Homer’s World View

TITLE: World view according to Homer
DATE: prior to 900 B.C.
AUTHOR: Homer

DESCRIPTION: This monograph discusses the reconstructions of the world/earth view held by the early Greek poet Homer. The Homeric conception of the world represented as a flat, circular disc of land surrounded by a continuous ocean-stream remained a popular notion in the Greek world even after many philosophers and scientists had accepted the theory of the sphericity of the earth enunciated by the Pythagoreans and subjected to theoretical proof by Aristotle. In this interpretation the world is like a plateau on the top of a mountain; inside this, close to the surface of the earth, lies the House of Hades, the Realm of Death, and beneath it Tartarus, the Realm of Eternal Darkness. The plateau of the earth is surrounded by Oceanus, the world river, and from its periphery rises the fixed dome of the sky. The sun, the moon, and the stars rise from the waters at the edge of the dome, move in an arc above the earth, and then sink once again into the sea to complete their course beneath the Oceanus. The atmosphere above the mountain of the earth is thick with clouds and mist, but higher up is the clear Æther with its starry ceiling.

Attributed to Homer and committed to writing in the mid-eighth century are the earliest extant Greek literary works, the Iliad and Odyssey. They recount episodes from the Trojan War, and both reflect a strong geographic curiosity and awareness. Homer was dearly engaged by the nature of the world, its origins, its shape, and the relationships between places. In his lengthy catalog of Greek ships, he lists 29 contingents, 44 Greek leaders, and 175 towns and locales by name. The catalog incorporates topographical details for many places: Aulis and Pytho are rocky; Eteonos has many hilly valleys; Asine lies down a deep gulf. Of particular importance is proximity to the sea: Chalcis and Antron are by the shore; Cerinthos is a seaborne island; the landlocked Arcadians, to whom “the work of the sea was nothing,” had to borrow ships from King Agamemnon. Certain places are characterized by weather: Euboea, whose “wind was fury”; “wintry” Dodona. Human and political data are likewise noted. Thus, places are distinguished by landmarks: strong-founded citadels at Medeon, lower Thebes, and Mycena Tiryns of the huge walls. Populations, too, are tallied: Crete is said to have one hundred cities. Several sites are characterized by economic strength: Arne and Hisdaia of the great vineyards; silver-shining Lycastos and Cameiros; Iton, mother of sheepflocks. Some peoples’ physical characteristics and fighting skills are noted - the Abantes (of Euboea) “their hair grown long at the back,” who are “furious spearmen”; the Arcadians fight at close quarters.
Herodotus, Strabo and other geographic writers would later incorporate similar information into their own geographic accounts.

In Homer’s catalog, details regarding the spatial relationships between places are limited, restricted usually to neighboring bodies of Liliaia, for example, is beside the wellspring of the river Cephisus. In the Odyssey, as in the Iliad explicit directional and spatial details are few. The suggestion that Ethiopia is a divided territory—some Ethiopians dwell in the east, some by the setting sun—is unusual, as is the clarity of Circe’s directions to the Underworld: “Let the blast of the north wind carry you. But when you have crossed with your ship the stream of Ocean, you will find there a thickly wooded shore, and the groves of Persephone, and tall black poplars growing, and fruit-perishing willows, then beach your ship on the shore of deep-eddying Ocean.” Circe’s directions and her landmarks are vivid. The Underworld is a difficult destination only for its remoteness, and a map is hardly necessary. Furthermore, Homer’s description of the journey suggests something about the accepted view of the shape of the earth. He writes that at its limit “lie the community and city of the Cimmerian people, hidden in fog and cloud, nor does Helios, the radiant sun, ever break through the dark, to illuminate them with his shining, neither when he climbs up into the starry heaven, nor when he wheels to return again from heaven to earth, but always a glum night is spread over wretched mortals”. This description implies a flat worldview and a sun whose path across the sky does not change regardless of the season.

According to Strabo (#115), the third-century scholar Eratosthenes (#112) rejected all attempts to map the sites to which Odysseus ventured in Homer’s epic. Yet scholars contemporary with Eratosthenes proposed likely equivalents for several of the places featured there. The truth is, however, that these cannot be identified conclusively; and modern scholars continue to dispute the geographic integrity of Odysseus’ journey. Certainly, Homer’s descriptions of Ithaca and surrounding islands are not corroborated by geographic facts, and his references to Egypt, Cyprus, and Phoenicia suggest the political geography of the eighth century, not of the Bronze Age Trojan War era.

According to the historian Georgia Irby it is unlikely that Homer used maps or knew of them. Again, the “reconstructions” of Homer’s world concept by today’s historians as shown herein are the result of attempts to graphically “interpret” or “translate” Homer’s writings on the topic. The opulent artwork on Achilles’ shield, however, strongly suggests an early attempt at mapmaking. Hephaestus, the Greek god of the forge, created a great shield with five layers of metallic laminate and a triple-layered metallic rim. The shield’s face was decorated with a gold plate in the center, two plates of tin, and two of bronze. One of the bronze plates engraved onto the shield showed the earth in its relationship to celestial bodies: “[Hephaestus] made the earth upon it, and the sky, and the sea’s water, and the tireless sun, and the moon waxing into her fullness, and on it all the constellations that festoon the heavens, the Pleiades and the Hyades and the strength of Orion and the Bear, whom men give also the name of the Wagon, who turns about in a fixed place and looks at Orion and she alone is never plunged in the wash of the Ocean.” Hephaestus then depicted two dries, one of peace, another of war, and around the “uttermost rim.” He engraved the Ocean, which was thought to circle the earth. In short, the shield is a synthesized microcosm of Homer’s world, both terrestrial and celestial. It was not intended to communicate a physical geography, but it rather served as a generalized and metaphorical depiction of human activity and the interdependence of humanity with surrounding environs, a powerful image of the cosmos.

Despite Homer’s geographic curiosity and awareness, only the vaguest of maps could be generated from his data, comprising little more than a set of cardinal points. His geography lacks a frame within which to delimit boundaries. Nonetheless, early Greek sailors knew the nautical and
geographic markers scattered along well-established shipping lanes. “By connecting these dots, as it were, an outline of the oikumene appears”, and so the nautical accounts in Homer prove essential to the advancement of mapmaking. In fact, the paradigm presented on Achilles’ shield, the circular cosmos framed by Ocean, may have inspired early efforts in Miletus to produce “scientific” maps.

The earliest literary reference for cartography in Greece is difficult to interpret. Its context is the description of the shield of Achilles in the Iliad of Homer thought by modern scholars to have been written in the eighth century B.C. Since both Strabo (ca. 64/63 B.C.-A.D. 21) and the Stoics claimed Homer was the founder and father of a “geographical science”, generally understood as involving both maps and treatises, it is tempting to start a history of Greek theoretical cartography with Homer’s description of this mythical shield. If this interpretation is valid, then it must also be accepted that Homer was describing a cosmological map. Although from the Hellenistic Period onward the original meaning of the term geography was a description of the earth, ge, written or drawn (mapping and geographical descriptions were thus inseparable in the Greek world); it is equally clear that Greek mapmaking included not only the representation of the earth on a plane or globe, but also delineations of the whole universe. The shield in Homer’s poem, made for Achilles by Hephaestus, god of fire and metallurgy, was evidently such a map of the universe as conceived by the early Greeks and articulated by the poet.

Despite the literary form of the poem, it gives us a clear picture of the various processes in the creation of this great work with its manifestly cartographic symbolism. We are told how Hephaestus forged a huge shield laminated with five layers of metal and with a three-layered metal rim. The five places that made up the shield consisted of a gold one in the middle, a tin one on each side of this, and finally two of bronze. On the front bronze plate we are told that he fashioned his designs in a concentric pattern; a possible arrangement is suggested in the reconstruction provided herein. The scenes of the earth and heavens in the center, two cities (one at peace and one at war), agricultural activity and pastoral life, and “the Ocean, that vast and mighty river” around the edge of the hard shield denote his intention of presenting a synthesis of the inhabited world as an island surrounded by water. Hephaestus depicted the universe in miniature on Achilles’ shield, and Homer, in his poetry, only provides a commentary on this pictorial representation. As with the Thera fresco, which is roughly contemporaneous with the subject of Homer’s poem, the juxtaposition on the shield of scenes and actions that in reality could not occur at the same time shows the artist’s desire to portray a syncretism of human activity.

In light of the archaeological discoveries of cultures that certainly influenced Homer’s poetry, the content of Achilles’ shield seems less extraordinary. Homer was writing at a time not much earlier than the first manifestations of what is considered the beginning of Greek science. His poem may be interpreted as the poetic expression of macro-cosmic/micro-cosmic beliefs, held by a society seeking to reconcile a general view of the universe with man’s activity within it. Hephaestus, the divine smith, chose to give a complete image of the cosmos - earth, sea, and sky together with scenes of human life. The main constellations - Orion, the Hyades, the Pleiades, and the Great Bear - are described, suggesting that a tradition had already developed of using these groups of stars to identify different parts of the sky. The shield includes a representation of the sun and moon shining simultaneously, again in an attempt to integrate a general knowledge of the sky into one depiction. Even in this poetic form we can glimpse the use of a map,
almost as a heuristic device, to bring some order into concept and observation and to codify the early Greeks’ reflections on the nature and constitution of their world.

At the same time, we should be clear that the map on Achilles’ shield was not intended to communicate a literal view of geographical knowledge of the world as known to the early Greeks. The scenes from rural and urban life are arranged on the surface of the shield in no apparent geographical order. They simply present a generalized and metaphorical view of human activity and of the profound interdependence of human beings in spite of the variety and specialties of their pursuits. The ocean encircling the whole shield, rendering the world as an island, emphasizes this human unity. Homer depicts no maritime activity in his social microcosm: the ocean seems to be no more than a geometric framework for the knowable inhabited world, a framework W.A. Heidel considers to be the essential feature of all maps from ancient Greece.
So detailed is Homer’s description that, though clearly an imaginary map, Achilles’ shield represents a useful glimpse of the early history of efforts to map the world. Probably much of it is conventional, and much also is fanciful. Indeed, it was the subject of ridicule by later writers. Strabo summarized the view:

Some men, having believed in these stories themselves and also in the wide learning of the poet, have actually turned the poetry of Homer to their use as a basis of scientific investigations... Other men, however, have greeted all attempts of that sort with such ferocity that they not only have cast out the poet.... from the whole field of scientific knowledge of this kind, but also have supposed to be madmen all who have taken in hand such a task as that.

But the description no doubt reflects elements present in real maps of the time, many of which were widely used later on. Stars are named and grouped into constellations; the limits of the known world are fixed by means of the ocean, real or imaginary, that encircles the inhabited world; and there is an attempt to give pride of place to human activity in this world scene.

Homer, *The Outward Geography Eastwards*: “The outer geography eastwards, or wonderland, has for its exterior boundary the great river *Okeanos*, a noble conception, in everlasting flux and reflux, roundabout the territory given to living man. On its farther bank lies the entrance to the *Underworld*; and the passage, which connects the sea (Thalassa, or Pontos) with *Okeanos*, lies in the east: ‘where are the abodes of the morning goddess, and the risings of the sun’ (Od. 12:3). Here however he makes his hero confess that he is wholly out of his bearings, and cannot well say where the sun is to set or to rise (Od. 10:139). This bewildered state of mind may be reasonably explained. The whole northern region, of sea as he supposed it, from west to east, was known to him only by Phoenician reports. One of these told him of a *Kimmerian* land deprived perpetually of sun or daylight. Another of a land, also in the north, where a man, who could dispense with sleep, might earn double wages, as there was hardly any night. He probably had the first account from some sailor who had visited the northern latitudes in summer; and the second from one who had done the like in winter. They were at once true, and for him irreconcilable. So he assigned the one tale to a northern country (*Kimmerie*) on the ocean-mouth eastwards, near the island of *Kirke*, and the other to the land of the *Laistrugonas* westwards but also northern, and lying at some days’ distance from *Aiolie*; but was compelled, by the ostensible contradiction, to throw his latitudes into something like purposed confusion.”
**LOCATION:** (map only exists as a reconstruction)

**REFERENCES:**
*Landström, B., Bold Voyages and Great Explorers*, p. 27.

*illustrated*
Reconstruction of Homer's Map of the World
Homer's World View
The Homeric World: a conjectural reconstruction taken from geographical references in the 'Iliad' and the 'Odyssey'. Sometimes distances were indicated by sailing times, e.g. a north wind drove the Greeks for ten days from Cythera to the land of the Lotus Eaters.