

# BLACK SHIPS AND SEA RAIDERS: HISTORY, ARCHAEOLOGY, AND *ODYSSEY* IN THE LATE BRONZE–EARLY IRON AGE TRANSITION

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*Lecture presented at the Joukowsky Institute for Archaeology,  
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Thank you very much for the opportunity to speak on the topic of ‘black ships and sea raiders’ today. This talk will touch on several topics, including Homer, seafaring, and the events of the Late Bronze–Early Iron Age transition in the Eastern Mediterranean, but it will hopefully maintain an at least somewhat–visible connective thread throughout!

We begin with the lines that introduce Homer’s epic and its hero Odysseus, the *polūtropos* ‘many-sided, much-traveled’ man:

“Tell me, O Muse, of the man of many devices, who wandered full many ways after he had sacked the sacred citadel of Troy. Many were the men whose cities he saw and whose mind he learned, and many the woes he suffered in his heart upon the sea, seeking to win his own life and the return of his comrades. Yet even so he saved not his comrades, though he desired it sore, for through their own blind folly they perished...”

*Odyssey* i 1–7

From here, the epic chronicles that which happened to Odysseus in the decade following the Greeks’ defeat of the Trojans. During these years, the hero was taken to places like the city of the Kikones, the land of the Cyclopes, and even Hades itself, before finally returning him to Ithaka, ten years after he first left Troy and twenty years after sailing from home with Agamemnon and the Mycenaean armada.

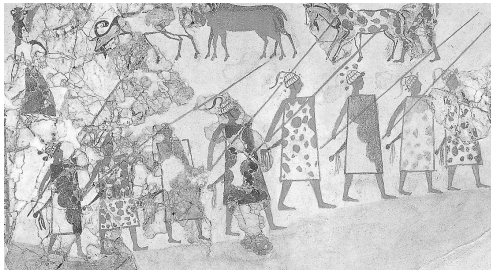
As we know, trials and tribulations after the Trojan War were not unique to Odysseus. The *Odyssey* tells us of the eight-year journey home endured by Helen’s jilted husband, Menelaos, as well as the death of recently–returned Agamemnon at the hands of his wife’s lover Aigisthos. We shall focus primarily on Odysseus himself, though, for the purpose of shedding light on the interplay between a Homeric individual and the historical and archaeological background.

Like all epic products of oral tradition, the “master myth” of the Homeric *Odyssey* is a tapestry woven from many fascinating micronarratives, each of which has its own origin, development, and – in some cases, at some points in time – individual grounding in historical truth. Further, though it may sound ironic, our discussion of history, archaeology, and Homer will pay particular attention to an itinerary of places and events that Odysseus may not have visited or experienced at all – those he tells to his own swineherd Eumaios, while disguised, in the portion of the *Odyssey* known as the “Second Cretan Lie” (xiv 199–359, and the portion retold to Antinoos in scroll xvii). Though

this specific micronarrative is portrayed as fiction within the Homeric macronarrative, several of its elements have precedent in archaeological and literary records dating to the Late Bronze Age and the Late Bronze–Early Iron Age transition.

Over the course of the next hour or so, we shall see what some of these elements are, and how they fit within the larger tapestry of the chaotic transitions that took place in the years surrounding 1200 BCE. At the outset, though, we must provide some background both on epic and history, as well as on piracy and naval warfare at the end of the Bronze Age. Then we may begin to see how these some of these events and some of the tales of Odysseus in *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are intertwined.

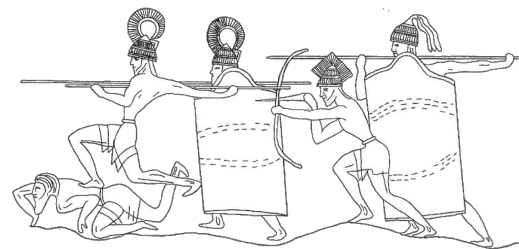
## Myth, History, and the Mythical History of Epic



*Procession of armed men from Room 5 of the West House, Akrotiri*

The possible existence of epic in oral tradition from earliest Mycenaean times and even before, perhaps conveyed to us in art – like that seen in Miniature Fresco from the West House at Akrotiri, or on the Siege Rhyton from Shaft Grave IV at Mycenae – may help explain the strands of continuity and vague memories of people, places, and events that seem to have come down to the archaic composer(s) of Homer’s epics from centuries long past. Sarah Morris has referred to these works of art as “a visual counterpart to early epic poetry,” while Eric Cline and Assaf Yasur–Landau, the excavators of the Middle Bronze Age site of Tell Kabri in the Levant, have suggested that “miniature narrative art, possibly relating to an early epic tradition...could serve as a unifying *epos* or epic cycle in the time of extended colonization and diaspora, for instance on Crete, Kea, and Santorini during the [Late Minoan] IA period, and it served somewhat as a membership card to a Mediterranean club of members who shared this tradition – a club which extended from the northern Cyclades to Crete and perhaps beyond.”<sup>1</sup>

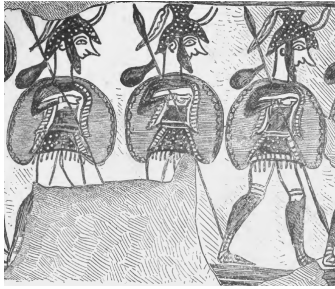
Why is this important? At perhaps the most basic level, it is a reminder that whatever measures of truth may be contained in the Homeric epics cannot truly be accessed without peeling back the layers of the received text. These layers are abundant: a characteristic of oral tradition is composition–in–performance, which lends itself, over time and a broad geographic area, to many slightly different versions of a single story. Temporal contradictions remain, and hint at the complexity of the whole. Add to that the agglutinative nature of epic poetry, which has among its progenitors “a vast reservoir of inherited myths, legends, and tales, the conflation of which has left traces and



*Scene from the Mycenaean ‘warrior krater’ (Shaft Grave IV at Mycenae) showing warriors with tower shields and spears engaged in battle.*

<sup>1</sup> S. Morris 1989 515; Cline and Yasur–Landau 2007 164

sometimes, at least by literary standards, rather glaring anomalies of structure and detail,” and the complexity of the topic can be appreciated that much more.<sup>2</sup>



Procession of soldiers carrying round shields and spears, from the LH IIIC Mycenaean ‘warrior vase’

A famous example of this temporal complexity is what we might call the ‘Mighty Morphing Shield of Hektor.’ We see this in Scroll 6 of the *Iliad* as a tower shield typical of the Bronze Age (“...the black rim of hide that went round his shield beat against his neck and his ankles”; VI 117–118), but in the very next scroll, Homer describes it in terms that are far more at home in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, when the iconography of warriors and their “kit” had changed significantly (“Then Ajax threw in his turn, and struck the round shield of the son of Priam...”; VII 249–250).<sup>3</sup>

Another potential example of a “inherited myth” is the set of false *ainoi* in Homer’s *Odyssey* known as the “Cretan Lies.” One Classicist has noted that these micronarratives feature a “remarkable contrast of our poet’s vague notion of the topography of the Peloponnese [with] his quite detailed knowledge of Crete.” This is one of a number of points that may mark these false *ainoi* as remnants of an alternative version of the epic – perhaps one in which they were presented as truth rather than fiction.

We shall now continue exploring a bit of that potential truth.

### Seaborne Threats and Refuge Settlements

Seaborne threats to coastal polities are well documented in the Aegean and eastern Mediterranean long before the transition from the Bronze to the Iron Age, around the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century BC. Like all sailing in the ancient Mediterranean, piracy was a seasonal pursuit, and in many cases the same groups seem to have partaken in it on an annual basis. Odysseus himself speaks to this, in a statement that may refer to annual raids over close to a decade:

“...before the sons of the Achaeans set foot on the land of Troy, I had nine times led warriors and swift-faring ships against foreign folk, and great spoil had ever fallen to my hands. Of this I would choose what pleased my mind, and much I afterwards obtained by lot.”

*Odyssey* xiv 229–233

Two further historical texts which will be discussed more fully in a few moments, one a Hittite document and the other a letter from the Amarna archives, speak of “often raiding the land of Cyprus and taking captives” and of sea raiders who “year by year seize villages,” respectively.

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<sup>2</sup> Reece 1994: 157

<sup>3</sup> Images of Warrior Krater and Warrior Vase from Blakolmer 2007 and Tsountas & Manatt 1897, respectively

Additionally, the early 13<sup>th</sup> c. Tanis II rhetorical stela of Ramesses II (r. 1279–1213 BCE), which will also be discussed shortly, refers to a piratical group called the *Sherden* as those “whom none could ever fight against” – a reference which likely means that they, too, had been raiding coastal settlements for several years prior to that point.



*'Sea Peoples' vessel from Medinet Habu, crewed by horn-helmeted warriors carrying round shields, spears, and cut-and-thrust swords.*

These seaborne threats seem to have increased in number and severity as the Bronze Age reached its end. In the Aegean and the East Aegean–West Anatolian Interface, scenes of naval warfare appear for the first time on Mycenaean pottery in Transitional Late Helladic IIIB–C or in LH IIIC Early, while Linear B tablets from the last days of Pylos may – and I stress the *may* here – communicate an effort to coordinate a large-scale defensive action or evacuation in response to a heightened threat from the coast.

Further evidence for a growing threat from the sea at this time can be seen in settlement changes and destructions around the Aegean and eastern Mediterranean, including at Odysseus' fictive home port of Crete, which had been a key node in the international network that characterized the Late Bronze Age in the Eastern Mediterranean. Settlements across Crete appear to have been abandoned or destroyed at the end of the Late Minoan IIIB, while new sites with larger, more concentrated populations were founded in defensible areas of the island, both inland and on coastal hilltops. The inland refuge settlements seem to have been a reaction to a new, or more serious, threat from the sea. The coastal hilltop settlements, on the other hand, were primarily founded on rocky promontories overlooking the water. These not only provided for early warnings of approaching ships, but they may have been used as bases for seaborne raiding of exactly the type claimed by Odysseus in his Cretan Lie.

## Crew Size and Ship Capacity

Now a transition, as we jump into Odysseus' raiding activity itself:

“Nine ships I fitted out, and the host gathered speedily” (*Odyssey* xiv 248)

The nine ships outfitted by Odysseus may seem like a rather ineffective “fleet” at first blush. However, before jumping to that conclusion, it is important to consider two points.

First, we must note that, in the words of Oliver Dickinson, “raiders and pirates in this period tended to operate in relatively small groups, whose basic tactic would be fast sweeps to gather up what could be easily taken, whether human captives, livestock, or portable loot.”<sup>4</sup> This isn't limited to the period under discussion, of course; in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century CE, scholar Philip Gosse defined a so-called “cycle of piracy” that goes from individual beginnings through agglutination to a point

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<sup>4</sup> Dickinson 2006: 48.

at which the confederation of bandits becomes too large to sustain, at which point it either disintegrates into something resembling its initial parts or becomes, in effect, a state navy (or surrogate for one).

Second, and of particularly critical import, we must consider the type and potential capacity of the ships in question here.

The roughly equivalent Late Bronze II and Late Helladic IIIB were periods of, among other things, rapid maritime innovation. The Mycenaean ascendancy in the 14<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries BC (by which I mean ascendancy over the former Minoan power, *not* a Mediterranean “thalassocracy”) was accompanied by the introduction of the Helladic oared galley, a long, narrow, light vessel propelled primarily by rowers and designed specifically for speed.

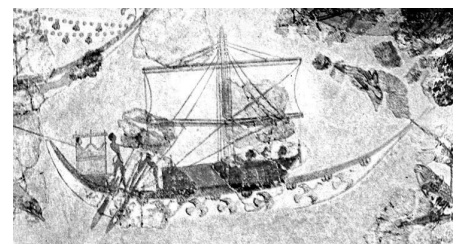


*'Kynos A,' a brail-rigged galley on a LH III C krater from mainland Greece*

The galley represented a true break with the design of earlier ships, like those seen on Minoan seals and on the walls of the West House at Akrotiri. As such, it has rightly been called both “a strategic inflection point in ship architecture” and “the single most significant advance in the weaponry of the Bronze Age Eastern Mediterranean.”<sup>5</sup>

Sometime around 1200 BCE, the revolutionary galley began to be paired with another revolutionary innovation in maritime technology: the brailled rig and loose-footed sail. This system consisted of lines attached to the bottom of a sail and run vertically through rings sewn into the front of the sail, which were also called “fairleads.” From there, they were run over the yard and to the stern. Using this system, sails could be easily raised, lowered, and otherwise manipulated in a manner similar to a set of Venetian blinds.

To this point, sailing craft had relied on large square sails held fast by upper and lower yards. While clearly an advantage over oared propulsion alone, this boom-footed squaresail's use was limited almost entirely to downwind travel. The manipulation of the sail made possible by the addition of brails and removal of the boom, on the other hand, allowed for much greater maneuverability, as well as the ability to sail in directions other than downwind. This sail type would become a mainstay of eastern Mediterranean sailing vessels for the next two millennia.



*Boom-footed Cycladic vessel from the 'ship procession' scene in Room 5 of the West House, Akrotiri*

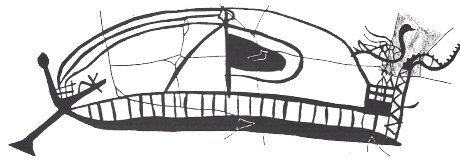
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<sup>5</sup> Wedde 1999: 465

Another advantage of the loose-footed sail was that the removal of the boom provided a better environment for shipboard combat, which seems to have begun around this time, as “warriors would not be obstructed...as they moved about the decks, throwing spears [or] shooting arrows.”<sup>6</sup>

Thus, once outfitted with the brailed rig, the Helladic oared galley became an ideal vessel for rapid travel and lightning-fast raids on coastal settlements.

Coming back once again to crew size and ship capacity: painted pottery provides evidence for the use of *pentekontors*, or galleys rowed by fifty men (twenty-five on each side), as early as the 13<sup>th</sup> century.



Ship with 24 vertical stanchions on a LH III C pyxis from tholos tomb 1 at Tragana

A Late Helladic III C pyxis from Tholos Tomb 1 at Tragana features a ship with twenty-four vertical stanchions, thereby separating the rowers' gallery into twenty-five sections.<sup>7</sup> Stanchions supported the superstructure and partial decking on galleys, while also serving to divide the rower's gallery in ship representations.

A Late Helladic IIIB larnax from Gazi on Crete features a large ship with what appears to be twenty-seven stanchions, which could signify a ship crewed by even more than fifty men. However, the “horizontal ladder” motif used to represent rowers' galleries on Late Helladic ship depictions also seems to have served to address a certain *horror vacui* on the part of Mycenaean artists. Because of this, it may be more likely that the Gazi painter intended to portray a *pentekontor* than a ship with fifty-four oarsmen.

‘Kynos A,’ one of several ship representations found near the Greek mainland site of Livanates (Homeric Kynos), features 19 oars and schematically-rendered rowers. This vessel may also have been intended as a *pentekontor* that the artist was forced to abbreviate due to space constraints.

The *Odyssey* itself attests to vessels crewed by fifty men, with one being attributed specifically to the Phaeacians:

“And chosen youths, two and fifty, went, as he bade, to the shore of the unresting sea. And when they had come down to the ship and to the sea, they drew the black ship down to the deep water, and placed the mast and sail in the black ship, and fitted the oars in the leathern thole-straps, all in due order, and spread the white sail.”

*Odyssey* viii 48–54

The “two and fifty” mentioned here were most likely fifty rowers, a coxswain, and the all-important helmsman. Additionally, in the *Iliad*, Philoctetes is said to have led a fleet of seven *pentekontors*,

<sup>6</sup> Monroe 1990: 87

<sup>7</sup> Tragana image via Wedde 2000 (no. 643)

and Achilles fifty. Crews of roughly this size may also be attested in the so-called “rower tablets” from Pylos, which as noted earlier have been used to suggest a state of emergency there late in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Tablet An 610 records approximately 600 oarsmen, while An 1 lists thirty rowers who are likely being summoned to man a single ship, a *triakontor*. If the ships crewed by the men of An 610 were *pentekontors*, the 600-man force would be enough to man only twelve ships. Even if they were *triakontors*, like the vessel crewed by the An 1 rowers, there would only be enough to fully man twenty ships.

Whether the ships sailed on Odysseus’ Egyptian raid were in fact fifty-oared *pentekontors* or thirty-oared *triakontors*, these vessel types would have carried between 360 and 450 combatants. This force would certainly have been simultaneously *large* enough to carry out a raid on a coastal settlement, and *small* enough to be highly vulnerable to encounters with organized military units – as seen later in Odysseus’ own tale.

Two late 13<sup>th</sup>–early 12<sup>th</sup> c. texts from Ugarit attest to the panic small numbers of ships could create in the inhabitants of coastal targets. The first, RS 20.238, is addressed from King Ammurapi of Ugarit to the King of Alašiya (Cyprus):

“My father, now the ships of the enemy have been coming. They have been setting fire to my cities and have done harm to the land. Doesn’t my father know that all of my infantry and [chariotry] are stationed in Ḫatti, and that all of my ships are stationed in the land of Lukka? They haven’t arrived back yet, so the land is thus prostrate. May my father be aware of this matter. *Now the seven ships of the enemy which have been coming have done harm to us.* Now if other ships of the enemy turn up, send me a report somehow(?) so that I will know.”

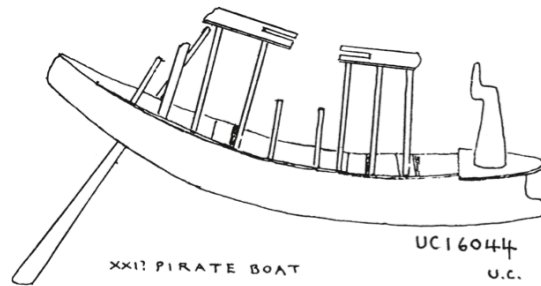
The second, RS 20.18, is addressed from the prefect of Alašiya to King Ammurapi:

“But now, *(the) twenty enemy ships* – even before they would reach the mountain (shore) – have not stayed around but have quickly moved on, and where they have pitched camp we do not know. I am writing you to inform and protect you. Be aware!”

## The Gurob Ship–Cart Model

Physical evidence that came to light semi-recently (in a manner of speaking) may provide further assistance in understanding the ships of this time. I say semi-recently because this evidence actually turned up nearly a century ago – in 1920 – when pieces of a small wooden ship model were discovered in a shallow and (unfortunately) otherwise empty tomb at Gurob, near the Fayum oasis in Middle Egypt.

Incorrectly assembled but perceptively labeled as a “Pirate Boat” by the overseer of its excavation, the incomparable Flinders Petrie, the model was paired in antiquity with a *pavois* for carrying as well as a wheeled cart, signifying its use as a cultic object. Following two brief mentions in print by Petrie, the model was largely forgotten until the turn of the millennium, when it was “rediscovered” in the Petrie Egyptological Museum and republished by in 2013 by Shelley Wachsmann of

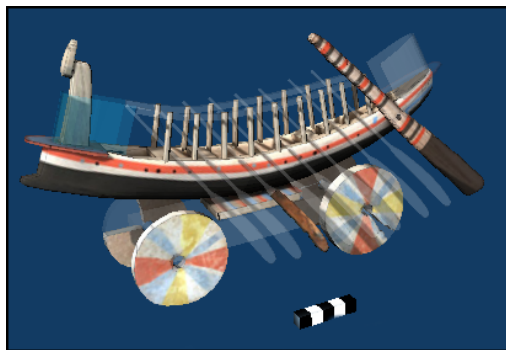


*Gurob ship-cart model as reconstructed by Flinders Petrie in a 1933 publication*

Texas A&M University. Wachsmann, an authority on seafaring in the Bronze Age Mediterranean, saw in this small, broken model a representation of a Helladic oared galley, an important vessel type which came into use at roughly the same time as the tumultuous transition between the Late Bronze and Early Iron Ages in the Aegean and Eastern Mediterranean – a dating supported by radiocarbon testing of the object, which returned a  $2\sigma$  calibrated age range of 1256 to 1054 BC.<sup>8</sup>

## Colors

One of the most remarkable and valuable aspects of the ship-cart model is its remaining pigment.



*Polychromatic reconstruction of the Gurob ship-cart model (Institute for the Visualization of History)*

As can be seen in this reconstruction, made possible by Professor Wachsmann and the Institute for the Visualization of History, the ship-cart model was painted with a base layer of white, over which black (covering the bottom half of the hull) and red (a stripe of which appears just below the caprail and above the oarports) were added.

This preserved polychromatic schema not only makes the model unique among known representations of Helladic ships. It illustrates Homer’s description of the Achaeans’ ships as ‘black’, an epithet that appears 81 times in *Iliad* and *Odyssey* combined. This reference alludes to the coating of hull planking with dark pitch or asphalt, a practice known from at least the Bronze Age. The model’s pigment also aligns with – and helps us visually understand – Homer’s reference to Odysseus’ ships as ‘red-cheeked.’ The hero’s ships are also referred to as ‘purple-cheeked,’ but most noteworthy is the fact that *only* Odysseus’ ships are identified by these “red-” and “purple-cheeked” epithets.

Flanking the model, between the pitch-covered hull and the “red cheeks,” are rows of black dots, almost certainly intended to represent oarports, whose number and spacing make it probable that

<sup>8</sup> Gurob images come from Wachsmann 2013 and <http://www.vizin.org/Gurob/Gurob.html>; for the first published analysis of the Gurob pigments and their implications, see Davis in Wachsmann 2013



the vessel after which the model was patterned was also manned by fifty rowers – harkening back to the *pentekontors* mentioned a few moments ago.

## The Need for Speed (and Stealth)

The combination of small raiding parties and heavily militarized targets (with Egypt serving as an excellent example of the latter) meant that success in piratical endeavors was dependent on a combination of speed, stealth, and – above all – the avoidance of conflict with professional soldiers.

Odysseus’ tale illustrates the catastrophe that could result from contact with regular troops:

“But my comrades, yielding to wantonness, and led on by their own might, straightway set about wasting the fair fields of the men of Egypt; and they carried off the women and little children, and slew the men; and the cry came quickly to the city. Then, hearing the shouting, the people came forth at break of day, and the whole plain was filled with footmen, and chariots and the flashing of bronze. But Zeus who hurls the thunderbolt cast an evil panic upon my comrades, and none had the courage to hold his ground and face the foe; for evil surrounded us on every side. So then they slew many of us with the sharp bronze, and others they led up to their city alive, to work for them perforce.”

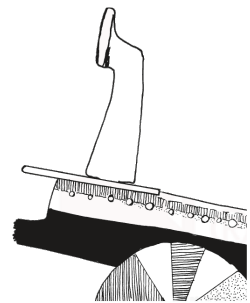
*Odyssey* xiv 262–272

Thus, both success in piratical endeavors and the very survival of raiding parties required not only the adoption of new sailing technology, but also the development of tactics that could satisfy such a life-and-death need for stealth and celerity. One such tactic was the deliberate beaching of vessels, which allowed attackers to disembark and conduct their raid as quickly as possible. The fastest way to land, and disembark from, a vessel is to row it bow first directly up onto the beach.

Keel extensions seen on some depictions of Helladic oared galleys, on the Sea Peoples vessels in the naval battle at Medinet Habu, and on the Gurob ship-cart model may have served as beaching aids, allowing raiders’ ships to sail more easily up onto land for the purpose of facilitating a rapid disembarkation. Such a technique is described elsewhere in *Odyssey*, when the Phaeacians, returning Odysseus to Ithaca, beach their vessel for the purpose of quickly offloading their human cargo:

“The ship, hard-driven, ran up onto the beach for as much as half her length, such was the force the hands of the oarsmen gave her.”

*Odyssey* xiii 113–115



*Bow keel extension on the Gurob ship-cart model*

## A Growing Threat in the Eastern Mediterranean

Traces of the sea raiders referenced in the aforementioned texts from the last days of Ugarit can be found in several other Late Bronze Age literary sources, as well. The Hittites in particular, who were not historically inclined toward maritime affairs, seem to have been forced to look to the sea with more interest in the waning years of the Late Bronze Age, possibly as a result of the threat posed by an increase in coastal raiding.

These raiders may be associated with (or seen as a precursor to) the ‘Sea Peoples’ of Ramesside Egyptian fame – heterogeneous, shifting coalitions of foreigners, whose name comes from the Egyptian Pharaoh Merneptah’s (1213–1202 BC) Great Karnak Inscription (ca. 1207 BC) and from the writings of French Egyptologist Gaston Maspero, and which included the aforementioned *Sherden* among their various members.

Two further texts especially stand out in this regard.

In the first, the Hittite king writes to the prefect of Ugarit about the *Šikala* “who live on ships,” and requests that a Ugaritian who had been taken captive by them be sent to Ḫattuša so that the king can question him about this people and their homeland:

“...I, His Majesty, had issued him an order concerning Ibnadušu, whom the people from *Šikala* [LÚ.MEŠ KUR.URU.Ši-ka-la-iu-ú] – who live on ships – had abducted.

Herewith I send Nirga’ili, who is *kartappu* with me, to you. And you, send Ibnadušu, whom the people from *Šikala* had abducted, to me. I will question him about the land *Šikala*, and afterwards he may leave for Ugarit again.”

The *Šikala* have been connected to two groups of Sea Peoples from the records of Merneptah and Ramesses III: the *Shekelesh* and the *Sikiḷ* or ‘*Tjeker*’. The *Shekelesh* appear alongside the *Sherden* in the aforementioned Great Karnak Inscription and the Athribis Stela, two accounts of Merneptah’s battle against an invading coalition of Libyans and Sea Peoples. The *Shekelesh* also appear in Ramesses III’s records at Medinet Habu, while the *Sherden* seem to be mentioned in their place in Ramesses’ posthumous Great Harris Papyrus. The *Sikiḷ/Tjeker*, on the other hand, are included in both of Ramesses III’s major accounts.

The second text, attributed to the last Hittite king, Šuppiluliuma II (ca. 1207–1178 BC), mentions a series of three naval skirmishes against the “ships of Alašiya,” followed by a land battle, presumably against the same people he had fought at sea:

“The ships of Alašiya met me in the sea three times for battle, and I smote them; and I seized the ships and set fire to them in the sea.

But when I arrived on dry land(?), the enemies from Alašiya came in multitude against me for battle. I [fought] them, and [.....] me [.....]...”

The latter is reminiscent of Ramesses III's (1183–1152 BC) claims to have fought land and sea battles against migratory Sea Peoples, which would have taken place during this same chronological timeframe. Though almost always ascribed to Ramesses III's eighth year (1175 BC), these migratory land and sea invasions were important enough to be mentioned in many different contexts in the pharaoh's "mansion of a million years" at Medinet Habu in Thebes. A particularly relevant portion of Ramesses III's Great Inscription of Year 8 discusses this:

"Those who reached my frontier [on land], their seed is not, their heart and their soul are finished forever and ever. Those who came forward together on the sea, the full flame was in front of them at the river-mouths, while a stockade of lances surrounded them on the shore. They were dragged in, enclosed, and prostrated on the beach, killed, and made into heaps from tail to head. Their ships and their goods were as if fallen into the water..."

This similarity in chronology and narrative raises the question of whether Šuppiluliuma was facing repeated waves of raiders or migrant warriors, while clearly reinforcing the aforementioned threat felt from the previously distant Mediterranean coast during the Hittite Empire's last days. Rather than belonging to the Alašiyā state, it is likely that the vessels against which Šuppiluliuma fought were called "ships of Alašiyā" because they had either sailed eastward via, or launched from a captured portion of, Cyprus. While the island had long been a target of seaborne raids, textual evidence also supports the use of Cyprus as a base for launching raids against coastal polities in the eastern Mediterranean in the Late Bronze Age, much as Odysseus claims to have done from Crete in his tale to Eumaios.

## Αἴγυπτόνδε

Two more relevant passages from the *Odyssey*:

"And then to Egypt did my spirit bid me voyage with my godlike comrades, when I had fitted out my ships with care."

*Odyssey* xiv 245–247

"But Zeus, son of Cronos, brought all to naught – so, I ween, was his good pleasure – who sent me forth with roaming pirates to go to Egypt, a far voyage, that I might meet my ruin; and in the river Aegyptus I moored my curved ships."

*Odyssey* xiv 424–427

The polities of the Aegean, Anatolia, and the Levantine coast were not the only victims of seaborne attackers during the Late Bronze Age and in the years surrounding the Late Bronze–Iron I transition.

Evidence from the mid–14<sup>th</sup> c. BC onward shows that the land of the pharaohs bore no special immunity to maritime marauding, either. The historical precedents for Odysseus' raid on Egypt

can be seen both *directly*, in accounts of coastal attacks, and *indirectly*, in records of defensive measures taken to combat such assaults. An example of the latter comes from an inscription of Amenhotep son of Hapu, a public official under Amenhotep III (1388–1351 BC), which refers to the need to secure the Nile Delta against a seaborne threat:

“I placed troops at the heads of the way(s) to turn back the foreigners in their places. The two regions were surrounded with a watch scouting for the Sand–rangers. *I did likewise at the heads of the river–mouths, which were closed under my troops except to the troops of royal marines.*”

This stationing of marines at the “river–mouths” reinforces the vulnerability of raiding parties to encounters with organized military forces.

Additionally, in a letter to Akhenaten (1351–1334 BC) from the Amarna archive, the King of Alashiya responds to an accusation of Cypriot involvement in a raid on Egypt by recounting annual raids carried out by “men of Lukki” against his own villages (EA 38):

“Why, my brother, do you say such a thing to me, “Does my brother not know this?” As far as I am concerned, I have done nothing of the sort. Indeed, *men of Lukki, year by year, seize villages in my own country.*”

### “He Has Destroyed the Warriors of the Great Green...”

Further evidence for such threats can be found in the formulaic Aswan stela of Ramesses II’s (1279–1213 BC) second year, in which he claims among other conquests to have “destroyed the warriors of the Great Green (Sea),” so that Lower Egypt can “spend the night sleeping peacefully.”

The Egyptians first give a specific name to these troublesome sea raiders in the aforementioned Tanis II rhetorical stela, one of twelve “triumph–hymn” stelai originally erected at Ramesses II’s capital of Pi–Ramesse and later transshipped to the eastern Delta city of Tanis. The stela tells of the “*Sherden...whom none could withstand*” who “sailed in warships from the midst of the Sea,” and claims the pharaoh defeated and imprisoned them:

“(As for) the Sherden of rebellious mind, whom none could ever fight against, who came bold–[hearted, they sailed in], in warships from the midst of the Sea, those whom none could withstand;

[He plundered them by the victories of his valiant arm, they being carried off to Egypt] – (even by) King of S & N Egypt, Usimare Setepenre, Son of Re, Ramesses II, given life like Re.”

This recalls the catastrophe that befell Odysseus’ raiding party at the hands of the pharaoh’s soldiers, cited in part above:

“But Zeus who hurls the thunderbolt cast an evil panic upon my comrades, and none had the courage to hold his ground and face the foe; for evil surrounded us on

every side. So then they slew many of us with the sharp bronze, and others they led up to their city alive, to work for them perforce. But in my heart Zeus himself put this thought—I would that I had rather died and met my fate there in Egypt, for still was sorrow to give me welcome. Straightway I put off from my head my well-wrought helmet, and the shield from off my shoulders, and let the spear fall from my hand, and went toward the chariot horses of the king. I clasped, and kissed his knees, and he delivered me, and took pity on me, and, setting me in his chariot, took me weeping to his home. Verily full many rushed upon me with their ashen spears, eager to slay me, for they were exceeding angry. But he warded them off, and had regard for the wrath of Zeus, the stranger's god, who above all others hath indignation at evil deeds.”

*Odyssey* xiv 268–284

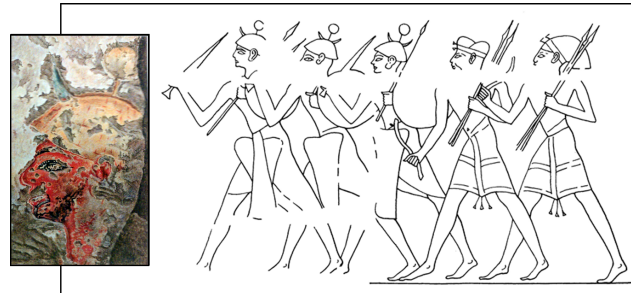
### Life, Prosperity and Health in the Land of the Pharaohs

“There then I stayed seven years, and much wealth did I gather among the Egyptians, for all men gave me gifts.”

*Odyssey* xiv 285–286

So why would a model of a Helladic oared galley be buried in a Middle Egyptian tomb, and to what degree does the connection to Odysseus still hold?

The Tanis II rhetorical stela marks the first of many Ramesside claims to have defeated and captured named maritime foes. Despite Ramesses II's typical bombast, though, not all of those *Sherden* who were “carried off to Egypt” languished in prison or spent the rest of their days serving the state as slave laborers, as the survivors of Odysseus' fictional raiding party were said to have done.



*Sherden participating in a procession at Medinet Habu, Ramesses III's 'mansion of a million years'*

Rather, like Odysseus himself, they appear to have been welcomed into Egypt and allowed to profit from the employment of their unique skills, which were utilized in the direct service of the pharaoh. Already in the fifth year of Ramesses II's reign, for example, *Sherden* appear as members of the Pharaonic guard at the battle of Qidš (1275 BC) against the Hittite forces of Muwatallis II – surely a place of high honor among soldiers, as well as one requiring great trust.

The place of honor afforded those *Sherden* who gave allegiance to Egypt can be seen in §75 of the Great Harris Papyrus, wherein Ramesses III addresses “the officials and leaders of the land, the infantry, the chariotry, the *Sherden*, the many bowmen, and all the souls of Egypt.” Whatever their

military role by this point, it is noteworthy that *Sherden* is the only *ethnikon* employed in the pharaoh's address to his people, the rest of whom are grouped solely by rank, title, and occupation.

Like the Odysseus of the Cretan Lie, the importance of the *Sherden* within Egyptian military and society also earned them significant material benefits. This can be seen in particular in the Wilbour Papyrus, a land registry from the reign of Ramesses V covering portions of the Fayum region of Middle Egypt – including Gurob.

If the Gurob ship–cart model belonged to one of these *Sherden* or their descendant, as Wachsmann has proposed, then members of this group may have been sailing Helladic oared galleys as they plundered the coasts of the eastern Mediterranean – a fact that would tie them even more closely to the culture that spawned Homer's *Odyssey*.

Among those listed in this text as land owners and occupiers are 109 *Sherden*, “standard–bearers of the *Sherden*,” and “retainers of the *Sherden*.” For some, occupations are noted, such as “herdsman” and, most intriguingly, “tender of crocodiles”(!). Nearly  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the plots of land assigned to *Sherden* in the Wilbour Papyrus are a little over three acres in size. This allotment is commensurate with priests, standard bearers, stablemasters, and others of similarly high rank. The tracts allotted to soldiers, on the other hand, were usually around two acres. The Wilbour Papyrus also tells us that these were not just temporary holdings – they could be (and were) passed down through generations – quite the significant reward!

It would be far from surprising if *Sherden* fighters, like Odysseus, also accumulated significant material wealth in addition to land. Papyrus Anastasi I, a text from the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> dynasties that discusses proper preparation and provisioning for a mission to Canaan, lists 520 *Sherden* among a mixed force of 5,000 soldiers. This suggests that, by midway through Ramesses II's reign, they had already become a standard component of Egypt's northern expeditionary forces. With regular exposure to warfare most likely came regular opportunities for plunder, which could be both taken individually and divided among the conquering forces after a successful siege or battle – much in the way that *Sherden* pirates and Odysseus' raiding crews likely divided the booty after their own successful raids:

“Of this I would choose what pleased my mind, and much I afterwards obtained by lot. Thus my house straightway grew rich, and thereafter I became one feared and honored among the Cretans.”

*Odyssey* xiv 232–234

Rather than being a benefit of Egyptian generosity, then, it seems likely that the wealth Odysseus characterizes here as being amassed via gifts from the Egyptians was likewise gained through a division of plunder from further raids in which he was a (now–legitimate) participant.

## Conclusion

The “master myth” of the *Odyssey* is a tapestry woven from many fascinating micronarratives, each of which has its own individual grounding (or lack thereof) in historical truth. Though the stories considered here – those told by Odysseus to Eumaios and Antinoos, respectively – are portrayed as fiction within the Homeric macronarrative, several of their elements have precedent in archaeological and literary records dating to the Late Bronze Age and the Late Bronze–Iron I transition (LH IIIB–IIIC).

To reiterate, this is not to say that the Homeric epics in their classical form were composed in, or are entirely reflective of, this period. After all, whatever the date of “Homer,” countless elements of both *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are clearly anachronistic in their fictive setting, or are wholly appropriate to various periods within the first millennium BC. However, a later date of composition and the reflection of geography and events that fit accurately in an earlier age (in this case, in the fictive period of the epic’s setting) are not mutually exclusive realities.

Further, Odysseus’ fictitious experiences have a remarkable analogue in a very real and very specific group of sea raiders, the “*Sherden of the Sea*,” who set upon Egypt in their ships around the same time Odysseus claims to have carried out his ill–fated raid. Their story is extraordinarily similar to the tales that make up Odysseus’ tales to Eumaios and Antinoos: years of successful maritime raiding, an ill–fated attempt to raid the Nile Delta in oared galleys, and a subsequent sojourn in Egypt, during which they were valued as a part of society and made prosperous for their efforts.

The two stories diverge as Odysseus’ seven year stay in Egypt draws to a close: while the *nostos* that makes up the *Odyssey*’s macronarrative dictates that its hero move on, those *Sherden* who settled in Egypt were able to create a new home for themselves in the land of the pharaohs, complete with wives, children, and land they could pass down through generations.

And it may be someone much like these immigrants (or their descendants) who owned and was buried with the remarkable polychromatic ship-cart model from Gurob, which stands now as one of our most unique – and most intriguing – links between the worlds of the Aegean, Egypt, and the Sea Peoples, as well as the world presented in the Homeric epics.

Thank you.

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