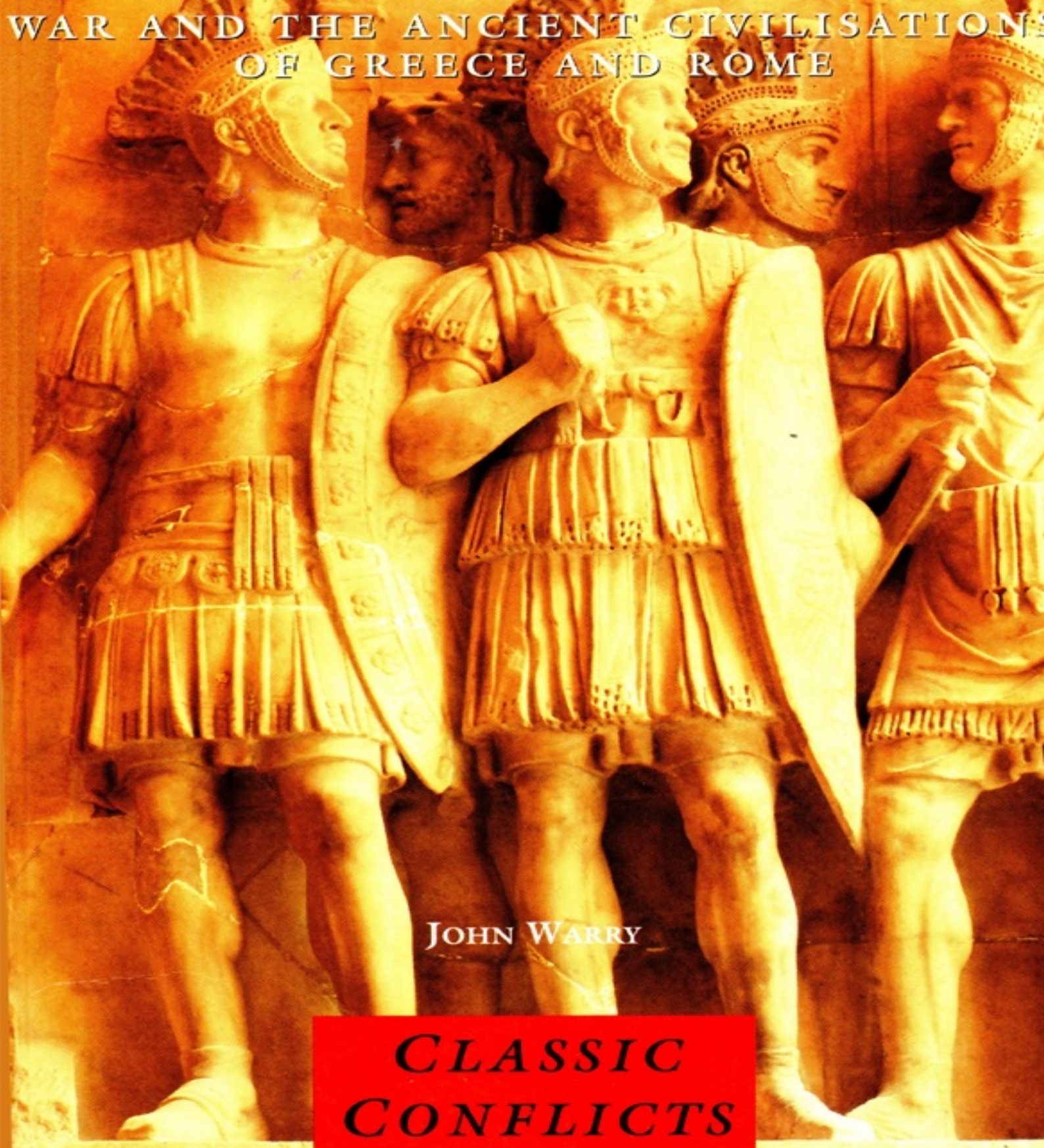


WARFARE IN THE CLASSICAL WORLD

WAR AND THE ANCIENT CIVILISATION
OF GREECE AND ROME



JOHN WARRY

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BATSFORD

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AUTHOR'S FOREWORD

A few words about the structure and design of this book may help the reader. Each of the fourteen chapters begins with notes on ancient literary sources and the political background of warfare during the period treated. The periods allotted to the several chapters are by no means equal in time, ranging from the 13 years of The Wars of the Triumvirate to the three-century Imperial epoch of The Military Task of Imperial Rome. The criterion that determines the time-span of a chapter is in every case political, for in the history of warfare political circumstances determine the combatants: or according to the well-known dictum of Clausewitz: "war is nothing but a continuation of political intercourse with an admixture of different means". However, most sections of each chapter are devoted to brief studies of military art, weapons, fortifications, navies, siegecraft, individual battles, leadership, etc.

Having regard to the above plan, the first chapter, Homeric and Mycenaean Warfare, is a special case. We need not apologise for trying to extract history from Homer. We have assumed that a long oral tradition, perhaps five centuries old, separated Homer from his "primary sources". Verse is an older art than prose. In early illiterate epochs, its function was mnemonic, its poetry a by-product. Priam's Troy and the voices which originally commemorated it may therefore have preceded Homer by as many years as Alexander the Great and Ptolemy, his contemporary witness, preceded Arrian. The existence of such oral sources would account for those features of Mycenaean civilisation which are strikingly reflected in the Homeric poems, as would the intervening letterless centuries for many interpolations and omissions.

It should be noted that the artists' reconstructions (featured in the illustrated section) are mostly based on research independent of that which underlies the text of the fourteen chapters. Consistency has everywhere been a prior aim, but if an acute critic here and there detects divergent trends of opinion, this will neither surprise nor dismay anyone who recognizes the essentially controversial nature of the subject.

The book is of course avowedly a summary. In summarizing one is bound to generalize and in generalization many significant details and variant interpretations of evidence are unavoidably omitted. Moreover, although the subject is fascinating, detailed study often raises more questions than it answers. In these circumstances, wishing to spare the reader a tiresome style hedged by continual provisos, the author and illustrators may sometimes appear rashly dogmatic, but they have nevertheless, wherever uncertainty arises, always paid attention to other views before adopting their own. For example, it was agreed to illustrate a trireme with a central deck and a hatch for the insertion of a mast. This does not mean that we are unfamiliar with the theory of side-decks and a central well, such as originated in Germany and, as early as 1949, enjoyed the formidable advocacy of Professor G. S. Kirk. However, it is clear, on literary evidence alone, that the structure of triremes differed with time and place, and as many varieties of them may have been known to the ancient world as there are conjectures about them among modern scholars.

The attempt to trace development, cause and effect in any subject implies some sort of history, and the fourteen chapters are designed to illustrate a story of continuous evolution. At all events, it is hoped not to leave the impression sometimes unfortunately created by

school syllabus, that ancient history halted abruptly at the death of Alexander the Great, then drew a deep breath before recommencing in Italy with Romulus and Remus and the Wolf.

Apart from our deep indebtedness to Dr Graham Webster of the University of Birmingham for reading proofs of the final eight chapters and for advising on matters in which he is a widely recognized authority, grateful acknowledgments are due to Mr Edward O'Donoghue of St John's College, Cambridge, for reading the first six chapters and to a number of institutions and individuals who have assisted in various ways. These include notably the staff of the Joint Library of the Society for the Promotion of Hellenic Studies and the Roman Society, whose services have on several occasions included a willingness to quote Greek over the telephone – even on Saturday mornings. A great deal of advice and help has also been obtained from the staff of the Central Library of the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst, the Libraries of the University of London and its Archaeological Institute, and of the Royal Holloway College, while in addition to facilities enjoyed as a reader in the British Museum, the author has welcomed the opportunity of discussion and correspondence with authorities in the Museum's Department of Greek and Roman Antiquities and the Department of Western Asiatic Antiquities. He is also grateful for help received from the press and information services and cultural attachés of the Greek, Italian and Spanish embassies in London, for advice concerning replicas and reproductions of reliefs on Trajan's Column from the Victoria and Albert Museum, for information about surviving early chariots from the School of African and Oriental Studies of the University of London, for prompt attention to enquiries about Scythian bows by the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology in Cambridge, and for ample material on the construction of ancient ships offered by the Department of Transport of the Science Museum, London. Thanks is also owing to Professor Francesco Roncalli of the Museo Gregoriano Etrusco in the Vatican for details of ancient shields preserved in Italy and to Professor A. M. Snodgrass of the University of Cambridge whose name is always closely associated with the study of Greek arms and armour, for valuable guidance to photographs and their interpretation in periodical publications. However, it goes without saying that the author, researcher and illustrators take full responsibility for all that occurs in or is omitted from their respective contributions.

John Warry

THE PRONUNCIATION OF ANCIENT LANGUAGES

It is possible to form some idea of the way in which Greek and Latin were pronounced in ancient times. Evidence is to be found in the spellings of ancient languages as we have received them in manuscripts and inscriptions, in the comments of grammarians, and in the pronunciation of derived modern languages. In practice, however, a modern student tends to a compromise between an inferred ancient pronunciation and the habits of his own tongue as conditioned by his own language.

The Italian pronunciation of Latin, widespread as a result of ecclesiastical use, may be regarded as international property. However, the letters “c” and “g” in classical Latin were pronounced hard, even when followed by the soft vowels “ee” and “i”. Moreover, Latin, like Greek, distinguished between long and short vowels. Modern scholars whose languages preserve the same difference (of English *beat* and *bit*), try to draw the distinction in the pronunciation of the ancient languages.

Long before Greek began to be taught in Western Europe, words borrowed from Greek – not to mention many Greek proper names, had appeared transliterated in Latin and received a Latin pronunciation. Not surprisingly, after the Renaissance, the pronunciation of Greek in western schools and universities was influenced by Latin traditions, particularly in the matter of accentuation.

If one is able to recognize long or short syllables, the rules of Latin accentuation are extremely simple. Dissyllables (with minimal exceptions) are accented on the first syllable. Polysyllables are accented on the penultimate when this is long, otherwise on the antepenultimate. Unfortunately, long and short syllables cannot be recognized without knowledge of Latin. Diphthongs are always long, but Latin sometimes transliterates Greek diphthongs as single vowels, and these must be treated as diphthongs for purposes of accentuation (e.g. in *Coronea*, formed from Greek *Koroneia*). Apart from all such considerations, familiarity with derived words in modern languages, particularly Italian, often suggests the correct Latin stress.

The principles of Greek pronunciations are quite different. The accentuation of polysyllables is most frequently determined by the quantity (length) of the final syllable, not the penultimate, and many words – as hardly ever in Latin – are accented on the final syllable.

Considering the long history of Latin and Greek, first as languages of common speech and subsequently as pronounced in schools, universities, and churches, it is inevitable that their pronunciation should have undergone many changes in the course of more than two millennia, quite apart from local differences. It is therefore impossible to define a “right” pronunciation. But Western Europeans, without experience of the classical languages, will probably make themselves most easily intelligible to other Western Europeans if they pronounce Latin as though it were Italian, and Greek as though it were Latin.

If, however, one wishes to be understood among Greeks, Greek words much receive the Greek accent. This is made much easier by the fact that since the third century BC, Greek accents have been marked on words as part of the spelling (except where block capitals are used). Greek accents, as written, take three different forms: acute, circumflex and grave.

These originally indicated differences of musical pitch. Indeed, the phonetic difference between a stress and a pitch accent is not always clear cut, since higher tones make a sharp impact on the ear. In any case, the Greek accents as used today all call for a similar stress in pronunciation and are distinct only in the manner of their writing.

Another important change in post-classical Greek has been brought about the process of Italicism, which has equated the pronunciation of no fewer than three Greek vowels and many diphthongs with an Italian "i". Many consonant sounds have also undergone change. Although post-classical, the so-called "modern" pronunciation of Greek is in fact very ancient and probably dates from early Byzantine times.

In Western Europe, vernacular forms of both Latin and Greek names are another source of confusion. For instance, Horatius Flaccus the poet (but not Horatius Cocles who defended the bridge) is written both in English and French as "Horace" and pronounced as linguists' habits dictate. The mute "e" at the end of a French or English word is often especially confusing because a Greek final "e", when retained in transliteration, is pronounced. Thus *Lade* is a dissyllable and *Ithome* is a trisyllable. Also compare the modern vernacular dissyllable form "hoplite" (plural: "hoplites") with the Greek trisyllable *hoplites* (plural: *hoplitai*). The difficulty occurs in English and French, but the German plural "Hopliten" happily invites no such confusion with the Greek singular.

In this connection, one should perhaps notice a few principles of transliteration as they apply in different European languages. German renders the Greek letter "kappa" as "k", but the Romance languages Latinise to "c". English usually Latinises, but sometimes writes "k". Latin rendered the Greek letter "upsilon" by a letter "y", which was reserved specially for that purpose. But Italian uses no such letter and replaces every Latin "y" with "i".

A reader with no background of classical study may pardonably conclude that if he adopts whatever pronunciation first comes to mind he cannot be very far from one phonetic norm or the other. However, if more than one word is to be pronounced in the same context consistency is obviously to be considered desirable.

Consistency is admittedly a sore point when it comes to rendering ancient proper names and most writers on classical themes find that it must often be sacrificed to usage and readability, especially where one is concerned with transliteration from the Greek alphabet. For the spelling of the name Boudica (Boadicea) the reader is referred to the book of this title by Graham Webster, whose reasons for adopting such a usage are fully explained therein.

HOMERIC AND MYCENAEAN WARFARE

More than one thousand years before the beginning of the Christian era, a Greek expeditionary force laid siege to the city of Troy in Asia Minor. Homer's epic account of this gives a graphic, if fragmentary, picture of warfare in the early classical world.

■ Ancient Authorities

Homer's *Iliad* is not history, but it is historical fiction, and it is the most obvious point to which to begin an account of ancient Greek warfare. The Homeric poems were composed in the eighth or ninth century BC, but the events which they described echo a much earlier past. The theme of the *Iliad* is announced in its opening lines. It concerns a quarrel between two Greek leaders in their war against the city of Troy and it traces the grave and far-reaching military consequences of this quarrel. Achilles, the young Greek commander with whose attitudes and behaviour the *Iliad* is chiefly concerned, could be courteous and even generous but, when roused, he abandoned himself to violent and implacable fury. The first victims of his wrath were the Greeks themselves. After quarrelling with the commander-in-chief of the Greek allied forces, he withdrew his support from the common war effort. Later, when his dearest friend, Patroclus, had been killed as the result of his behaviour, Achilles' anger was turned against Hector, the enemy leader at whose hands Patroclus had met his death. Achilles avenged Patroclus and, in his usual implacable manner, barbarously outraged the corpse of his conquered foeman. But the *Iliad* ends on a conciliatory note: Achilles overcame his anger and restored Hector's body to the Trojans for decent cremation.

In military terms, the story of Achilles' anger means that phase of the Trojan War in which the Greek army, deprived of its full complement, was fighting, sometimes desperately, on the defensive. The Greek counter-offensive against the Trojans began only when Achilles' bitterness was diverted from his own commander and focused again upon the enemy. The *Iliad* is, therefore, concerned with only one phase of the whole Trojan War.

The other great epic said to be "by Homer" is the *Odyssey*. It tells of the return of one of the Greek leaders, Odysseus, to his island home of Ithaca, off the north-west coast of Greece. One might describe it as a "sequel" to the *Iliad*, and it contains many references to the events of the Trojan War. It has been observed that the *Iliad* describes the Homeric world at war while the *Odyssey* is an account of that same world at peace; though peace in this context means – as perhaps it has come to mean in our own times – a period of disorganized and chaotic violence distinct from organized violence.

Other poems, now lost, seem to have aimed at completing the history of the early Greek world. These "Cyclic" epics, as they were termed, are summarized in prose synopses on some manuscripts of Homer's poems. The causes and early events of the Trojan War were recorded in a verse narrative generally known as the *Cypria* – perhaps because the poet who composed it was a native of Cyprus.

The story of other incidents in the Trojan War was told in the *Little Iliad* and *The Sack of Troy*. The first relates the death of Paris, the Trojan prince whose abduction of Helen from Greece had been the occasion of the war. The second poem contains the well-known story of the Wooden Horse and of the capture of Troy by the Greeks after a ten-year siege. The Trojan

Aeneas and his followers, in this account, escape furtively from the city, aghast at warning omens, before the fatal night of its capture and sack. But there are representations in early Greek art of Aeneas carrying his aged father to safety, as later described by Virgil.

Another of the Cyclic epics was called, alternatively, the *Aethiopis* or the *Amazonia*. It told how the Trojans were aided by Penthesilea, the queen of those legendary women warriors the Amazons. But Penthesilea was killed by Achilles in battle. The same fate awaited Memnon, king of the Ethiopians, who also led a relief force to Troy. The *Aethiopis* went on to describe the subsequent death of Achilles himself, who fell when storming one of the city gates, the victim of inspired archery.

Throughout antiquity, poets, dramatists, painters and sculptors treated and developed the themes of the Cyclic epics; but this treatment necessarily interpolated the standards and usages of later times into the ancient background. The main literary evidence for our subject must remain the *Iliad* of Homer. Archaeological evidence is of course another question. We shall discuss it later.

■ Political Background

The commander-in-chief with whom Achilles quarrelled was Agamemnon. A consideration of the role which he plays in the *Iliad* suggests that his apparent military and political supremacy was as much a question of honour as of jurisdiction. He was entitled to a special prize out of any booty taken. At the beginning of the *Iliad*, he had sacrilegiously helped himself to a priest's daughter, but when the god Apollo marked his displeasure with a visitation of plague (as in unhygienic siege conditions he must frequently have done), Agamemnon was obliged to return his favourite concubine to her father without ransom. We should notice at this point that the general assembly of the Greeks, which met to discuss the plague situation, had been convened by Achilles, not by Agamemnon; Agamemnon, resenting this, compensated himself by impounding one of Achilles' concubines.

There is a kind of democracy here. It is not a democracy based either on the rights of man or of the citizen. The concept of human rights was unknown in the ancient world, founded as its civilization was on the institution of slavery. As for citizens' rights, they certainly had no place in the Homeric world. But one can see that there was a nicely balanced separation of powers among the Greek leaders. Agamemnon could not afford to flout the opinion of his army, especially when it was backed by Achilles' armed resources. On the other hand, Achilles felt unable to withhold his own captive concubine when Agamemnon sent heralds to collect her. Agamemnon was, after all, nominally in command, and he had the right to a prize.

It was, moreover, Achilles' turn, for all his ungovernable temper, to respect public opinion. Agamemnon originally claimed in the assembly to be compensated by what, in the absence of any public fund, would have amounted to a capital levy on the whole army. Achilles countered with the more popular suggestion that the army should compensate Agamemnon later, when more booty was available. The politics of the amendment were irresistible, but Agamemnon retaliated angrily with an amendment of his own. He would be compensated not by a levy on the rank and file, but by one of the leaders, preferably Achilles himself.

Like others among Homer's heroes, Agamemnon is the subject of divergent traditions. According to one account, his position as supreme commander was a purely ad hoc

appointment, the result of general consensus, since he and his brother, the wronged Menelaus, had carried out a recruiting drive throughout Greece to raise forces to restore Helen and avenge her abduction. In this case, the widespread sympathy which they enlisted for their cause must have been linked with the hope of gain and honour on the part of the other Greek rulers. There is, however, another story, according to which Helen's father¹ had exacted a vow from her assembled suitors that they would support her chosen husband against any challenge to his married rights. The existence of this oath suggests some kind of feudal allegiance, owed by the other Greek lords to Agamemnon's family; this probability is strengthened by the further story that Odysseus feigned madness in order to evade service on the Trojan expedition: something he need not have attempted if he were free from obligation.

In contrast with the Greek leadership, the authority of the Trojan royal family was unequivocal. Its members were generally united and worked as a team. King Priam and his sons commanded the allegiance not only of adjacent communities in the Troad, but of a far-flung empire which straddled the Hellespont (Dardanelles), extending both into south-eastern Europe and Asia Minor. There was no question of purely war-substantive command such as Agamemnon's position sometimes seems to have entailed.

Hector, Priam's eldest son by Hecuba, the current queen consort, was both commander-in-chief and Troy's most formidable fighting man. Again, this contrasts happily with the Greek situation, in which Agamemnon and Achilles were rivals for military prestige. The Trojan government, comparable perhaps with some dynastic governments in the Middle East today, had supported and ratified Paris' abduction of Helen. Troy's wealth, derived from its command of Black Sea trade routes, made it a target for predators. Yet we should not dismiss the story of Paris and Helen as lacking all historical basis. By Homeric usage – for which parallels can easily be found – he who married a queen was entitled not only to her dowry in the form of gold, silver and movables, but to territory and jurisdiction as well. Paris, having eloped with Helen, married her. She did not live with him in Troy as his mistress. Even today it is possible, as a result of differing national marriage laws, for a woman to have different husbands in different countries. When Paris was killed in action, his brother Deiphobus married Helen. The Trojan royal family seems to have been determined not to relinquish its claim to a kingdom in mainland Greece.

There is, perhaps, in his harmonious family government, one discordant note, which could have resulted in a palace revolution had Troy survived the war. Aeneas, who, at the end of Book Two of the *Iliad*, seems to have ranked second in command to Hector, was descended from a cadet branch of the Trojan royal house. In Book Thirteen it is made clear that he was dissatisfied with the meagre honours which he had received at Priam's hands. Later, Achilles taunted him with having an eye to the royal succession, and indeed we hear of a divine prophecy according to which Aeneas was destined one day to rule over the Trojans. The *Sack of Troy*, as has already been noted, records his premature and surreptitious flight from the doomed city, and among late authors there are even some who accuse him of having sold Troy to the Greeks. However, the portrait in the Roman poet Virgil's *Aeneid* of an honest man, attentive both to his domestic and religious duties, is the tradition which has reached us, and perhaps this is the picture which would in any case have persisted, if it had not been admirably in accord with Virgil's political commitments.

In reading the *Iliad*, it is easy to form the impression that the Trojans themselves were

Greek extraction. For the most part, they had Greek names. They conversed easily enough with their Greek foemen, now negotiating a truce, now exchanging boasts and threats. The assumption of a common language may, of course, be regarded as a poetic convenience, but such convenience is denied by Homer to the Trojans when he describes their relations with their allies. At the end of Book Two, Iris, the messenger of the gods, impersonating a Trojan sentinel, advised Hector to obviate the language difficulty by delegating authority to the leaders of the national contingents.

In this connection, it should be recalled that Homer has no word applicable to all the Greek-speaking peoples. He usually refers to those who served under Agamemnon as Achaeans² – sometimes as Argives or Danaans. But although these local designations are extended to mean much more than the inhabitants of Achaea of the city of Argos – once ruled by King Danaus – they do not necessarily include all persons of Greek language and culture. Apart from other peoples of Asia who supported Priam, there were allies from Lycia, led by the prince Sarpedon, who, despite some chronological confusion, was said to have come originally from Crete. Glaucus, his lieutenant, was also a Lycian. Homer describes how, during a lull in the fighting, Glaucus had a few friendly words with the Greek hero Diomedes. The Lycian explained how his family came originally from Argos and Diomedes immediately discovered that they were bound by ties of hereditary friendship; the grandfathers had in the past, as host and guest respectively, exchanged gifts in Argos. Accordingly, the two men, now fighting on different sides, vowed to avoid each other in battle and themselves exchanged armour in token of friendship. Sadly, it is implied that Diomedes had an ulterior motive; Glaucus' armour was of gold, worth more than ten times as much as Diomedes' bronze panoply.

■ Arms and Armour

Homer refers elsewhere to gold armour, but seems to despise it. The usual material for weapons was bronze. Iron is well known in Homer, but is used for making implements, not weapons – though iron arrowheads existed. Methods of producing iron were presumably still primitive and it appears to be valued as a substitute for bronze rather than as an improvement upon that particular material.

The characteristic offensive weapon in the *Iliad* was the spear. It was made of ash wood and was for throwing rather than thrusting – though Achilles killed Hector with a thrust of his spear. Hector's own spear is recorded as being 11 cubits long (about 18ft, 5.5m). Swords are referred to as being large and sometimes two-edged. When not in use, they were slung in a sheath from a baldric. They seem to have been used for cutting rather than for thrusting.

Shields were body-length. They were suspended from a strap round the neck and knocked against a warrior's ankles as he walked. They were made of bull's hide and were plated with bronze. The shield of Ajax had seven layers of bull's hide; of these, the spear of Hector penetrated six, but was arrested by the seventh. Ajax' shield is also described as being like a tower; he was a man of enormous stature, who both needed and could manage such a shield. But the use of small, round shields may be inferred, notably from the wearing of greaves. Achilles' greaves, which were loaned to Patroclus, were fastened with a silver clasp. Greaves were possibly more like gaiters, not necessarily of metal, though there is a reference to the Achaeans as wearing bronze greaves.

A Homeric hero's helmet was characteristically of bronze, though leather caps were also in use and must have been more common with the rank and file. The bronze helmet was surmounted by a horse-hair plume, which nodded in the air with awe-inspiring effect. The helmet itself was effectively resistant and a sword sometimes shattered on encountering it.

Protective metal armour seems to have been mainly the privilege of the leaders, and for this reason it required a leader to defy a leader in battle. Otherwise, the situation was that of infantry thrown against tanks. Armour was very precious, and when a hero had fallen there was usually a fierce fight for possession of his arms and armour. However, subject to these limitations, the rank and file were not frequently mentioned as being adept with the spear. Achilles' Myrmidons, who were something of a local *corps d'élite*, wore some kind of breastplate or corselet, probably not of metal. Diomedes' followers are mentioned as being equipped with shields, which they used at night as pillows, while their spears stood upright thrust into the ground on their spiked butts. Diomedes himself had a carpet for a pillow rather than such a shield. On the Trojan side, shields were also standard equipment in the archer Pandarus' contingent; these shields were used to screen him while he let fly a treacherous arrow during the time of solemnly sworn truce. Homeric arms and armour, must be remarked, are the subject of much controversy. In the present context, we must limit ourselves to generalizations; but even so it is difficult to avoid statements which are open to challenge.

■ Chariots

Apart from weapons and panoply, both the Greek and Trojan chiefs were sufficiently wealthy to maintain horses and chariots. These were essential to their way of fighting. The normal purpose of a chariot was to carry a fully armed warrior to the battlefield, where he would dismount and fight on foot, while his charioteer waited at a discreet distance with the horse and vehicle. If the warrior survived, he would eventually retire from the fight, remount his chariot and be driven back to his own lines.

In practice, chariots often became more deeply involved in the fighting. They were frequently within bowshot, spear throw – or even stone's throw – of the enemy. Homer describes how an arrow missed Hector in his chariot and killed his charioteer. Another charioteer was later killed by a stone flung by Patroclus. In the thick of battle, horses and chariots ploughed their way through the wreckage of enemy chariots, trampling and crushing the bodies of fallen men, while they themselves were spattered with blood. Patroclus, with the thrust of his spear, impaled an enemy warrior in his chariot and hauled him out, over the rim of the chariot, still impaled, like an angler hauling a fish to land. The chariot needed smooth terrain for efficient performance; on difficult ground the pole that connected the yoke with the car itself could easily break, allowing the horses to bolt. This happened to many Trojan chariots as their drivers tried in vain to negotiate the ditch round the Greek camp.

Homeric chariots were drawn by two horses and carried two persons, the warrior and the charioteer. A detailed description of the chariot of the goddess Hera is instructive, though a chariot owned by a goddess must be presumed more luxurious than those available to mortal men. Hera's chariot had an iron axle-tree. Her horses had gold frontlets. The circumference of the wheels was of gold, with bronze tyres, and the centre was of silver. The wheels themselves had eight spokes, though in early artistic representatives of chariots four spokes

are characteristic. In contrast, the axle-tree of Diomedes' chariot was of oak, not metal.

The highly ornamental turn-out of Hera's chariot is possibly fanciful, just as the shield of Achilles, fashioned by Hephaestus, the smith of the gods, can be in no way regarded as typical. Yet we may have here the faithful description of a ceremonial chariot, resembling in some respects those of Tutankhamun's tomb with their rich gold and inlay. These, too, were products of a world in which iron artefacts were making a first appearance.

■ Methods of Fighting

In normal circumstances, as we have observed, the Homeric warrior chieftain dismounted from his chariot and approached the enemy on foot. He carried either one or two spears which he launched against his opponent. If the enemy remained unscathed, he then protected himself with his shield against the inevitable retaliatory shafts. If the spears of both parties were thrown in vain, the two champions might immediately set about each other with swords or, before resorting to these weapons, they might hurl heavy stones or small rocks at each other. With these ready-to-hand missiles the Trojan plain seems to have been extremely well provided.

There was a good deal of opportunism in such fights. When Menelaus and Paris tried to decide the issue of the war in single combat, Menelaus' sword broke in three or four pieces against the crest of Paris' helmet. Menelaus, however, despite his disappointment, seized Paris by the helmet crest and began to drag him towards the Greek lines. Paris was thus nearly strangled by his helmet strap, and no doubt would have been but for the attention of his goddess mother, who arranged for the strap to break. Menelaus was left holding the helmet while Paris made good his escape.

Most descriptions of fighting centre in the heavily armed leaders themselves, but attention is drawn to the large numbers of the Greek army and the Trojans are sustained by one contingent after another of loyal allies. In scenes of violent fighting, not only are warriors made aware of anonymous casualties but of many flying spears and arrows sped by anonymous hands. The rank and file of the army is described as fighting in formation (*phalanges*). Both sides were marshalled by their leaders in good order, but after battle was joined the scene was confused and sanguinary. The enemy ranks were more easily broken when one of their leaders was killed. This might lead to full-scale rout, when chariots were useful in pursuit. It does not, however, seem that the word *phalanges* – Homer only once uses the singular *phalanx* – denoted the closely packed formations with which it was associated in the fighting of a later epoch. Quite certainly the Homeric *phalanx* did not rely on the spear as a thrusting weapon as the classical *phalanx* did.

Discipline in the Greek army was on the whole good. The Greeks marched in silence unlike the Trojans who chattered volubly, perhaps because of their language and liaison difficulty. One notably insubordinate character on the Greek side should, however, be mentioned in this context. Homer is very contemptuous of Thersites, who was a thorn in the flesh of the Greek leadership. His demagogy was not of the subtle kind which we have noticed in Agamemnon and Achilles, but consisted in raising laughs at the expense of the commanders: something which, in the circumstances, cannot have been difficult. Odysseus at last beat him and reduced him to tears. In the *Aethiopsis*, Achilles grows sentimental over the Amazon queen whom he has killed in battle. Thersites accuses him of having been in love

with her. But Achilles is unamused, and kills Thersites.

In the *Iliad*, there are frequent allusions to arrows, though as a weapon the bow seems to have been secondary to the spear. Some of the leaders on both sides were good archers, notably Paris and Pandarus among the Trojans. Of the Greeks, Teucer was the best archer, shooting down nine of the enemy in the course of the *Iliad*. But like other aristocratic archers, he was also able to fight hand-to-hand with spear and shield; when his bow string broke he was quick to arm himself with other weapons. Odysseus, according to the *Odyssey*, was conspicuous for his archery, but he did not use a bow in the Trojan War except on a very special commando mission, which we shall describe shortly. Odysseus, in fact, left his bow at home when he came to Troy.

Generally speaking, in Homer, “a good spearman” is synonymous with “a good fighter”. Yet archery was a crucial factor in the Trojan War. Both Achilles and Paris met their death from enemy arrows. It had been prophesied that Troy could not be taken without the bow of Philoctetes, the unfortunate Greek leader who languished long in the island of Lemnos, *hors de combat* and suffering from a festering snake-bite. Only when his services were re-enlisted was Paris killed and Troy taken.

Not only Philoctetes himself but his whole contingent were noted for proficiency in archery, while on the Trojan side the Paeonians, who came from Macedonia, constituted a corps of archers. Apart from this, the presence of massed bowmen may be inferred from the frequent reference to arrows, not all of which were launched by the bows of the aristocracy. It should perhaps be noted that the bows described by Homer were not of the most efficient kind. Nor were they used in the most efficient way. The bows themselves were composite, made of two curved horns joined at the centre. The string was drawn by the archer only to the breast, not to the ear as was done with the English longbow of the Middle Ages. The range of an arrow was possibly not much greater than that of a well-thrown spear.

■ Greek Strategy and Siege Warfare

The prose summary of the Cyclic epic narrative tells us that, after the death of the Trojan ally Eurypolus, the Greeks “besieged Troy”. Whatever this implies, it is not recorded that during the first nine years of the war any attempt was made to starve Troy into surrender. Indeed, the arrival of successive relief forces proves that any such attempt would have had little prospect of success. There were no walls or trenches of circumvallation. On the contrary, the Greeks were obliged to dig a ditch and build a rampart on the shore to protect their own camp and beached ships. After the withdrawal of Achilles and his troops from the war, Hector led a heavy attack on the Greek camp and penetrated the ramparts in an almost successful attempt to burn the ships. The situation was at last saved by Patroclus, commanding Achilles’ troops and wearing Achilles’ armour.

After Achilles’ own return to the war, the Greeks were able once more to take the offensive. According to one tradition an argument took place between Achilles and Odysseus as to whether Troy could best be captured by force or fraud, each of the two heroes making recommendations in accordance with his own character and abilities. Achilles, in pursuit of his policy, led a violent attack on the Scaean gate (i.e. the West gate) of the city and died fighting there. Odysseus’ counsels were vindicated when Troy was eventually captured through the stratagem of the Wooden Horse.

Not only was no attempt made to starve Troy into surrender, but no assault was made upon the walls. It should be stressed that Achilles' final attack was launched against one of the city's gates; and this in turn should remind us that the Trojans, in making their earliest attack on the Greek camp, broke in through the camp gates. Hector himself smashed the gates in with a heavy stone, breaking the hinges and the long bar which held them. At the same time, he had ordered that chariots should be left temporarily at the edge of the ditch and assault made against the rampart on foot. One commander disregarded his orders and attempted to pursue the flying enemy through an open gate on the left flank of the beached ships. But the gate was well defended and the assault came to no good. Meanwhile, the outcome of the fight on the ramparts remained in doubt, though the Lycian leader Sarpedon succeeded in dismantling some of the battlements. When the attackers were eventually driven out of the camp, they poured back over the ditch, many of their chariots – which had previously entered the enclosure – coming to grief in the process.

The inference to be drawn from these facts is that the Greeks of the Homeric period knew virtually nothing of siegecraft. By contrast, the eastern peoples of whom we hear in the Old Testament were capable of both reducing cities by starvation and of attacking fortifications. It might be possible to draw the further inference that the Trojans were more skilful than the Greeks in assailing fortified positions – something which they had perhaps learnt from their Oriental contacts – though it seems unfair to compare the ramparts of a military camp with the permanent walls of a city.

■ Homeric Ships

The ships which were the target of Hector's attack in the *Iliad* were lightly built, easily launched, easily beached and easily relaunched again. To protect the Greek ships from Trojan assault, Agamemnon was in favour of hurriedly rowing them out to sea. He was dissuaded by Odysseus, but the physical possibility of such an emergency manoeuvre was not in question.

The Homeric ships carried a single sail on a yard suspended from halyards. The prow and the stern were decked, but the intervening space amidships was occupied by rowers' benches. Odysseus, as a passenger in a Phaeacian vessel, slept in the stern, on the flat surface of the deck – not under it. There was no lower deck.

Already, in Homer times, the construction of a merchantman differed from that of a war galley. References to merchant ships prove that they were comparatively broadbuilt, and they apparently had a normal complement of 20 rowers. Fighting ships, which were also troopships, carried considerably more men. The rowers must, for the most part, have been fighters themselves, and there does not usually seem to have been any distinction between oarsmen and marines, such as existed on Greek warships. We learn that the rowers of Philoctetes' seven ships were all skilled archers – like their leader. On the other hand, Agamemnon provided ships for the contingent from Arcadia – an inland territory – since the Arcadians were not a seafaring people and did not possess ships of their own. The context suggests that the Arcadians were not called upon to do the rowing either.

Achilles sailed with 50 ships to Troy, and each ship carried 50 men. The Homeric narrative does not specify 50 rowers. Ships of the Boeotian contingent carried 120 men each. One cannot assume that all of them were rowers; if they were, they must have relieved each other at the oar. In any case, the number of rowers cannot always have coincided with

ship's full complement. Odysseus lost six men out of each of his ships in his fight with the Cicones, those old Thracian allies of Troy, not to mention other casualties incurred at later stages in his voyage. If the rowers were all fighting men, casualties were to be expected; thus the same ship cannot always have been propelled by the same number of oars.

Warships seem to have been chiefly used for assaulting coastal cities and raiding littoral areas. There is no description of any naval engagement, properly speaking, between Greeks and Trojans. Sea fights, however, certainly took place in Homeric times, and the Greek ships were equipped for such fighting. When the Trojans attacked the ships on the beach, the Greeks met them with long, jointed boarding pikes, of a type used in sea fights. The pike wielded by Ajax was 22 cubits (about 36ft, 11m) long.

The Trojans do not seem to have maintained a standing navy of any importance. When Paris sailed for Greece in search of the world's most beautiful bride, a special shipbuilding programme was inaugurated. Such at least was the story of the Cyclic poet. Presumably the coastal allies of the Trojans had navies to equal those of mainland Greece. At any rate, ships must have ferried their Thracian supporters across the Hellespont.

■ Intelligence and Commando Operations

The Thracian expedition in defence of Troy, to which we have just referred, was singularly ill-fated. Its leader, King Rhesus, did not survive his first night on the Trojan plain. The story is told in the Tenth Book of the *Iliad*. On the night in question, the Trojans were deployed on the plain before their city, poised to strike at the Greek camp. They were now under no pressure to retreat within their walls and their watch fires were everywhere visible. The Greeks were tense and anxious. If possible, some communicative prisoner was required, from whom the enemy's immediate intentions might be learned. In order to gain such intelligence Odysseus and Diomedes volunteered for a highly perilous night reconnaissance.

By good luck, Hector had also sent out a Trojan spy called Dolon, to bring back information about the state of affairs in the Greek camp. Odysseus and Diomedes encountered Dolon in the darkness. After a brief chase, they captured him, induced him to talk and then killed him. Apart from other useful information, they learnt the position of Rhesus and the newly arrived Thracian allies. These became their target. The Trojans, according to Dolon's information, were keeping watch while their allies slept. His information proved correct. Odysseus and Diomedes slaughtered 12 of the Thracians who surrounded Rhesus and finally killed the king himself, driving away his fine Thracian horses. On the way back to the camp, they stopped to collect the bloodstained arms and equipment of Dolon, which they had hung on a clump of tamarisk to mark their route.

The differences of arms and equipment described in Book Ten from those which feature elsewhere in the *Iliad* have led some scholars to regard the episode of Dolon and Rhesus as an interpolation. For the purposes of the night raid, Diomedes wore a leather helmet without a crest, while Odysseus borrowed a bow and quiver of arrows, setting on his head a leather and-felt cap overlaid with boar's tusks. It must be remembered, however, that the occasion was exceptional. For a night operation of this kind, it was only natural to avoid the use of brazen armour which would gleam in the light of the Trojan watch fires.

Information about chariots and their use may also be gleaned from the episode. Not only Rhesus, but also all his henchmen possessed chariots. Diomedes at one point considered

dragging Rhesus' chariot by hand or even lifting it in his arms with the valuable armor inside it. This, even when one allows for Diomedes' heroic strength, suggests that the Thracian chariots were very lightly constructed. Dolon's information related not only to the Thracians but to other allies of Troy, and he described the Phrygians and Maeonians in words which can most naturally be interpreted as meaning that they were chariot-fighters and chariot-owners. Among the Trojan allies, chariots were perhaps not always a pure aristocratic prerogative. One gains the impression that in some contingents a chariot and two horses amounted to standard equipment. There is no hint of this in the account of the Trojan allied forces given at the end of Book Two, but such an interpretation accords well with the prominent part later played by chariots in the attack on the Greek camp.

■ Archaeological Evidence

Evidence for the existence of leather-and-felt caps overlaid with boar's tusks, such as Odysseus wore in the night operations just described, has been furnished by archaeological discoveries. Felt and leather are, of course, perishable, but vanished caps have left the residue of boar's tusks.

The whole question of archaeological corroboration must now be raised. In the second half of the nineteenth century, first Schliemann and then others excavated many localities which had been celebrated in the Homeric poems. As a result, there came to light the relics of ancient civilizations which corresponded impressively with descriptions given in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Apart from sensational gold treasure, Schliemann recovered bronze weapons which had been deposited in the graves of their warrior owners at Mycenae. Characteristic of these Mycenaean weapons was a long, rapier-like sword blade. It had a tang for insertion in a hilt of some other material, but the tang was too frail for the weapon and it must easily have broken on impact. Some such tangs have, in fact, been discovered broken. But breakage in a sword of this kind, occurring at the hilt, would save it from shattering in several pieces, like that of Menelaus in the *Iliad*. However, another type of shorter sword has also been found in the tombs of the same period. The tang here has been developed into a substantial flanged hilt and represents an improvement in design. Archaeologists assign these weapons to an epoch spanning the seventeenth to fifteenth centuries BC, at least 300 years earlier than the destruction of the ancient city at Hissarlik in Asia Minor which is commonly identified as Homer's Troy. Spearheads are less common than swords in early Mycenaean graves. Perhaps they were so precious to the living that they could not easily be spared for the dead. The spearheads which survive are of different sizes. The large ones are massive and must have belonged to thrusting weapons, but the smaller ones could well have been fitted to javelin shafts.

Schliemann found fragments of boar's tusks but no metal helmets at Mycenae. The Mycenaean gold breastplates, though beautiful, were frail and obviously intended for ornamental purposes. Excavations at Mycenae yielded a large number of arrowheads made of flint and obsidian. The material, not common in mainland Greece, suggests that they were imported. Representations of shields were discovered, notably on an inlaid Mycenaean dagger blade. Such shields appear to have been made from bull's hide and two designs are conspicuous: the oblong, tower-like shield and the narrow-waisted, figure-of-eight shield. Both are large, long shields, capable of covering the user from chin to ankle. The form

readily suggests the shield of Ajax described in the *Iliad*. Even the figure-of-eight type might qualify for that epithet of “circular” or “well-rounded” which Homer commonly applies to shields. After all, its form is that of two adjacent convex circles.

■ Mycenae and Crete

Later developments in Mycenaean culture were revealed by the excavations of Sir Arthur Evans in Crete. This phase is generally known as the “Palace Period” and its weapons often represent a structural improvement on those of the earlier epoch, correcting original weaknesses in design. The tombs from which the weapons have been recovered seem to be those of aristocratic warriors, with whom it is easy to associate the heroes of the *Iliad*. But one notable change exhibited in this period is the development of bronze armour and bronze helmets. Arrowheads remain common, being made of flint, of obsidian and of bronze. One entire panoply of plate armour and fragmentary evidence of other panoplies, such as a helmet associated with the Cretan Palace culture, have also been discovered in mainland Greece. They featured bronze shoulder pieces and gorgets, which anticipate the plate armour of the medieval knight. Such panoplies are heavy and must have considerably restricted the mobility of the wearer. The agility displayed by the heroes of the *Iliad* is quite inconsistent with their use, and they may be dated 1450–1350 BC.

Archaeologists also recognize a later period of Mycenaean civilization which is distinguished by an abundance of less splendid, smaller weapons. One has the impression that the heroic age has passed and that the armourers are concerned to produce weapons for a great many commoners rather than for a few aristocrats. At the same time, Mycenaean civilization seems more widespread and its characteristic culture is detected westward as far as Sicily and the Lipari islands and eastward as far as Cyprus and the Syrian coast. For the tendency to produce more and worse, economizing on raw materials and cutting costs, we perhaps have an analogy in the industries of our own day. But the weapons produced were perhaps more efficient, if less splendid. The whole Mycenaean period covers roughly the latter half of the second millennium BC.

■ Pictures and Writing

When archaeologists discover and decipher an ancient writing, they extend the period of history backward into an era which was previously prehistoric. This has happened in connection with Mycenaean civilization. Written records of the period have been discovered at many sites in association with Mycenaean cultures. The language of these records is Greek though the Greek is not written in the letters of the Greek alphabet. The archaic script used is that which archaeologists have classified under the title of “Linear B”.

Following up the work of Schliemann, Sir Arthur Evans discovered at Knossos in Crete a multitude of baked clay tablets impressed with Linear B writing, though the script was not then deciphered and was not thought to be Greek. In addition to the writing, these tablets often carried pictographs, comparable to the diagrammatic pictures which advertise the amenities of our motorway parking areas. These pictographs supplement the written records and thus helped in a complicated process of their decipherment.

Unfortunately, no *historical* records have so far been discovered. The clay tablets are largely records of accounts and inventories. But it is of present interest that many of these

refer to the contents of the Palace armoury or ordnance depot at Knossos. The number of chariots stored in use in time of war ran into hundreds. Chariots also appear on sculpture and bas-reliefs at Mycenae, apparently in battle scenes. There is no evidence that the Mycenaeans ever rode on horseback; another circumstance which connects them with the people described in Homer. It is interesting, also, to find evidence of chariots which seem to have been a standard issue to troops, not merely the personal property of aristocratic leaders. The method of storing chariots was evidently systematic – records are interpreted to mean that the car of a chariot was normally stacked separately from its wheels, or even dismantled into smaller components. One certainly gains the impression that chariot-fighting as practised by the Knossos régime was a much more highly organized form of combat than it appears to have been in Homer. At the same time, armies in peacetime normally present a more organized appearance than they do when examined in the heat of battle.

Chariots apart, the clay tablets provide information about arms and armour of various kinds. Some of the pictographs are more realistic than others; but even with these, difficulties of interpretation arise. Swords, for instance, cannot be easily distinguished from daggers. Even the Greek word which in Homer normally means a sword is suspected in its Mycenaean context of indicating specifically thrusting weapons, which would include daggers. Objects which are more difficult to represent, such as protective body-covering, present even greater problems to the archaeologists.

■ Fortifications

The ruined city now identified as Priam's Troy was first excavated by Schliemann on the hillside at Hissarlik in north-west Asia Minor, where ancient Troy is traditionally supposed to have stood. It shows signs of having been destroyed by fire and violence and stands on the ruins of earlier cities, one of which appears to have been shattered by an earthquake. Greek legend also tells of an earlier Troy which was destroyed by Heracles. According to the story the god Poseidon, who presided over earthquakes as well as the sea, contributed to the disaster. Archaeology confirms the existence of massive walls on this site – a further endorsement of the ancient tradition.

According to archaeological evidence, also, the burnt city of Troy must have flourished at the same time as did Mycenae in mainland Greece. Like Mycenae, other Mycenaean sites are characterized by the massive construction of their walls. These are built in a style known as "Cyclopean"; for the Greeks of later antiquity believed that they were the work of the Cyclopes, a legendary race of giants. Cyclopean walls are constructed of huge rough-hewn rocks piled one upon another, with smaller stones inserted to fill the interstices which were inevitably left by their irregular contours. Near a gateway, however, blocks are often squared and laid in horizontal courses.

In distinguishing the gate areas thus, the Mycenaean builders may have had an eye not merely to appearance; but they may also have been providing a more solid defence. In the ancient legends, an attempt to storm a city meant an attempt to storm a city gate. At Mycenae, a bastion projects near the main gate, from which missiles could be launched obliquely against an enemy in the gateway. Achilles, according to the testimony of the Cyclopean poet, was killed while attacking the Scaean gate of Troy. A later legend had it that he was hit in the heel. Those who told the story obviously envisaged the fatal arrow as coming either

from the flank or the rear.

Bastions flanking gateways can be found elsewhere in Mycenaean fortifications. This is wholly consistent with the literary evidence on early storming tactics. In the Theban War, which reputedly took place a generation earlier than the Trojan War (to cite the story of which the Greek dramatists based their works), each of the seven commanders who led the assault on Thebes selected one of the city's seven gates for attack. All seven leaders were unsuccessful, and six were killed.

■ Conclusion

When we compare archaeological with literary and traditional accounts of the Homeric world, we are faced with notable points of resemblance, as well as points of difference. Our assignment, therefore, of the Homeric epics to the realm of historical fiction seems justified. One cannot claim for these poems the status of history. Outstanding poetic merit is in itself an obstacle to the historian. For a poet tries to breathe the life of his own day into the dry bones of the remembered or recorded past. In striving to fuse the past with the world of his own immediate experience, he is inevitably hard put to avoid producing anachronisms.

In English literature, the romances of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table afford a comparable instance. They are purportedly based on the exploits of a Romano-British king whose legend dates from the European Dark Ages, but Arthur and his paladins wear the armour and assume the behaviour of French knights in the medieval age of chivalry. In addition to these diverse ingredients, it is also easy to detect in the Arthurian romances elements which derive from the history and religion of the pagan Celts of pre-Roman times. Such syncretism is often to be expected in traditional epic compositions.

Even in the drama of a historic period, much the same process may be detected. We do not condemn Shakespeare for alluding in *Julius Caesar* to a doublet, a clock and a book with blank pages; and in our own century, T. S. Eliot, as if to vindicate a poet's freedom in this respect, deliberately introduced anachronisms into his treatment of a historic subject.

To expect Homer or any other poet who portrays a past epoch to provide us with history is to misunderstand the nature of literary art. However, the situation remains tantalising. There may often be elements of history in epic compositions, for the poet has neither the time nor the patience to invent his own history. But without the aid of external evidence it is impossible to distinguish history from fiction, even though we are certain that both are present. The difficulty arises wherever epic works have survived their sources; and archaeology, though its testimony may be uniquely vivid, only becomes a substitute for documentary tradition when it can point to history in the form of inscriptions or writing on some durable material.

Scholars are perennially tempted to relate homeric descriptions to archaeological discoveries in Greece and the Aegean area, because in many instances literary and archaeological evidence closely correspond. In other instances, however, they are strikingly discrepant.

Archaeology apart, discussion as to the date of the composition of the Homeric poems encounters a semantic difficulty. What is meant by composition? From a poetic point of view, Shakespeare's description of Antony's meeting with Cleopatra on the River Cydnus is Shakespeare's composition, and Plutarch's description of the same scene is the raw material

with which he worked. But if our interests were entirely historical, we might claim with equal truth that Plutarch, or even one of the earlier writers on whom Plutarch based himself, was the composer of this record and that Shakespeare merely adapted it.

Our esteem for the Homeric poems of course derives from their poetic merit, and it is natural to adopt the language of literary criticism when discussing them. However, if we attempt to extract history from Homer, then this terminology may well prove misleading. At least, the meaning of the word "composition" must change, and when we talk of the date of composition our meaning will change correspondingly. Not a poet, but his source lies close to the contemporary accounts on which history is ultimately based.

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¹ Her putative father, to be mythologically precise.

² The name has been thought to occur on Hittite-inscribed tablets in the form *Achehijawa* (late fourteenth to end thirteenth century BC), and, in an Egyptian inscription of c. 1225 BC, the Akawash are mentioned as raiders of the Nile Delta. Interesting attempts have been made to supplement our knowledge of Greek history with these Hittite and Egyptian records.

THE PERSIAN WARS

In the fifth century BC, successive rulers of the mighty Persian Empire sought to expand their dominions westward. In a series of engagements vital to the future of western civilisation, the Greek allies withstood and repulsed the invaders.

■ Ancient Authorities

The history of the Persian invasion of Greece is narrated in continuous and connected form by Herodotus, who was born about 484 BC in the Greek city of Halicarnassus on the south-west coast of Asia Minor. An Ionian Greek himself, he wrote in his own dialect, but he travelled widely and resided for a time at Athens before settling in the Greek colony of Thurium in southern Italy, where he died about 424 BC. The first Persian invasion thus took place shortly before his birth and the second during his infancy.

The Athenian, Thucydides, who chose for his theme the history of later wars, lived and wrote in the second half of the fifth century BC and his references to the Persian Wars sometimes supplement knowledge gained from Herodotus. But we have in Aeschylus' play the *Persae* an account of the second Persian invasion and the battle of Salamis by one who had perhaps fought in that battle – as he had at Marathon ten years earlier. His brother was in fact, killed in action at Marathon. Aeschylus was, of course, a poet and a dramatist and his purpose was not to write history. But no modern historian is likely to overlook the importance of Aeschylus' play.

Apart from that, there remains the fragmentary evidence of Greek lyric poets who lived a century before the Persian Wars and who refer to the political situation in the eastern Aegean, which preceded Persian power in that area. Their inadvertent historiography may usefully be added to Herodotus' account of the same period. Nor should we despise the relevant biographies of Plutarch, which were written some six centuries after the events with which we are concerned. Plutarch was a serious scholarly writer and he had access to many books, monuments and inscriptions which have long since been destroyed. Monuments and inscriptions, of course, have, particularly in the last century and a half, been frequently recovered by the spade of the archaeologist, and our knowledge has been further supplemented by the deciphering of mutilated Greek papyrus manuscripts found in Egypt. Even so, the writers and commentators of late antiquity have a very great advantage over us.

■ The Events of the Persian Wars

The Persian Empire was brought into existence suddenly by the victories of Cyrus the Great almost as suddenly as it was to be destroyed a little more than 200 years later by the victories of Alexander the Great. In the early sixth century BC, the Persians occupied territories round Susa, just eastward of what we still habitually call the Persian Gulf. Cyrus overwhelmed the Medes to the north of his kingdom and then, before any grand alliance could be formed against him, turned his attention westward to the Lydian power in Asia Minor. He conquered Croesus, the Lydian king, and took Sardis, the Lydian capital. Croesus may be described as a "Philhellene". He was on terms of friendly co-existence not only with the Greek cities of the eastern Aegean, which he dominated, but with those of mainland Greece. It is easy to believe

that most Greeks regarded his fall with dismay. On the other hand, the Greek ideal of freedom, involving the preservation of small, independent city states, implied at some stage a certain clash with any large imperial power that extended over the peninsula of Asia Minor.

Cyrus divided his empire into provinces under the rule of governors or “satraps” – to use a Persian word which we have inherited in its Greek form. The subjugation of the Aegean coast was completed by his general Harpagus, while Cyrus himself returned eastwards to capture Babylon – the event recorded in the Old Testament – before meeting his death in an obscure war amid northern tribes. His son Cambyses, despite some evidence of mental instability, added Egypt to the empire, and after an interlude in which a usurper ruled, the imperial throne was occupied by Darius, another scion of the royal (Achaemenid) family.

Darius organized the empire into 20 satrapies and sought to extend his empire into southern and east Europe. He led his armies beyond the Bosphorus and even beyond the Danube. In the last campaign, against the Scythians, he fared ill; the Persian force would probably have been surrounded and annihilated if it had not been for the loyalty of Darius’ Ionian Greek contingent, which guarded the Danube bridgehead. From the events of this campaign, both Darius and the Ionian Greeks drew mistaken conclusions. Darius assumed that in future he could rely on the unswerving loyalty of the Ionians, and the Ionian Greeks, conscious that the Persians had been worsted by the Scythians, judged that the time was close when they themselves might with impunity and fair prospects raise a revolt against their Persian overlord.

From Miletus, the chief city of the Ionians, an embassy¹ came to mainland Greece canvassing armed aid from compatriot states. The Spartans, cautious diplomats as ever, hesitated and at last refused to help. The Athenians, impulsive as ever, contributed 20 ships to the cause of Greek independence in the East; the city of Eretria, on the big island of Euboea, also contributed five ships.

At first, the Ionian revolt met with success. The Greeks marched inland and burned Sardis, the old capital of Croesus, to which a Persian satrap had succeeded. But retribution followed. The Greek fleet was destroyed at the battle of Lade in 494 BC. Miletus was also destroyed by the Persians, its inhabitants being massacred or enslaved. This news came as a shock to the Athenians. They rightly suspected that worse was to follow. Darius, aware of the naval help which had been given to the Ionians, was preparing a punitive expedition against the Greek mainland. His armada, commanded by his son-in-law, set sail in 492 BC and hugged the northern Aegean coastline. (Ancient Mediterranean ships preferred to keep within sight of land if possible.) A storm badly damaged the Persian fleet off the promontory of Mount Athos, so Darius was obliged to try again.

Another fleet was sent, under other commanders, by way of Naxos across the central Aegean. Eretria, the weaker of the two guilty cities, was quickly captured and burnt. The Persians now disembarked on the north-west coast of Attica, in the plain of Marathon, from which the road ran, skirting Mount Pentelicus on the south, straight to Athens. But an Athenian army opposed the landing and gloriously routed the Persian forces in a battle on the plain. The Persians who survived or had not been committed to the battle were then transported by their fleet round Cape Sunium, to approach Athens from the Saronic Gulf. But the victorious Athenian army hastened back from Marathon along the Athens road and confronted the Persians once more when their ships arrived.

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