

Iron in Homer

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IRON IN HOMER.

IRON is mentioned in the following passages of Homer (ὅστις ποτ' ἐστίν, εἰ τόδ' αὐτῷ φίλον κεκλημένῳ, τοῦτό νιν προσεννέπω), and in these passages only:—

Δ 123, 485, 510; E 723; Z 48; H 141, 144, 473; Θ 15; I 366; K 379; Λ 133; P 424; Σ 34; T 372; X 357; Ψ 30, 177, 261, 834, 851; Ω 205, 521; α 184, 204; δ 293; ε 191; ι 393; μ 280; ξ 324; ο 329; π 294; ρ 565; τ 13, 211, 494, 587; φ 3, 10, 61, 81, 97, 114, 127, 328; ψ 172; ω 168, 177.

These passages form a basis for discussing two interesting and important points in the Homeric question: (1) whether Homer's acquaintance with iron differs so much in different books that we must believe those books to belong to different ages; and (2) whether iron plays such different parts in Homer and in Mycenae that we cannot believe the Homeric age to be coincident with the Mycenaean period.

The former of these two points has been dealt with by Beloch (*Rivista di Filologia ed Istruzione Classica*, ii. 1873, pp. 49—62), followed by Helbig (*Das Homerische Epos*¹ pp. 235—237) and Schrader (*Prehistoric Antiquities of the Aryan Peoples*, Eng. trans. p. 194). Beloch's paper I have unfortunately not been able to gain access to, and therefore cannot pretend to discuss his arguments. But, according to Helbig, his contention is that, in those parts of the Homeric poems which are known on other grounds to be the oldest, there is (when the lines mentioning iron have been athetized) no reference to iron; and that in the parts of later date we can observe bronze being gradually ousted by iron, just as it was actually driven out by that metal when the Iron Age superseded the Age of Bronze.

We will begin with the latter point. Of those who hold that the *Iliad* is not ὄλον τι but essentially μεριστόν, most will agree that the date of the *Odyssey* is appreciably later than that of the *Iliad*. Consequently, if the iron test fails to reveal any marked differences between the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, it cannot be expected to be of much value in the far more delicate work of distinguishing the younger from the older portions of the *Iliad*. Let us then ascertain how much iron the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* respectively contain. In the first place, however, Beloch, Helbig and Schrader consider it a fact of capital importance that *bronze* is mentioned 279 times in the *Iliad* and only 80 times in the *Odyssey*. Since this fact is so all-important,

what is the inference we are intended to draw from it? Obviously, that the use of iron increased in the age of the *Odyssey* in proportion to the decrease in the use of bronze. If this is not the inference suggested, the fact has no importance for the present discussion. That bronze is mentioned more than three times as often in the *Iliad* as it is in the *Odyssey* is a fact which, taken by itself, tells us nothing about the extent to which iron was used; for there may be many other reasons why bronze should be mentioned more frequently in the one poem than in the other. The suggestion therefore must be that the real reason is that iron increases in use in the *Odyssey* because bronze decreases. What then are the actual facts? Iron is mentioned 23 times in the *Iliad*, 25 times in the *Odyssey*. The suggestion is misleading, the inference fallacious, the important fact valueless. The simple reason why bronze is more frequently mentioned in the *Iliad* is that Homeric weapons are made of bronze and that, fights being more numerous, weapons are necessarily more often mentioned in the *Iliad* than in the *Odyssey*.

It seems unnecessary to say more on this point; but, as figures may be made to prove anything, let us see what the figures in this case represent, for fear we should have done any injustice to an argument which has been approved by such high authority. The suggestion is that in the *Odyssey* iron has come to be more extensively used than it was in the *Iliad*, that it has come to be employed for many purposes for which originally it was not used, that many articles are made of iron in the *Odyssey* which were not made of iron in the *Iliad*. What are the facts? The following is a list of all the things of iron that are to be found in the *Iliad*: (1) a club, H 141 and 144; (2) a knife, Σ 34 and Ψ 30; (3) an arrow-head, Δ 123; (4) an adze, Δ 485 and Ψ 851; (5) an axle, E 723; and (6) gates, Θ 15. This is the list of the iron things in the *Odyssey*: (1) an adze, φ 3, 61, 81, 97, 114, 127, 328; τ 587; ω 168, 177; ι 393; (2) bonds, α 204. In all strictness, therefore, we may say that iron was not put to more uses in the *Odyssey* than in the *Iliad*. Indeed, we might be misled into thinking that the Iron Age was not so far advanced in the *Odyssey* as it was in the *Iliad*, if we did not observe that the iron weapons of the *Iliad* are implied in the words, αὐτὸς γὰρ ἐφέλκεται ἀνδρᾶ σίδηρος, of the *Odyssey*, π 294 and τ 13.

Trial by iron, therefore, seems thus far to indicate either that the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* belong to the same date or that the iron test is not a safe one. It may be that Helbig is right in saying that the authors of the later parts of the Homeric poems adhered as closely as they could to the 'poetic apparatus' of the older lays, and were only occasionally betrayed into lapses which reveal the more advanced culture whereby they were actually surrounded. It does, indeed, seem strange that such lapses should be more frequent in the *Iliad* than in the *Odyssey*, since the bulk of the *Iliad* is older than the *Odyssey*. But perhaps it is in the more modern lays of the *Iliad* that these little slips occur. This is a point on which it is impossible to pronounce with confidence, because of the difficulty there is in suiting everybody, when one tries to specify which are the modern lays.

Let us assume that 'the later expansions' as determined by Dr. Leaf

and in which 'the approximation of style to the *Odyssey* is very marked' (*Iliad* II. p. x.), together with what Prof. Jebb calls the Greater Interpolations, are distinctly later than the rest of the *Iliad*. The older lays, then, will consist of Dr. Leaf's *μῆνις* and those 'earlier expansions' of which he is not sure whether they are by the author of the *μῆνις* or not; but which, as we infer from Dr. Leaf's uncertainty, cannot be regarded as belonging to an entirely different age from his *μῆνις*. Now, on the theory that iron was wholly unknown or but little known in the time of these older lays, we should expect to find in them no references to iron or but few. On the other hand, inasmuch as there are in the *Iliad* 15,700 lines, in these older lays 7,200 lines, and in the *Iliad* 23 references to iron, we should on the theory of chances expect to find 10 references in the older lays, for $15700 : 7200 :: 23 : 10$. As a matter of fact there are 9 references to iron in the older lays (Δ 123, 485, 510; E 723; Z 48; H 141, 144; P 424; X 357). This seems to show that the facts are against the theory that iron was better known to the later lays than to the earlier; and it is surely not without significance that the iron test, when applied to the supposed earlier and later lays of the *Iliad*, should yield precisely the same results as are obtained from its application to the *Odyssey*. On the theory that iron was equally well known to the authors of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, we should expect to find it mentioned an approximately equal number of times. As a matter of fact, it is mentioned 23 times in the *Iliad* and 25 in the *Odyssey*.

It may however be that some fallacy lurks behind the figures which we obtained by comparing the later and the earlier lays of the *Iliad*: and that this fallacy will become evident when we enquire what articles of iron are manufactured in the older lays. Let us push the enquiry, then. The list of all the articles of iron to be found in the *Iliad* as a whole amounts, as we have already said, to six, viz. a club, an adze, an arrow-head, an axle, a knife and gates. With which of these were the older lays acquainted? According to the theory of Beloch, they ought to have been acquainted with none—at any rate, we may say, with a minority. As a matter of fact they are acquainted with the majority, with four out of six, with the first four. After this, it is only in patent disregard of the facts that any one can maintain that in the earlier lays little or no acquaintance with iron is shown, whereas it becomes greater and greater as the lays become later. It so happens that precisely the reverse is the case: more iron objects are found in the older lays of the *Iliad* than are found in the recent; and more again are found in the *Iliad* than in the *Odyssey*. But, it may be suggested, though the lays in which these articles of iron occur are old, the particular lines in which they are mentioned may be spurious. Very well! I am content to submit to this test; my only wish is to get to the bottom of the matter. I take Henze's *Anhang*, the most complete record I can command, and I find that not one of these lines has been suspected.

There remains only one other way by which it is even possible to maintain that iron was unknown in the time of the older lays; and that is to argue that the mere mention of iron is of itself sufficient proof that the

line in which it occurs is spurious. Then, when these spurious lines have been excised, our way will be clear: the absence of any mention of iron in the older lays will show that iron was unknown. As an argument this reasoning is indeed circular; but the conclusion it seeks to establish is not therefore necessarily untrue. And, twenty years ago, the assumption on which it is based had the advantage of being unverifiable: if any one chose to maintain that iron was not known in the time of the older lays and therefore every reference to it must be spurious, no one could prove that iron, as a matter of fact, was known and therefore the references were genuine. To-day, however, things are different. The spade has proved the argument to be not only circular but false. Iron has been discovered both at Hissarlik and at Mycenae.

This brings us to the question whether—so far as iron is concerned—we can count Homer as belonging to the ‘Mycenaean period.’ The amount of iron as yet dug up is certainly not great—two lumps in the Burnt City of Troy, and, at Mycenae, a few finger-rings in ‘the graves of the populace in the lower city.’ The absence of iron in the shaft-graves is to be noted. At the same time the amount of iron to be discovered in Homer is not very great, either. There are more than 24,000 lines of Homer, and the references to iron are only 48, all told. Bronze is mentioned about ten times as often—which is what we should expect at the beginning of the Iron Age. Again, 15 out of the 48 references to iron are similes, and, if they were the only references, would not prove that the poet had so much as seen iron: he might only have heard of it and have had no more knowledge of its real nature than other poets have of adamant. Further, the articles of iron which are mentioned in Homer are only seven in number (or eight, if we include the plough-share which is implied, possibly, though not expressly described in Ψ 834); and even this list shrinks on examination. The ‘iron bonds’ of α 204, which according to Athene would not be strong enough to hold Odysseus, are, I suspect, so called simply to convey the notion of bonds of adamantine strength. The gates of Θ 15, again, could be made of iron by the poet at little expense, but it may be doubted whether any king who had the honour of the poet’s acquaintance could have afforded such a piece of iron-work. At any rate the poet does not profess to have seen them—they are the gates of Tartarus. The axle, again, of E 723 is part of Hera’s chariot, which in other respects also is constructed regardless of expense.

On the other hand, the club of H 141 and 144 does seem to have been real. It is spoken of in a tone which implies that it was quite a new invention, if not a luxury, and the owner evidently felt considerable pride in it—more indeed than was warranted by the actual performances of the new weapon:—

οὐ κορύνῃ οἱ δλεθρον
χραῖσμε σιδηρεῖη.

The axes of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, the knives of Σ 34 and Ψ 30, the arrow-head of Δ 123 and the (possible) plough-share of Ψ 834 may also

safely be regarded as things which the poet had actually seen and not as merely 'poetic apparatus.'

The first question with regard to them is whether these implements imply a very advanced knowledge of iron and a very large quantity of metal for their manufacture. As to the axes, commentators seem agreed that they were mainly made of bronze and that only a small portion of iron was employed in them (Ameis on ϕ 61 and Helbig *Hom. Ep.* p. 76 n. 7). As to the plough-share, no one, who remembers how extremely primitive the Greek plough was, will maintain that more than a very small amount of metal would be required in order to tip it with a point of iron. The knives may be assumed to have been small; and the arrow-head obviously was not a large affair.

On the whole, I think, the blade of an axe, the point of a plough-share, a knife, an arrow-head and a knob on the end of a stick do not necessarily imply that the Iron Age was far advanced. This impression is strengthened when we think of the many things which might have been made of iron—which in later Greek time were indeed made of iron—but in Homer's time were exclusively made in bronze:—corslets, greaves, shields, helmets, swords, hammers, tongs, anvils, etc.

Small however as was the use made of iron in Homer, it may have been greater than was possible in the Mycenaean period. Let us therefore, next, consider this point. To begin with, we must not lay too much stress on the fact that no arrow-heads or adzes of iron have been yet discovered at Mycenae—for neither have any bronze arrows or axes been found, and yet we may be quite sure that they were in use, for two-edged axes are depicted more than once on gold rings etc. True, bronze knives have been discovered, whereas knives of iron have not, but the former were more numerous than the latter. On the other hand, strange to say, we have actually come across something very like the club of Arêithous (H 141): Schliemann says, 'there were found two lumps of iron....One of them has a large square hole on its better preserved side, and it probably served as the handle of a staff' (S.'s Report on the Excavations at Troy in 1890, *Schliemann's Excavations*, p. 332). Take the stick by the right end and you have a club.

It may however be said, 'Doubtless arrows and adzes and knives of iron might rust away, if they were there, but were they ever there?' Dr. Schuchhardt would seem to be inclined to answer 'no,' on the ground that the iron found at Mycenae takes the form of finger-rings, 'which show that this metal was considered costly and only worked into trinkets' (*Schliemann's Excavations*, p. 296). Was iron 'only worked into trinkets' in the time of Pliny, who testifies to the use of iron rings amongst the Lacedaemonians of his day (*Hist. Nat.* xxxiii. 49)? Was iron rare at the end of the Roman republic, when iron rings were still in use? Was it 'considered costly' in the time of Aristophanes, who puts the price of rings at a drachma (*Plut.* 883), and even at three obols (*Thesm.* 425)? On the contrary, it appears that iron may be fairly abundant and finger-rings yet be worn of iron.

Further—though I only advance this as an *argumentum ad hominem*—Dr. Schuchhardt, Dr. Leaf and Mr. Flinders Petrie seem to consider that in the Mycenaean period a lively intercourse by sea was carried on between Greece, the Isles and Egypt. Now, since iron was known so early in the last-named country, ought not Drs. Schuchhardt and Leaf and Mr. Petrie to expect to find it known in Mycenae, perhaps not to the same extent as in Egypt, but at any rate to the same limited extent as it is in Homer?

The old-fashioned view was that it was the Phoenicians who introduced the Iron Age into Greece: 'die Lehrmeister der Griechen in der Gewinnung und Bearbeitung der Metalle sind bekanntlich die Phönikier gewesen,' says Blümner (*Tech. u. Term. d. Gewerbe und Künste*, IV. i. 3). And the presence of iron in Homer is in harmony with the part played by the Phoenicians in the Homeric poems. Dr. Schuchhardt, however, will not have the Phoenicians in Mycenae: the people of the Mycenaean age 'had not, like the Greeks of the following period, given up to the Phoenicians all commercial intercourse with each other and with Egypt, but had carried it on themselves. The commercial supremacy of the Phoenicians in the Archipelago began in the next period' (p. 318). But if this is so, it is difficult to understand how Homer can have lived in the Mycenaean period. The influence of the Phoenicians on Homeric civilization is far too considerable, if we may trust Helbig, to be explained away. But let that pass. If there was any iron at all in Mycenae, then, whether brought by the Phoenicians or imported direct from Egypt, it was probably to be found in Mycenae in quite as large quantities as it is in Homer.

But was there any iron in Mycenae? It is strange, though not of any decisive importance, that finger-rings of iron, though known to have been worn in very ancient times in Greece, especially in Lacedaemonia, are conspicuous by their absence in Homer. The discovery of the two lumps of iron in the Burnt City of Troy does indeed at first sight seem to make the discovery of finger-rings at Mycenae intelligible. But the total absence of any finds of iron in the shaft-graves of Mycenae makes it hard to believe that iron was really known in the much earlier time of the Burnt City.

Schliemann, let us remember, found an iron knife at Troy, apparently belonging to the fourth or fifth pre-historic city, which, however, he felt forced to attribute to the Lydian city: 'the weight of the iron would easily account for its having sunk to the depth at which it was found' (*Ilios*, p. 60†). And are the finger-rings, whose discovery in 1888 caused 'the doubts aroused by the total absence of iron' to 'entirely disappear' (Schuchhardt p. 314), part of the find of iron articles which Schliemann (*Mycenae*, 74 f.) assigns to the beginning of the fifth century B.C.? Doubtless, however, Dr. Schuchhardt has conclusive reasons for assigning the rings to the Mycenaean period, and one would have been interested to see them stated in *Schliemann's Excavations*.

In conclusion: (1) it is absolutely opposed to the facts of the case to

say that iron is more common in the *Odyssey* than in the *Iliad*, or in the later lays of the *Iliad* than it is in the older ; (2) the Homeric poems must be placed in the Iron Age—but at the very beginning of that Age ; (3) if Homer—even the oldest of him—lived in the Mycenaean period, iron must have been known in that period ; (4) if iron was not known in that period, then even the oldest lays must be posterior to that period.

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