 3-30). Every city from Gaza to Troy was sacked and burned, and most small settlements. In Anatolia, every important site ends in a layer of ash. Hattusas, the Hittite capital, was burned and never reoccupied. At Karaoğlan there was no one left to bury the corpses. Troy, Homer's particular site of the collapse, was burned several times (at least twice) and then abandoned until Roman times. Cyprus was invaded in several waves, first by the Hittites, and then by the mysterious Sea Peoples. Ugarit was destroyed, and Carchemish. Ramesid Egypt went into decline under the

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\* University of Southern California, USA; kemp@usc.edu

depredations of the Sea Peoples, lost its Syrian and Canaanite empire, and began its slide toward the Third Intermediate Period. In Greece, every Mycenaean palace-citadel was destroyed. In all, 90% of occupied sites were burned and/or abandoned. Linear B literacy was lost, and the Greek Dark Ages, local, impoverished and illiterate, lasted for more than 400 years, until the adaptation of the Phoenician script from abjad to alphabet. This is Homer's world, his oral past, through which the stories of a lost age of splendor were transmitted by singers and epics now lost to us. Homer's historical consciousness is that of a people living in huts pitched among the ruins of great palaces and temples. An eighth-century Anglo-Saxon poem from the Exeter Book, now called "The Ruin" or "The Ruined City," expresses a similar sensibility.

The causes of the Bronze Age collapse are mysterious to us. We must not suppose that they were any clearer to those who lived through it, who could only experience local calamities. The living and the dying have no way of perceiving future retrospective totalizations of their age. Drought, earthquake swarms, the Hekla 3 eruption, the spread of iron weapons from what is now Bulgaria and Romania—all have been advanced as explanations and may well have been contributory. But there is one cause that is not mysterious: all of the destroyed cities were destroyed by war. The only mystery is the identity of the peoples and political units involved. Who was fighting whom? Who were the Sea Peoples, the Phrygians, Thracians, Macedonians and Dorians? The world of the Bronze Age collapse is a multi-polar world of total warfare. It is mysterious to Homer, as it is to us? There is a sense throughout the Iliad and Odyssey that not only Troy is being destroyed, that the whole Achaian world is also sinking, and that the reason is connected to Troy. The failed νόστοι (nostoi, homecomings) of the Achaian kings, and the deaths of so many of them at Troy is offered as a partial explanation. As Nestor tells Telemachus,

For we have been told about all the other men who once fought  
the Trojans, how each one of them perished in sad destruction,  
. . . and all who were our best were killed in that place;  
. . . since not all of them were considerate nor righteous;  
therefore many of them found a bad way home . . . (*Odyssey* 3: 86-134)

The atmosphere of decline is like a great penumbra throughout Homer, the background radiation of his whole kosmos. It is in Menelaos' nepenthe-soaked mourning for Agamemnon, for all the others, for the world itself:

So it is with no pleasure I am lord over all these possessions. . . .  
I wish I lived in my house with only a third part of all  
these goods, and that the men were alive who died in those days . . . (*Odyssey* 4: 93-98)

As one man, Odysseus, reestablishes peace and family and love, ὁμοφροσύνη (homophrosuné, same-mindedness, unity of thought and feeling), on one small island kingdom, all around the lights are going out.

What then of the individual human being in this world? Homer's poems are about how particular persons navigate this world. Here is how people die in Homer. I give below just two combat deaths selected from so many in the poems. They are cumulative in their effects:

This man Peneleos caught underneath the brow, at the bases of the eye, and pushed the eyeball out, and the spear went clean through the eye-socket and tendon of the neck, so that he went down backward, reaching out both hands, but Peneleos drawing his sharp sword hewed at the neck in the middle, and so dashed downward the head, with helm upon it, while still on the point of the big spear the eyeball stuck. He lifted it high like the head of a poppy. (*Iliad* 14: 493-499)

Idomeneneus stabbed Erymas in the mouth with the pitiless bronze, so that the brazen spearhead smashed its way clean through below the brain in an upward stroke, and the white bones splintered, and the teeth were shaken out with the stroke and both eyes filled up with blood, and gaping he blew a spray of blood through the nostrils and through his mouth, and death in a dark mist closed in about him. (*Iliad* 16: 345-350)

This is the warrior's fate, the degradation he both inflicts on others and eventually suffers himself. For this he wins κλέος (kleos, fame, renown, that which is told) precisely because what he does and endures is so terrible, a way of life and death so hard to choose. Combat death in Homer is realistic and anatomical (in a culture that had no anatomy!); I can think of no rival in world literature who describes violent death so acutely. Even when it is seen from the point-of-view of the killer rather than the killed, death is horrible. After the death of Patroklos, Achilles returns to the war with the determination that he must now win excellent glory (κλέος ἔσθλόν, kleos esthlon). This is what excellent glory looks like:

As inhuman fire sweeps on in fury through the deep angles of a drywood mountain and sets ablaze the depth of the timber and the blustering wind lashes the flame along, so Achilles swept everywhere with his spear like something more than a mortal harrying them as they died, and the black earth ran blood. Or as when a man yokes male broad fore-headed oxen to crush white barley on a strong-laid threshing floor, and rapidly the barley is stripped beneath the feet of the bellowing oxen, so before great-hearted Achilles the single-foot horses trampled alike dead men and shields, and the axle under the chariot was all splashed with blood and the rails which encircled the chariot, struck by flying drops from the feet of the horses, from the running rims of the wheels. The son of Peleus was straining to win glory (κῦδος, kudos), his invincible hands spattered with bloody filth. (*Iliad* 20: 490-503)

In such a world of war and death, universal and personal, what consolation? I'll start by pointing out two forms of consolation that occur to moderns that are not available to Homer. First, Homer has no idea of utopian consolation, that any war could be a war to end all wars, that in a revolution the world might suddenly change and become the opposite of what it actually is and what it has always been. There is no holding place in Homer's mind for such an idea. Would he find an age of peace desirable if he could imagine one? That is a real question. Homer has a divided affect in his attitude to war. There is a plenitude of evidence that Homer finds war hateful, squalid and pitiable. He has no patriotism, no glorifying of one side and dehumanization of another. He seems to regard all with an equal compassion, though some who emphasize the primitiveness of Homer might say that this compassion is a reader's phantasy. On the other hand, he seems to find war paradoxically magnificent, precisely because it is so terrible, so difficult to accomplish and to endure. Desirable or not, the idea of a future age of peace that reverses past and present is simply not part of his mental outfit. In this he is much more realistic than we moderns.

The second consolation that moderns might think of and Homer does not is the religious consolation. There is no better world beyond death for those who die horribly and young, no heaven for the just, nor even a Valhalla for the brave. All good that happens to mortals happens to them in this world, in their bodies, under the sun. After death, in the Homeric religion, everyone goes to hell. Only Tiresias keeps his mind among the dead. All others retain just enough consciousness, enough persistence to know that they have lost everything (*Odyssey* 11). Menelaos dreams of his prophecy from Proteus that he might not have to die, but will be translated to the Ἠλύσιον πεδῖον (Elusion pediov, Elysion plain) (*Odyssey* 4: 561-570). This is not life beyond death, but life without death, never having to die, being made immortal by the gods. But of all the mortals of both epics, only Menelaos is to receive this reprieve from death (and only because he is the son in law of Zeus), if the prophecy is true: only one saved of how many? Curiously, and immediately following this passage, Odysseus on Ogygia seems to be offered the same immortality by Kalypso (*Odyssey* 5:135-136). Whether she had the power to do so (her "hoped" is already in the past tense), or what it would have depended upon is unclear. In any case, he rejects such endless days, choosing instead his own uncertain, aging wife, his own poor and rough kingdom, his unknown son, his mortal life. There are no consolations beyond death in Homer's world.

We might mention the rituals of hospitality and supplication as consolations, but they are repeatedly and grossly violated in Homer. The cause of all the strife is a prior, always-already violation of hospitality: princely ambassador Paris has taken advantage of Menelaos' hospitality to seduce and steal his wife. Achilles repeatedly denies supplication until his final grief-fueled, weeping reconciliation with Priam. Even in the *Odyssey*, comedy to the *Iliad's* tragedy, the hospitality and supplication are sometimes observed, sometimes violated, often strangely twisted: on Ithaca Odysseus receives hospitality from his own slaves, and must supplicate for food his own guests in his own palace.

Two prime consolations in Homer's world must be mentioned: νόστος (nostos, homecoming) and κλέος (kleos, fame, renown, that which is told). These are the poles of desire in Homer's world, the rack on which character is tortured and stretched. Nostos is homecoming, and also, by the extension, all the pleasures of peace: marriage, children, the domestic, farming, herding, well-governed cities and well-ordered countryside, watching the seasons return, growing old among your possessions, living as long as you can before going into the dark. Kleos, immortal reputation, is won by extraordinary skill in violence, and the consequent power and possession that accrue from it. Nostos is the way of life; kleos the way of death. No one gets fame for staying at home and trying to live a comfortable and safe life. It is the obvious choice, and it gains no power. The way of kleos is a way of loss and discomfort, far from hot baths (*Iliad* 22: 444-445). It is difficult and terrible, and costs everything, and because it is so terrible, it earns great fame. The choice is made acute by the situation of an expeditionary war, but it is also the general choice of a warrior culture. One cannot possess both, at least not at the same time, though one cannot help but desire both. Almost all who seek kleos die young and horribly. Those who survive to achieve nostos after kleos—Meneleus, Nestor, Odysseus—are still haunted by loss: of companions, of time. When mortals do not live long, it is no small thing to lose twenty years of wife and son and home. These two consolations, the primary objects of desire in Homer's world, act as a kind of torment in their irreconcilable opposition. They need another kind of consolation to bridge the space between them.

When we first see Helen in the *Iliad* :

... she was weaving a great web,  
a red folding robe, and working into it the numerous struggles  
of Trojans, breakers of horses, and bronze-armoured Achaians,  
struggles that they endured for her sake at the hands of the war god. (*Iliad* 3:  
125-128)

She is transforming time, living and fleeting, violent dynamic action that is past before it can be comprehended, in which every deed is lost the moment it is enacted—the living world in which time devours all that time engenders—into stasis. In the tapestry everything endures and time is overcome. This is why works of art, wrought objects, are so important in Homer. Like oral kleos, art gives persistence, a kind of immortality, to the dead. Visual art has a different order from the normal order of narrative: events told in the order in which they occurred in time, from past to future. Visual art is ordered atemporally, spatially. Its normative principle is balance and symmetry. Such architectonic qualities work against the brevity of time and narrative art's enslavement to time. Penelope's tapestry—a shroud for the hero Laertes, her father in law, who is not yet dead, an obvious substitute for the missing Odysseus for whom she can weave no shroud, for there is no one to burn and to bury—is her weapon against time. She ravel it by day, unravels it by night, to eke out time and hold off the future in which she will be forced to choose an inferior husband (*Odyssey* 2: 94-110; 19: 137-153). What better metaphor of the articulation of art against time, against brevity and mortality, could there be?

The most complex of these many ekphrases is the shield of Achilles (*Iliad* 18: 478-607). Ekphrases can describe actual or fictive works of visual art, and in this case the described object is so detailed and complex as to be impossible of physical realization. Many artists have attempted to do so. It is obviously a circular shield of the hoplon or aspis type, not the man-enclosing figure-of-eight shield described elsewhere in Homer. I don't know what the five folds or triple rim mean; they may simply denote the layers of material, wood and leather and metals. The pictorial content of the shield is divided into nine zones, each introduced by the statement that the god Hephaestus made or wrought it. It also seems obvious that the two cities of mortal men are pendent to each other on either side of the same zone; there is no statement that the god made as we move from the city of peace to the city of war. If we draw a horizontal line across the centre of the shield, the zones look like this:

The Shield of Achilleus (*Iliad* 18: 483-607)

9-8-7-6-5-4-3-2a-1-2b-3-4-5-6-7-8-9

1. Center of the kosmos: earth, sky, sea (θάλασσαν, thalassan, inward sea, Mediterranean), tireless sun, moon, all the constellations, Pleiades, Hyades, Orion, Bear/Wagon "who turns about in a fixed place and looks at Orion and she alone is never plunged in the wash of the ocean."

2. Two cities of mortal men:

2a. City of peace: marriages, festivals, brides from their maiden chambers, torches, bride song, circles of the dance, flutes, lyres, market place, two men disputing over the blood price of a man who had been killed, one offers full restitution, other will accept nothing, arbitrator, heralds, "benches of polished stone in the sacred circle."

2b. City of war: besieged by two armies, divided counsel, wives, children, old men on the rampart, Ares, Pallas Athene, Hate (Ἔρις, Eris), Confusion (Κυδοιμὸς, Kudoimos, an onomatopoeia for battle-noise), Death (Κήρ, Kaer).

3. Planting: soft field, tilled land, ploughmen, teams of oxen, flagons of honey-sweet wine.

4. Harvest: precinct of a king, reapers, sheaf binders, children, king in silence watches happily, feast of a great ox.

5. Vineyard: heavy with clusters, grape-bearers, young girls, young men, light-hearted innocence, kind, sweet fruit, singing, lyre, dance-steps.

6. Herds: oxen, herdsmen, nine dogs, defense against two lions.

7. Flocks: meadow, sheep-flocks, sheep-folds.

8. Dancing floor: “like that which once in the wide spaces of Knosos Daedalos built for Ariadne of the lovely tresses,” young men, young girls, dancing, holding hands at the wrists, “understanding feet,” “as when a potter . . . makes trial of his wheel,” rows crossing each other, great multitude happily watching, revolving.

9. Periphery of the kosmos: Ocean river (Okeanoio, outer sea).

This summary cannot do justice to the delicate beauty of the original. The human world is encompassed by the natural world as centre (1) and as periphery (9). Homer distinguishes between the central sea, the sea within the land, and the great outer ocean, beyond all lands to the end of the world. The northern night sky is important because it is the fixed point of navigation for night sailing, another centre of the world. When Odysseus leaves Ogygia on his raft, the northern constellations appear with exactly the same language, marking his reentry into mortal time and season from Kalypso’s hidden realm (her name means “concealer”). The two cities of men embody Achilles’ choice, between nostos (2a) and kleos (2b), life and death. Notice that the city of peace is not a perfect place. It includes a murder, but the murder is reconciled by arbitration in the circles of the court. Achilles cannot make his choice. It leaves him sitting and paralyzed, in contrast to his epithet “of the swift feet,” because while he concentrates on his choice he cannot choose. He declares that nostos is everything to him, kleos nothing, that he will leave, but he does not, and remains sitting by his shelters. He cannot bear to lose what he will lose by making either choice, and so cannot choose until the death of Patroklos propels him, and in that instant he knows that he will die. (It is at this moment that the shield is made for him, replacing the shield that Hektor has stripped, with the rest of Achilles’ armor, from the dead body of Patroklos.) But what of all the lovely scenes of agriculture, herding, dancing, the ceremonies of human cooperation (3-8)? What have they to do with Achilles’ identity? They are all intricately detailed scenes of nostos, and they represent what he has now lost forever. They are the elegy for the fate he has not chosen. The happy king watching his harvest is the king Achilles’ might have been, even until today, but now will never be.

The whole of the temporal structure of the *Iliad* mirrors the architectonic symmetry of the shield. Counting time in Homer is complicated. The present time of the poems is overlain by retrospective and prospective times. Time in the *Iliad* has been worked out with most detail, and full allowance for uncertainties, by J. L. Myres in 1933. He refined the scheme as his earlier efforts were challenged and modified by correspondents. It looks like this:

1-9-1-12-1-1-1-1-Night-1-1-1-1-12-1-9-1(?)

The only uncertainty in the count is the one day after the final unit of nine, where I have put a question mark. There may be two days here and a third anticipated but not yet here (the day of the resumption of the fighting). The chronology between the two blocks of nine days seems certain, and here the *Iliad* presents an absolutely symmetry. Nights as well as days are highly detailed and at the very centre of the time line we find

one odd night, the temporal centre of the poem. This is the night-embassy to Achilles, to supplicate him to return to the fighting, and at the scene's very centre we find this:

And the great desire in my heart drives me rather in that place  
to take a wedded wife in marriage, the bride of my fancy,  
to enjoy with her the possessions won by aged Peleus. For not  
worth the value of my life are all the possessions they fable  
were won for Ilion . . .  
but a man's life cannot come back again, it cannot be lifted  
nor captured again by force, once it has crossed the teeth's barrier.  
For my mother Thetis the goddess of the silver feet tells me  
I carry two sorts of destiny toward the day of my death. Either,  
if I stay here and fight beside the city of the Trojans,  
my return home (νόστος) is gone, but my glory (κλέος) shall be everlasting;  
but if I return home to the beloved land of my fathers,  
the excellence of my glory (κλέος) is gone, but there will be a long life  
left for me, and my end in death will not come to me quickly.  
And this would be my counsel to others also, to sail back  
home again . . . (*Iliad* 9: 398-418)

Here is the fulcrum of the whole poem, its fateful and moral centre, the static balance of Achilles' fate, before it topples to its fall. Past and future emanate like ripples from this point. Homer transforms narrative—the rule of time—into architectonic symmetries—the proportions of spatial form. The *Iliad*, like the shield of Achilles within it, takes as its subject chaotic, dynamic motion, a world of cruelty and death, and transforms it by severe abstraction into stasis—the tapestry, the shield, the poem that contains the world and saves its quick, bright beauties (all in reality long dead) from time.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For the temporal architectonics of the *Odyssey*, see the brilliant reading of Norman Austin in *Archery at the Dark of the Moon*.