

Homer Appreciation Day (April 24, 2026)

Abstracts of Academic Papers

Dr. Eva Anagnostou-Laoutides, Professor at Macquarie University, Sydney (via zoom):

Homer's Underworld and Triangles of Death

As Homerists have long insisted, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* often preserve Bronze Age traditions, popular across the ancient Near East for centuries before Homer's epics took their final form (Morris 1997, 599). One of these traditions is the tale of Thrinacia, the legendary island where the sun god kept his sacred cattle and sheep. Odysseus, who undertakes a *katabasis* to the Greek Underworld in book 11 of the *Odyssey* (see Hades/the House of Hades in *Od.* 11.47, 65, 69, 150, 164, 211, 277, 425, 475, 571, 625, 627, 635), visits Thrinacia in book 12, where the hero still narrates his adventures in mythical lands before taking refuge on Kalypso's island. The eschatological nuances of Odysseus' adventure at Thrinacia have received limited scholarly attention (e.g. Dova 2023) although in antiquity it was frequently identified with Sicily (*Od.* 24.307; *Verg. Aen.* 3.429ff.; *Strabo G.* 6.2.1; *Justin, Ep.* 4.2; *Pliny, HN* 3.8; or western Sicily specifically, as in *Thuc.* 6.2.2), an island famous for the cult of Persephone, Hades' wife. Importantly, our ancient sources report that Sicily's original name was Thrinacia on account of its triangle shape. Importantly, T(h)rinac(r)ia's location in the West, invites comparison with Babylonian traditions that refer to the underworld's western location (e.g. *Epic of Gilgamesh* IX.8-29), and its association with the daily course of the Sun (*Gilg. Mi.* iii.9-10; Anagnostou-Laoutides 2017, 39-40; Woods 2009). While the impact of this tradition on Heracles' quasi-katabasis in the garden of the Hesperides (located in the West) has been pointed out in scholarship (Currie 2024), we are yet to explore the importance of the triangle shape of the Underworld in Babylonian and other Near Eastern traditions, like the *Rig-Veda*, and Homer.

Indicative Bibliography

Anagnostou-Laoutides, E. 2017. *In the Garden of the Gods: Models of Kingship from the Sumerians to the Seleucids*. London: Routledge.

Currie, B. 2024. "Heracles and Gilgamesh in Early Greek Epic". In Chr. C. Tsagalis (ed.), *Heracles in Early Greek Epic*, Leiden: Brill, 13-62.

Dova, S. 2023. "Helios, Hades, and the Power of Thrinacia". In S. Dova, C. Callaway, and G.A. Gazis (eds), *Homer in Sicily*, Sioux City and Syracuse: Parnassos Press, 1-30.

Morris, S. 1997. "Homer and the Near East." In I. Morris and B. Powell (eds), *A New Companion to Homer*, Leiden: Brill, 599-623.

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Dr. Jonathan Burgess, Professor em. at the University of Toronto

Odysseus' true if supernatural wanderings, false but realistic travel tales, and Gladstone's cognitive map of the 'wanderings'

I will first compare and contrast Odysseus' supernatural true return with his realistic "lying tales." The false tales occasionally borrow from the true travel tale and have recourse to a typology that I call "lying visitors at Ithaca." I will advise against theories that the "lying tales" represent a historical journey of a real Odysseus or alternative, non-Homeric versions of the hero's return. Then I will discuss the persistent phenomenon of proposing real locations for Odysseus' "wanderings" (as documented in my website <wakeofodysseus.com>). I will feature William Gladstone's imaginative/realistic map of Odysseus' wanderings and the Homeric world. Though its geography is eccentric, the map can be credited for anticipating the modern concept of "cognitive mapping." Display of this dense map littered by Homeric references and quotations will be employed to explain and critique Gladstone's visualization of the hero's journey.

Dr. Joel Christensen, Professor at CUNY (via zoom)

Why Odysseus? The Reception of Odyssey in the 21st Century

Since the release of the Coen Brothers' *O Brother Where Art Thou* in 2000 and Margaret Atwood's *Penelopiad* in 2005, popular interest in the *Odyssey* and its hero has steadily increased. This paper surveys trends in popular reception from Odysseus' status as a traumatized veteran, to his 'romance' with Penelope, and general discomfort with his actions as an "antihero". It will close by suggesting that Odysseus' traditional narrative adaptability and his epic's focus on identity and questions of truth and fiction help to explain his appeal to audiences in the 21st century.

Dr. Altay Coşkun, Professor at the Waterloo:

Scylla and Charybdis – Migrating Gates to the Other-World.

Both the Argonauts and Odysseus must cross monstrous straits known variously as Planctes, Symplegades, Cyaneae, and Scylla & Charybdis. In the *Odyssey*, these threats emerge on the hero's return from Circe's Aea, whereas Jason and his companions had to pass through terrible gates on their way to the kingdom of Aetes and the home of Medea. In the imaginative landscape of ancient epic, the mysterious straits serve as a boundary between a world of adventure known at least in part to the Greeks and the antechamber of the Netherworld from which there is no escape, at least none without divine support. Once crossed by human beings, however, the monstrous gates petrify and cease being fatal threats. Lands of darkness become part of the oikumene and can henceforth be accessed, explored, and exploited. In the 1st century CE, Valerius Flaccus would present the crossing of the Bosphorus by the Argo as a civilizing act and a manifestation of human progress. Most ancient and modern readers identified the obstacle of the Argonauts with the Thracian Bosphorus, whereas a majority of scholars and amateurs is enticed to pinpoint the Strait of Messina for Scylla and Charybdis separating Odysseus from his way back to Ithaca. But if it is true that the *Odyssey* had been shaped largely by the model of the *Argonautica*, then we must find a way to overcome the spatial contradiction. The present paper will delineate the migration of the elusive straits along the lines of Greek colonial history. The scope will be from the time of Homer, when the Black Sea was still closed to Greek traders and settlers, to the times of Apollonius of Rhodes, when there was no shortage of geographical knowledge and conflicting versions of mytho-geography.

Dr. Phil de Souza, Professor at University College, Dublin (via zoom):

Odysseus the Pirate.

This contribution will address a question that has a long history – does the epic hero Odysseus deserve to be called a ‘pirate’? While he is never directly labelled as such in the Homeric *Odyssey*, he and his crewmen certainly carry out acts that can be defined as ‘piracy’, and there are several Classical texts that refer to Odysseus, other Achaian heroes, and even the entire Achaian fleet at Troy as pirates. The main focus will be on the following episodes:

Odyssey 9.1-565 – Odysseus tells his host, the Phaiakian king Alkinoös, who he is and recounts some of his adventures after leaving Troy, including the raid on a Thracian people called the Kikonians and his encounter with the Cyclops, Polyphemos.

Odyssey 14.191-359 – Odysseus, pretending to be a Cretan aristocrat (son of Kastor), tells the swineherd Eumaios about his exploits; he tells a shorter version of the same story to Antinoös in *Odyssey* 17.415-444.

Odyssey 16.321-445 – The suitors of Odysseus' wife Penelope plot to kill their son Telemachos before he enters the city, after having failed to intercept him at sea; Penelope confronts them

and reminds one, Antinoös, that his father was saved by Odysseus after participating in a maritime raid on the Thesprotians, friends of the people of Ithaka.

Dr. Naomi Neufeld Folkes, Lecturer at the University of Toronto and University of Waterloo

Spatial Imagination and Mobility in Homer's Odyssey: Time, Harbors, and Navigable Space

This paper examines how the *Odyssey* constructs space through the interplay of temporal markers and harbor descriptions. In the early stages of Odysseus' voyage (Book 9), durations and explicit coastal details allow audiences to translate time into cognitively navigable space, creating a human-scaled mental map of the journey.

While scholars have long recognized Circe's island as a liminal threshold leading to the Underworld, this paper shows how Homer signals this liminality through the disappearance of harbor descriptions and the loss of temporal markers' function as distance, creating a cognitive shift in spatial perception. In Book 10, harbors fade and time no longer measures distance, marking a liminal, mythic spatial regime, reinforced in the Underworld episode.

Harbors and coastal/proximity cues return with the Phaeacians (Book 13), re-anchoring Odysseus' journey in navigable space. By tracing these patterns, this paper identifies distinct spatial regimes - human, liminal, and cosmological — and demonstrates how Homeric narrative constructs mobility and guides audiences to imagine a world that is both traversable and extraordinary.

Dr. Ivana Petrovic, Professor at the University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA:

Literary and Visual Representations of Homer in the Hellenistic Age.

*If Homer is a god, he should be worshipped among the immortals,
Even if he is not a god, he should be acknowledged to be one.*

Starting from this anonymous epigram, we will investigate one modern and several ancient representations of Homer's apotheosis and will then broaden our scope to discuss the general standing and perception of Homer and his poetry in the Hellenistic period.

Rabbi Dr. Ben Scolnic, Adjunct Professor of Southern Connecticut State University, Hamden, CT (via zoom):

The Walls of Troy: Magical Defenses in Ancient Sieges.

Why did the ancient historians pay so much attention to sieges? While the obvious answer is that they were a common aspect of ancient warfare, the deeper theological and psychological reasons may be found in Eliade's exploration of the city as sacred space. The city's walls were built and/or protected by the gods, who inhabited the inner circle of the temple. From Gilgamesh to Psalm 48 to Homer, we see the notion of magical defenses; the walls of the city were its chief, at times, its defining characteristic.

In the most famous siege in literature, the Greeks besiege Troy for ten years and never breach the walls. The *Iliad* begins with the tenth year of the siege, and flashes back to the reasons for the invasion, and lists all the cities and peoples on each side, but we think very little about the details of the siege. There is more of an attack on the makeshift walls of the Greeks than an attempt to scale the mighty walls of Troy. The Greeks only win when they are unknowingly welcomed into the city. The inability to breach the walls is not merely due to insufficient weapons and equipment, but based on the ancient concept of the sacred city.

Dr. Karol Zieliński, Professor of Classics at Wrocław University, Poland

The Homeric Changes to the Traditional Image of Odysseus

Comparative studies allow us to reconstruct Odysseus' image and the role in the oral pre-Homeric tradition. He is not a protagonist of the epic there but, representing the trickster type, rather the antagonist of the hero-protagonist. Both polarized characters represent two types of behavior assessed by the audience in terms of their usefulness for the survival of the community. In his readiness for sacrifice, the hero displays an altruistic attitude, positively valorized as moral behavior. The trickster's egoistic behavior moves away from moral principles, but it can also ultimately bring benefit to the whole community. Similarly to the behavior of the trickster-antagonist, that of the hero-protagonist is also ambivalent, as it can likewise bring harm to the community, which – though temporary – often takes on the dimension of a disaster. Odysseus' similarities to the god Hephaestus have been recognized previously by some scholars, and they do not seem to be coincidental: both characters reveal traits of crafty and dangerous dwarves, who are also excellent craftsmen and have magic at their disposal. The author(s) of the *Odyssey* and, to some extent, also of the *Iliad* reconfigure and transform this traditional character in a manner typical of oral tradition, which has always been open to reinterpretation.

