

THE PHAIAKIS AS POLITICAL ARGUMENT – THOUGHTS CONCERNING THE SOCIAL - POLITICAL INTERPRETATION OF THE HOMERIAN EPICS

by

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Summary

The written publication of the Homeric epics was a glaring breach of a taboo revealing the formula behind the oral epic tradition practised by the Aoiden guilds to the wider public. Like other historic first-time publications of material from the carefully protected oral tradition, this act had a political background. The Homeric Phaiakis should be regarded as an important argument for the retention of the prevailing aristocratic state order.

THE EARLIEST evidence of occidental literature are the Homeric epics - the Iliad and Odyssey. Their written record which presupposes the creation of the Greek alphabet at the beginning of the 8th century is dated generally with the end of the 8th century before Christ. In Mycenaean times writing (Linear B) and poetry existed, but written poetry was not known. During the Dark Ages (1.200-800 BC) poetry was exclusively conceived and passed on by oral tradition. Preliminary forms of the epics by Homer like cult songs, work songs, festive songs and especially heroic poetry, can be found in the epics themselves. Their big treasure of formulas can be considered as the best proof for the great age the orally transmitted poetry already had had at the time the two epics were put down in writing. The addressees of Homer's epics belong to the Greek nobility of the 8th century BC, a period which used to be - according to the archaeological

evidence - the flowering season of nobility during the Dark Ages. This is revealed by the characterizing values, the way of thinking, the social manners of the acting persons and the social ambience in general. In the background simpler social groups such as wage workmen or slaves can surely be found; but they are always represented from the point of view of the nobility. Thus the social environment described in the epics is the noble society of the late Dark Ages. The described actions however originate from the splendid aristocratic world of the Mycenaean period of time. Thus the singer(1) (aoidos) sings about events taking place in the court society of the Mycenaean period. He sings an epos dealing with heroes of this great past in the presence of the court society of the Dark Ages. Where the action appears historically, it reflects the Mycenaean past. Where social states are described, it reveals the time period of the Dark Ages with its self-sufficient

farmyards, out of which resulted only a limited number of specialists (smiths, potters, carpenters, physicians, seers, aoidoi). The author placed the unravelling of the wanderings of Ulysses in the land of the Phaeacians; the series of Ulysses' adventures ends here, where he could be sure about his home-coming to Ithaka. The Phaiakis holds an especially large place in the epos - in fact the Phaiakis covers approximately a third of the epos (5,279-13,187). The greater part of it consists of the narrations of Ulysses (canto 9-12), and only about 40% deal with the actions in the land of the Phaeacians as well as with the description of the landscape, the city, the society and their state.

Landscape

Far from human beings Scheria is located in the sea(2), the gross glebed(3), lovely land of the Phaeacians(4). The coast is rocky and full of cliffs(5). Woody(6) mountains cast shadows (7). A river which bears good water throughout all the year falls(8) into the sea just in front of the city. Washing pits(9) are located there, far away from the city, on the ledging beach(10), which here is free from stones(11) and on which exists a place protected against the wind(12). Reed(13), crouch-grass(14) as well as wild and cultivated olive-trees(15) grow here on the nourishing ground(16). There it exists arable acreage(17), a poplar grove of Athena with its fountain and around about meadow(18). There is located within earshot a country-seat of Alkinoos and a lush garden(19).

AN OTHER big enclosed garden of Alkinoos in a size of 4 acres is located at the entrance to the palace(20); it demonstrates as an example the natural fortune of the land: fruit-bearing pear-trees, pomegranate-trees, apple-trees, fig-trees and olive-trees prosper there throughout the year. The west wind blows incessantly and makes fruits mature. A part of the garden is exclusively reserved for the viniculture - after the vintage one part of the

grapes is dried in order to become raisins, the other part of the mature fruit are eaten or used to produce wine. In another part of the garden which also is harvested throughout the year vegetables are cultivated. Two springs pour forth in this garden, of which one irrigates the whole garden and the other one flows in the front court of the palace from where the inhabitants of the city get their water.

The city

THE CITY OF the Phaeacians(21) lovely with its inhabited surroundings(22), its houses(23) which are enclosed by a high wall made out of stockades from one sea-shore to the other(24), with the narrow access(25) between the two harbours protected against the wind(26). On their shores anchor stones are lined up(27) and the ships of the Phaeacians have their berths(28). On both sides of the beautiful temple of Poseidon lies the stone-enclosed marketplace with its rows of stone-seats; in this place they used to assemble and to perform their games(29). In the middle of the city a gateway(30) leads to the palace of Alkinoos, a splendid ensemble of halls, court yards and buildings(31), luxuriously fit out with gold, silver, bronze, glass, carpets, and day and night in the shine of torchlight(32).

The society

The population of Scheria is numerous, the poet counts them big talking in ten thousands (33). Although the poet does not pay attention to the simple's society, time and again he mentions the people of the Phaeacians as a whole(35) as well as in its individuals(34).

It is Nausikaa, a Phaeacian woman, who herself characterizes her fellow-citizens as being proud and also shows some understanding for their behaviour(36). Towards foreigners they are cool(38), although they respect the principles of

hospitality (37). Being themselves far away from the gainfully employed peoples(39), the Phaeacians are inspired with abhorrence in particular of merchants, strictly speaking of maritime tradesmen(40).

WOMEN - they are under the men's control on principle(41) - dispose of a quite respected standing in this society. Their capabilities in regard of handicrafts are emphasized: they grind grains, they produce solid linen, wool(42) and clothes(43). Arete(44) occupies a special position among them: she is the wife of Alkinoos, she is respected by her family as well as by the men of the common people in particular due to her outstanding good sense. She is also consulted by men with their differences waiting for her arbitrament(45). The appearance of Arete always used to cause problems to Homer interpreters. On the one hand it is expected that according to the introduction she would occupy a more important part in the Phaiakis - but this expectation is not granted; on the other hand her appearance does not match with the phenotype of the early Greek nobility. Thus she perhaps was part of another narration with probably matriarchal features and so had got into the Phaiakis.

The men of the Phaeacian people are passionate seafarers; as such they are well known(46) for their fast sailors(47). Even though the Phaeacians live far away from other people, they are - by their seafaring activities - in touch with other societies; otherwise they wouldn't be able to know anything about maritime trade practised elsewhere(48). Nausikaa's maid Eurymedusa coming from Apeira(49) refers to the foreign relations of the Phaeacians. If we do not want to explain the riches of the Phaeacians by the favourably inclined gods, she makes us assume that the wealths can be traced back to piracy. From their glory as seafarers also results their haughtiness towards other people(50). As real aristocrats they - of course - practise sport and it shouldn't be looked down upon their culture of sport

because they were not able to show some to Ulysses supported by Athena(51). They consider the group- and single dance(52) as their great strength, which is a discipline reckoned by Alkinoos among the noble social life culture.

The religious centre of the Phaeacians is the temple on the Agora consecrated to the honour of Poseidon, Poseidon is - for a people of seafarers - the appropriate centre figure to be worshipped(53). It has to be mentioned that other gods as Zeus(54), Hermes(55), Apollo(56) and Athena(57) played an important part as well in their cult life. Alkinoos stressed(58) that the gods appeared to the Phaeacians and participated in the hecatomb sacrifices of the Phaeacians due to their trustful relation with the Olympic gods, being as close as the one of the Cyclopes or the Giants.

The state

THE KING OF the Phaeacians is Alkinoos(59). He certainly inherited his power from his father Nausithoos(60), had undoubtedly a close relation to the gods(61) and was worshipped by the people of Phaeacians(62), from whom however he also got his power.

In addition to the twelve kings (64), there is a thirteenth one (65), Alkinoos. He is their grand king(66). Alkinoos did the talking with Ulysses, none of the other kings asked leave to speak. Ulysses submitted his request for a conduct on his journey back home to "the king and to the people"(67) and not explicitly to the twelve other kings. Echeneos, the chairman of the eldest, does not leave any doubt that Arete is able to give wise advises, "but word and deed depend upon Alkinoos" (68). However, the twelve kings beside Alkinoos are able to dissociate from Alkinoos' intentions; inviting the other kings to attend a banquet at his house he otherwise wouldn't have added the warning: "No one

should refuse!"(69). All the kings bear a sceptre(70). Alkinoos consults(71) the council(72) of kings and councillors named (77) eldest(73), best(74), leader(75) and adviser (76). Alkinoos is not the only one empowered to convene the council, the council can also be convened on the initiative of the Phaeacians(78). Such a council, for example, was held on the Agora when Ulysses has been introduced to the Phaeacians by Alkinoos(79). In a certain way the councillors participate in the power; in this way should be understood that Arete characterizes Ulysses as her guest but adds that "everyone participates in the power"(80). In Alkinoos' house - it doesn't seem that it was a council - the councillors also express clearly their opinion in demanding that the foreigner should be conducted home(81). The narration doesn't deal with the Phaeacian people any longer - it constitutes the spectator scenery during the contests(82), it refunds the costs of representation to the councillors, which I have resulted from the guest gifts caused by Ulysses' visit(83); and when Athena in the shape of Alkinoos calls "every single man" to the council, she addresses them again as "leader and adviser of the Phaeacian people"(84). Finally the people counting in the political and social context is reduced again only to the nobility.

AT FIRST VIEW the Phaeacians of Scheria present themselves as monarchical constituted society till the moment when we become aware that beside Alkinoos there exist twelve other kings. This impression of an aristocratically conceived society becomes even more clear if we consider that Alkinoos certainly again and again rises to speak, pushes the action, that no other king makes his appearance, but that on the other hand Echeneos, the chairman of the eldest, rises to speak two times: the first time he urges Alkinoos in a reproving way to act properly, the other time he praises the suggestion by the highly estimated queen Arete, but he sets right the social conditions by pointing out at once that it is Alkinoos turn to speak and to

act. That the initiative to convene a council is not taken only by Alkinoos also shows that this aristocratic power is based on a broad foundation. A not fully logical compromise which is typical for this aristocratic constitution and can be explained by its historical development takes shape in the kingship of Alkinoos: Alkinoos has certainly inherited the kings throne from his father Nausithoos the founder of the town but his power over the Phaeacians has been given to him by the Phaeacians themselves. Finally we listen to what characterizes the advanced aristocracy more distinctly to some extent: we do not hear anything of prince residences on the countryside. Nobility lives completely in the polis.

THE PHAIAKIS is an evidence of the late Dark Ages. In the course of the Sea-people storm and the Dorian migration royal centers such as Pylos, Amyklai, Tiryns, Mykenai, Thebai, Gla, Orchomenos and Iolkos were broken. Death and displacement prevailed now; different groups found refuge on the one hand in the east, in Kypros and on the west coast of Asia Minor, on individual Aegaeian islands such as Naxos, on the other hand in the west, in Attika, in Arcadia and on the Ionian islands. Gradually in the course of the time some different small, but soon quite wealthy prince seats developed; this can be proven by archaeological findings at Lefkandi on Euboia, and also by active maritime trade, which reached the Aegaeis, but also South Italy and Sicily. In contrast to the Mycenaean world broad economic and power-political centers were missing. In the 8th or 7th Century, finally more important residences were again developed. Along with the gradual decline of the prince rule the beginnings of the polis become more provable as well.

Seen as a whole, the Phaiakis should be regarded as utopia, as societal model in the form of a harmonious, certainly unreal collection of real elements in their optimal expression. This is permitted by the natural

ambiente and the way the king and his people deal with crises brought into the society from outside - in this case the confrontation with Ulysses - and by the fact that the Phaeacians are satisfied by the way their own world is structured. Certain discrepancies in the presented societal model add a touch of realism to the utopian description, which leads to a higher public acceptance. After a period of general decline the reflection of the Mycenaean hero world in the Homeric epics - being an orientation towards the past -, might have served to find out one's identity in times of economic and cultural Renaissance. However, the utopia of the Phaiakis should be classified as a request for

maintenance and protection of present conditions. In spite of compromises relating to broader social groups, these conditions are still monarchically influenced. The utopia serves as protection against tendencies, supported by larger parts of the population, opposing the prince rule. Nevertheless, the thought that the conditions described in the Phaiakis concerning a less strict prince rule were not at all reached at the time of the publication of the epos, should not be excluded. In this case the Phaiakis would from a political perspective be an extremely critical document of almost revolutionary content.

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Zusammenfassung

Die schriftliche Veröffentlichung der homerischen Epen war eine eklatante Verletzung eines Tabus, die das innerhalb von Aoiden-Zünften mündlich tradierte epische Formel-Repertoire der Öffentlichkeit preisgab. Wie andere historische Erstpublikationen von bis dahin streng gehütetem, nur mündlich aktiviertem Wissen hatte auch dieser Akt politische Hintergründe. Besonders die homerischen Phaiakis ist als gewichtiges Argument für die Erhaltung der bestehenden aristokratischen Gesellschafts- und Staatsordnung zu verstehen.

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- ¹ Cf. Demodokos in the Phaiakis Hom. Od. 8,250-255; 488-498.
- ² 6,204f.: οἰκέομεν δ' ἀπάνευθε πολυκλύστῳ ἐνὶ πόντῳ, ἔσχατοι; 6,279. Cf. 8,49: ἄλς; 50; 13,65; 70: θάλασσα; 8,55: νότιος.
- ³ 5,34: Σχερίη ἐρίβωλος.
- ⁴ 7,79: Σχερίη ἐρατεινή, cf. 13,160; 6,202: Φαιήκων ἀνδρῶν γαῖα, cf. 5, 35; 345; 392; 408; 439; 6,177; 7,195; 8,555.
- ⁵ 5,401-405; 411; 425; 7,279.
- ⁶ 5,398; cf. 475.
- ⁷ 5,279f.; 7,268f.: ὄρεα σκιόεντα γαίης.
- ⁸ 5,441; 453; 460; 469; 6,59; 85; 89; 97; 210; 216; 224; 317; 7,281; 284; 296.
- ⁹ 6,40; 85-87; 92.
- ¹⁰ 5,348; 350; 399; 402; 438; 6,138.
- ¹¹ 5,443; 7,282.
- ¹² 6,210; 212; 7,282.
- ¹³ 5,463.
- ¹⁴ 6,90.
- ¹⁵ 5,477.
- ¹⁶ 5,463.
- ¹⁷ 6,10; 259; 7,26. Cf. the grain milled by the women in the palace: 7,104.
- ¹⁸ 6,291f.; 321f.
- ¹⁹ 6,293f.
- ²⁰ 7,111-131.
- ²¹ πόλις ἐραννή: 7,18; 26; cf. 6,3; 114; 144; 177; 191; 195; 255; 262; 298; 8,555; 13,156; ἄστῳ: 6,178; 194; 296; 7,2; 40; 8,7; 13,181.
- ²² 8,551: ἄλλοι θ' οἱ κατὰ ἄστῳ καὶ οἱ περιναιετάουσιν.
- ²³ 6,297; 302.
- ²⁴ 6,262f.; 7,44f.
- ²⁵ 6,264.
- ²⁶ 6,263; 7,43.
- ²⁷ 13,77.
- ²⁸ 6,6,264f.; 7,243.
- ²⁹ 6,266f.; 7,44; 8,5-7; 12; 16f.; 109; 122: πεδῖον; concerning the extension of the agora cf. 8,124f. and 260.
- ³⁰ 7,4.
- ³¹ Cf. the description of the palace: 7,83-132; 303-315. Moreover 8,57: αἴθουσαί τε καὶ ἔρκεα καὶ δόμοι; cf. δῶ: 13,4; δῶμα: 6,256; 7,135; 139; 8,56; δώματα: 6,296; 299; 7,3; 46; 82; 8,32; 41; δόμος: 6,302; 7,28; 48; 144; 7,346; 8, 257; δόμοι: 8,255; cf. 7,301: ἐς ἡμετέρου; 8,418; 13,23: ἐς Ἀλκινόοιο.
- ³² 7,81ff.
- ³³ 8,109f.: πουλὺς ὄμιλος, μυρίοι.

- ³⁴ ἕκαστος: 8, 15; ἕκαστος φῶς: 8,10f.
- ³⁵ πάντες: 7,226f.; 13,47; 54; δῆμος: 8,555; πᾶς δῆμος: 8,157; λαοί: 13,62; πάντες λαοί: 13,155f.; ἅπαντες ἄνθρωποι: 13,157f. seems to mean "all human beings" in general, not only "all Phaeacians".
- ³⁶ 6,274: ὑπερφίαλοι; cf. 286-288. Moreover 7,16: μεγάθυμοι.
- ³⁷ 6,193; 207f.; 7,165; 181; 8,546f.
- ³⁸ 7,32f.; cf. 51f.
- ³⁹ 6,8.
- ⁴⁰ 7,159-164.
- ⁴¹ 7,68: ὄσσαι νῦν γε γυναῖκες ὑπ' ἀνδράσιν οἶκον ἔχουσιν.
- ⁴² 6,52f.; 7,103-111.
- ⁴³ 7,234f.
- ⁴⁴ 7,53; 347: δέσποινα; 7,241: βασιλεία. Cf. her ancestors 7,54ff.
- ⁴⁵ 7,66-74.
- ⁴⁶ 7,109.
- ⁴⁷ 5,386; 7,39; 108f.; 8,96; 191; 369; 247; 13,166.
- ⁴⁸ 8,161-164.
- ⁴⁹ 7,8f. In this context, it is not of great interest where Apeira should be located – according to Eustathios ad locum for example on the continent (1,265,37f.: γρήυς ἀπειραΐη θαλαμηπόλος Εὐρυμέδουσα. ἦν ποτε ἀπειρήθεν νέες ἡγαγον, ἢ μάχης νόμῳ, ἢ κατὰ ἐμπορίαν), if we look on Scheria as an island, as he does. According to Eustathios, it might have been possible that the Phaeacians worked in searade – an estimation to be denied because of the harsh criticism by Euryalos (8,159-164).
- ⁵⁰ 6,274; 7,16f., 8,153.
- ⁵¹ 8,97-235.
- ⁵² 8,248f.; 370-380; 382-384; cf. 6,69.
- ⁵³ 7,35; 56; 61; 8, 565; 13, 173; 181; 185.
- ⁵⁴ 7,164; 180; 311; 316; 8,245; 13,25; 51.
- ⁵⁵ 7,137.
- ⁵⁶ 7,311.
- ⁵⁷ 6,291f.; 321f.; 7,310f.
- ⁵⁸ 201-206.
- ⁵⁹ κρείων: 8,382; 401; 13,38; βασιλεύς: 7,46; 141; 8,257; cf. 6,12; 7,10f.; 23; 55. Cf. 11,348f.; 353.
- ⁶⁰ Cf. 6,7; 7,56; 62f.
- ⁶¹ 6,12. Cf. 7,167; 421; 8,2; 4; 385; 13,20; 24: ἱερὸν μένος Ἀλκινόοιο; cf. 7,178; 8,423; 13,49; 64.
- ⁶² 7,11.
- ⁶³ 6,196f. (μεγαλήτορος Ἀλκινόοιο, τοῦ δ' ἐκ Φαιήκων ἔχεται κάρτος τε βίη τε); 7,150 (γέρας θ', ὃ τι δῆμος ἔδωκεν).
- ⁶⁴ 6,55; 7,49; 8,41.
- ⁶⁵ 8,390f.: δώδεκα γὰρ κατὰ δῆμον ἀριπρεπέες βασιλῆες ἀρχοὶ κραίνουσι, τρεῖς καὶ δέκατος δ' ἐγὼ αὐτός.
- ⁶⁶ 6,196f.
- ⁶⁷ 8,57.
- ⁶⁸ 8,346.
- ⁶⁹ 8, 43.
- ⁷⁰ 8,41; 47.

- ⁷¹ 6,61: βουλάς βουλεύειν.
⁷² 6,55: βουλή.
⁷³ 7,189: γέροντες. Echeneos is the eldest, cf. 7,155; 11,342: γέρων ἥρωας Ἐχένης.
⁷⁴ 6,257; 8,91; 108: ἄριστοι; 6,34f.: ἀριστῆες κατὰ δῆμον πάντων Φαιήκων.
⁷⁵ 7,89; 136; 186; 8,11; 26; 97; 387; 536; 13,186: ἡγήτορες.
⁷⁶ 7,136; 186; 8,11; 26; 97; 387; 536; 13,186: μέδοντες.
⁷⁷ They all are together addressed to as councillors (13,12: Φαιήκων βουλευφόροι); the wine – obviously sponsored by them – drunk in the palace of Alkinoos is called “sparkling councillors’ wine” (13,8: γερούσιος αἴθου οἶνος).
⁷⁸ Cf. 6,53-55. It is the “illustrious Phaeacians” (Φαίηκες ἀγαυοί) having invited to the council; in this passage it is not clear whether the other kings, the eldests or a wider circle of noble Phaeacians are meant.
⁷⁹ 8,1-45.
⁸⁰ 11,338.
⁸¹ 7,226f.: πάντες ἐπήνεον ἠδ’ ἐκέλευον πεμπέμεναι τὸν ξεῖνον.
⁸² 8,109f.
⁸³ 13,13-15.
⁸⁴ 8,10f.

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