

The Persistent Myth of the Existence of Homer in Mainstream History

**Examining a sample of information available to the general
public and assessing how this information may influence their
understanding of the Homeric Question**

Vincent T. Ciaramella

May 7, 2015

The academic world has known for quite some time that Homer is not one man but a collection of nameless bards that have sung the tales of the Trojan War and of the hero's that fought on the plains of Troy. Yet mainstream textbooks and history books still insist that there may or may not have been a real Homer. Why is this? With the lack of physical evidence out there why do writers still insist that this is a valid question or perpetuate the myth of his existence? Is it because there are artistic representations of Homer found on coins and in art of the Classical world? Is it because artifacts such as the cup of Phidias have taken figures from the realm of myth to history? Or is it the fact that textbooks, websites, and museums carelessly attribute the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* to a man who never was without delving deeper into Homeric scholarship to find out the facts? This paper will examine textbooks, mainstream history books, and websites, to see how they frame the existence of Homer to the general public who rely on them for factual information and then examine who might be to blame for this inaccurate information. Let us first turn to most of our first encounters with the bard, our trusted history textbook.

Homer in textbooks

“You may have read some tales about the Trojan War from a long poem called the *Iliad* by the Greek poet Homer.”¹ This quote comes directly from a textbook aimed at students between

¹ Mary Beth Klee, John Cribb, and John Holdren, *The Human Odyssey: Prehistory Through the Middle Ages Vol 1* (Hong

seventh and ninth grade. This is also the first encounter a student reading this textbook would have with Homer. If you read the quote you see that it says, “by the Greek poet Homer,” not that it is attributed to countless unnamed bards or is attributed to a mythical figure named Homer. This statement would lead one to believe he was a real person. In another portion of the textbook it gives us this statement, “The Greek playwrights wrote both tragedies and comedies. The tragedies were usually about the relationships between human beings and the gods, relationships between family members. They took stories from old myths, the poems of Homer, or Greek History.”² Again we see that it would lead the reader to believe that Homer was a real writer. The book never clarifies that Homer is a compilation of countless storytellers and that he is a mythical representation of the Greek bard. It just states in a matter-of-fact way that would lead students, teachers, or anyone not versed in Homeric studies to believe he was a real person. This isn’t the first time textbooks aimed at the mainstream public have given the reader the false impression that Homer is a real person. Is it because they have to pick and choose what they write about and leave the existence of Homer and the Homeric question out for the sake of space and size? Is it because the writer themselves are ignorant of the facts and scholarship that have gone into proving that Homer never existed? These questions would have to be posed to the writers of school textbooks on a one-on-one basis to find out why. But that is out of the scope of this paper and is best left for another time. Let us then take a look at books aimed at the mainstream public that deal with the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* and see how they frame the existence of Homer.

Kong: MacMillian Productions, 2011), 243.

² *Ibid.*, 321.

Homer in mainstream history

“Homer (no relation) was a blind poet who lived in Greece around the ninth or eighth century B.C., and, as a result of the curious Greek dating system, was apparently born eighty years after he died. It is believed the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, his two surviving works, were both originally oral rather than written works, which goes a long way towards explaining how a blind guy could have written them thousands of years before the invention of Braille.”³ This comical entry may make the reader laugh but the aim of this work is to give the reader a quick overview of the *Iliad* in a few short pages. We find again that in a work aimed at mainstream consumption it gives the impression that Homer was a real living being. This work is by no means aimed at the academic world but it does shine a light on what the mainstream public could possibly read about Homer.

In a more serious minded book aimed at the mainstream public titled *A History of Ancient Greece in Fifty Lives* by David Stuttard, the author gives some hint that Homer might not be real but does not delve into it beyond a brief statement, “This was thanks in no small part to two epic poems, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, thought by Greeks to be the work of one man, Homer.”⁴ Nowhere beyond this statement does it go into the research done by academics into the existence of Homer. So is this why the question of Homer’s existence is still brought up? The blame cannot be laid at the feet of just these two works. There are others out there that more or less give the same impression that Homer may or may not have existed. This is not to say that others like *The War That Killed Achilles* by Caroline Alexander does in fact state that the existence of Homer is doubtful but they never go on to clarify why. In some cases the works are more focused on the writings instead of the authorship but still, why is there little to no

³ Greg Nagan, *The 5-Minute Iliad and other Instant Classics* (New York: Fireside, 2000), 21.

⁴ David Stuttard, *A History of Ancient Greece In Fifty Lives* (London, Thames & Hudson Ltd, 2014,) 20.

mainstream attention paid to scholarship done into the Homeric Question? Is it laziness or ignorance? This again is a question for another paper. Let us turn now to the twenty-first century's favorite method of research, the internet and see what the World Wide Web has to say about the bard.

Homer and the internet

In years past, research was carried out in libraries, with one sifting through card catalogues and blowing the dust off of old books not checked out in the past fifty years. Now with the internet people have abandoned this archaic ritual for the sleek and easy search engine. This paper's aim is not to debate the validity of doing research this way but to underscore that this is how most people nowadays get their information. If we were to apply this idea to Homer what does one find? Using the popular search engine Google, if one types in "Homer + Greek Poet" there are 350,000 results. The first result is biography.com. In its synopsis it states that, "Although very little is known about the life of Greek poet Homer, credited with being the first to write down the epic stories of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, the impact of his tales continue to reverberate through Western culture. The Greek poet Homer was born sometime between the 12th and 8th centuries BC, possibly somewhere on the coast of Asia Minor. He is famous for the epic poems *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, which have had an enormous effect on Western culture, but very little is known about their alleged author."⁵ This brief overview does not mention that his existence is in question within the first few sentences. In fairness it does mention the Homeric Question later in the article but most people won't read beyond the synopsis, especially students who are in a rush or people just wanting a general answer and that's if they don't go to another site instead like Wikipedia that states in the first sentences, "Homerus

⁵ "Homer," *The Biography.com website*, accessed May 07, 2015, <http://www.biography.com/people/homer-9342775#legacy>.

(Ancient Greek: "Ὅμηρος [hómē:ros], *Hómēros*), best known as his anglicised name Homer, is the author of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. He was believed by the ancient Greeks to have been the first and greatest of the epic poets. Author of the first known literature of Europe, he had a lasting effect on the Western canon."⁶ Now Wikipedia's accuracy has been called into question many times but that hasn't stopped the general public from using it as its primary source. Again laziness or lack of academic training could be to blame but are scholars to blame for the lack of correct information presented to the general public? Do scholars specializing in the Homeric Question only write for other academics and forgo the general public? This question will be asked again later and expanded upon. But for now let us see how many links it takes us to get to a reliable source.

Four down from the top is the Encyclopedia Britannica which for over a century has been in publication and has been a trusted source, does a poor job also of dismissing the idea that Homer was real in its first few lines. "Although these two great epic poems of ancient Greece have always been attributed to the shadowy figure of Homer, little is known of him beyond the fact that his was the name attached in antiquity by the Greeks themselves to the poems. That there was an epic poet called Homer and that he played the primary part in shaping the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*—so much may be said to be probable. If this assumption is accepted, then Homer must assuredly be one of the greatest of the world's literary artists."⁷ Again it gives a vague notion that Homer might have existed and goes on to use the word "probable." It does bring up the question of his existence farther down the page but not before the average person would have quit reading and moved on. There is hardly a non-academic site that doesn't bury the question and work gone into disproving it either towards the bottom or it's not addressed

⁶ "Homer," Wikipedia, accessed May 7, 2015, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Homer>.

⁷ "Homer," Encyclopedia Britannica, accessed May 7th 2015, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/270219/Homer>.

at all. Is this why the belief in Homer persists? It may not be the sole factor but it's a contributing one. What if we were to examine the artwork of Classical antiquity and the museums that house them? Do they shed light on this question or perpetuate the myth? Let us examine the website for one of the most famous museums in the world, The Louvre.

Homer at the museum

On display in one of the most famous museums in the world is a marble bust of Homer. According to the Louvre's website, "This bust is one of many imaginary portraits of Homer, author of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, who lived in the eighth century BCE. The poet's features are unknown, but tradition describes him as a blind old man. Sculpted after a second-century Greek original influenced by the Pergamene style, this face uses a realistic vocabulary to depict an idealized portrait of the aged bard inspired by the gods."⁸ As we see the website even goes on to explain that, "To the Hellenistic age Homer was the quintessential poet, enjoying such enormous popular enthusiasm that he became the object of a cult, and was honored in the same way as a god. Many portraits were created to adorn the scholarly libraries of Athens, Alexandria and Pergamon. This example makes use of a realistic vocabulary to offer a venerable, idealized image of the aged bard, inspired by the gods and dwelling upon his inner vision. Over his forehead is a bandeau or headband that distinguishes him from ordinary mortals."⁹ The public places a lot of trust in museums and rightfully so. They are filled with treasures from all places and all times and attended to by academics whose job it is to preserve and present them in correct context with correct information. This quote from the Louvre's website begins by saying "imaginary" which is a promising start but then falls into the same

⁸ "Imaginary Portrait of the Blind Homer" Louvre, accessed May 2, 2015, <http://www.louvre.fr/en/oeuvre-notices/imaginary-portrait-blind-homer>.

⁹ *Ibid.*, Louvre, accessed May 2, 2015, <http://www.louvre.fr/en/oeuvre-notices/imaginary-portrait-blind-homer>.

trappings as other depots of mainstream history by saying “who lived in the eighth century.” Already the average reader will take away that we don’t know what he looks like but that he was real. Nowhere does it mention the debate of Homer’s existence or give the impression that it’s a question at all. If academics are responsible for communicating correct material then why does this fail so miserably? Let’s take a look at another entry from The British Museum and see what they have to offer.

“The existence of Homer as an historical individual has been doubted. However, it remains possible to accept that he was an oral poet or bard of genius who created two great enduring poems from the mythological tradition. Homer probably did not use writing, but the Phoenician alphabet was introduced to Greece at about the time that the poems were composed. His followers may have written down the poems shortly afterwards.”¹⁰ Finally we find a website that states that his existence is doubted. But that’s only if one knows to type in “The British Museum + Homer” into Google. It does not appear on the first few pages of the search engine if one just uses the same string used before, “Homer + Greek Poet.” So what are the chances of the average person finding it? Slim to none unless they already knew about the site. It is also more likely they would access the site to research a piece of art or an artifact. If we type in “Homer bust” into their search field one gets this from the official entry. “Homer is thought to have lived in Greece around 750 to 700 BC. He is the most famous poet of all antiquity; the author of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, epic poems focusing respectively upon the heroes Achilles and Odysseus. The first tells of Achilles' part in the siege of Troy, while the second relates the adventures of Odysseus on his journey home following the city's fall. Homer lived before the age of realistic portraiture. The Roman author Pliny the Elder (AD 23/4-79) tells us that the poet's later portrait type was invented in the second century BC for the library of the

¹⁰ “Homer”, The British Museum, accessed May 7, 2015, <http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/highlights/articles/h/homer.aspx>.

Attalid kings of Pergamon (Pergamum). Many copies of this 'portrait' were made in the Roman period. This one is carved as a 'terminal bust', designed to be mounted on a square stone shaft.”¹¹ Though the website does a great job at describing the artifact it doesn't make clear that Homer's existence is in question and states that he was the author of the two great epics.

Is the academic world to blame?

These websites and books are just a few examples of sources on Homer available to the mainstream population and by no means is a definitive collection. But these are seen as trusted sources of information for the general public and again they do a poor job at making it known that the existence of Homer is debated. If we start adding these things up, and not taking into account programs on cable networks that talk about Homer, it seems that there is an epidemic of misinformation about the true nature of Homers existence. Why? Is it because there is no definitive answer? Is it because some are holding out that archeology will prove the existence of Homer through a tomb or a cache of documents unearthed somewhere in the Mediterranean World or Egypt? Or does the blame lie at the doorstep of academia? Is the Homeric Question well published or is it just written by and for a small circle of professors and diehard enthusiasts? As far as the author of this paper knows, there is no mainstream history book available to the general public that tackles the Homeric Question solely. There are books but most are geared towards those with an already strong knowledge of the bard and the Homeric Question. So in the end, who is to blame? If scholars are supposed to educate the public on their specialized topics, then this topic has no champion to bring it to the masses. A pessimistic answer some might give is that the public doesn't care about the author as much as the works or it's irrelevant to the object it's describing. But until the academic world stops

¹¹ “Marble bust of Homer”, The British Museum, accessed May 7, 2015, http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/highlights/highlight_objects/gr/m/marble_portrait_bust_of_homer.aspx.

looking inwardly and begins looking beyond the halls of the university then this myth will persist.

Bibliography

Klee, Mary Beth, Cribb, John, and Holdren John. *The Human Odyssey: Prehistory Through the Middle Ages Vol 1*. Hong Kong: Macmilliam Productions, 2011.a

Klee, Mary Beth, Cribb, John, and Holdren John. *The Human Odyssey: Prehistory Through the Middle Ages Vol 1*. Hong Kong: Macmilliam Productions, 2011.

Nagan, Greg. *The 5-Minute Iliad and other Instant Classics*. New York: Fireside, 2000.

Stuttard, David. *A History of Ancient Greece in Fifty Lives*. London: Thames & Hudson, 2014.

“Homer.” The Biography.com Website. Accessed May 7, 2015,
<http://www.biography.com/people/homer-9342775#synopsis>.

“Homer.” The British Museum. Accessed May 7, 2015,
<http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/highlights/articles/h/homer.aspx>.

“Homer.” Wikipedia. Accessed May 7 2015, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Homer>.

“Homer.” Encyclopedia Britannica. Accessed May 7th 2015,
<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/270219/Homer>.

“Imaginary Portrait of the Blind Homer.” Louvre. Accessed May 2, 2015,
<http://www.louvre.fr/en/oeuvre-notices/imaginary-portrait-blind-homer>.

“Imaginary Portrait of the Blind Homer.” Louvre. Accessed May 2, 2015,
<http://www.louvre.fr/en/oeuvre-notices/imaginary-portrait-blind-homer>.

“Marble bust of Homer”, The British Museum, accessed May 7, 2015,
http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/highlights/highlight_objects/gr/m/marble_portrait_bust_of_homer.aspx.