HOMERIC WARRIORS AND BATTLES: TRYING TO RESOLVE OLD PROBLEMS

To the Memory of Walter Donlan

ABSTRACT: Homeric battle descriptions have long eluded satisfactory interpretation. Major problems include the mode of fighting, the role of commoners in battle, the extraordinary duration of battles lasting entire days, and the use of chariots. A better understanding is possible by taking the poet's narrative techniques seriously (such as alternation between panoramic and scenic perspectives or common use of formulaic or type scenes). The latter, for example, help explain the "epic overextension" of battles by stringing together "normal battles," corresponding to a familiar reality, and chaotic-fantastic flight and aristeia scenes, where gods and chariots are much more prominent than elsewhere.

I.

Walter Donlan pursued a lifelong quest: to understand fully what kind of society is reflected in Homer's epics—a historical society, the product of poetic fiction, or a mixture of both?—and, if this society is historical, when to date it. He and I were fellow-explorers on this path. After Moses Finley, nobody has contributed more than he did to clarifying social concepts in the world of the epics. Unlike Finley, Donlan often started with a careful examination of the meaning and uses of specific words and concepts, and then tried to explain such usage by applying historical and anthropological insights. The recent republication of The Aristocratic Ideal (by now a classic and still most valuable) contains a number of his articles; whether dealing with the elite, authority, power, the relations between chiefs and followers,

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1 This is a slightly revised version of a paper offered on October 28, 2006, in Irvine at a Memorial Conference for Walter Donlan. Parts of this paper were published in a more detailed version in German in K. Raaffläub, "Homerische Kriege, Protohoplisten und die Polis: Schritte zur Lösung alter Probleme," in B. Meissner, O. Schmitt, and M. Sommer, eds., Krieg, Gesellschaft, Institutionen. Beiträge zu einer vergleichenden Kriegsgeschichte (Berlin 2005) 229–66. Translations of Homer are by R. Lattimore, The Iliad of Homer (Chicago 1951), and S. Lombardo, Homer, Iliad, with an introduction by S. Murnaghan (Indianapolis 1997).


pre-state communities, and economic aspects, or explaining specific episodes in the epics, they remain unsurpassed in their thoroughness, originality, and judicious conclusions. Other articles, not included in that collection or more recent, are equally important; I think of an early piece on “Reciprocities in Homer,” resumed in a more recent study on “Political Reciprocity in Dark Age Greece,” a paper on “The Social Groups of Dark Age Greece,” a chapter on “Homeric Economy,” or one on “Achilles the Ally,” among many others. Nor should we forget Donlan’s crucial contributions to the two successful Greek history textbooks he co-authored with three colleagues.

Another article, on “Kin-Groups in the Homeric Epics,” was not published during his lifetime. The conference volume in which it was to appear contains only a two-paragraph summary. I presume it would have become an important component as well of the book on which Donlan was working for many years: From Tribe to Polis, in his latest curriculum vitae retitled as Society and Culture in Dark Age Greece. He was not trained as an anthropologist but, like Finley, felt that such a book could not be written without profound familiarity with this discipline. So he worked his way into the relevant literature and produced one important article after another—but, sadly, the book remains unfinished.

One of the issues in “epic society” with which I have been struggling partly overlaps with Donlan’s interests. It concerns Homeric warfare. The present paper offers, in honor and memory of my fellow-warrior, some insights that I hope will advance our understanding of at least some aspects of this thorny complex of problems. More...

4 Donlan’s publications up to 1999 are listed in Donlan (above, n.3) 359–64. His 2002 article (“Achilles the Ally,” Arethusa 35 [2002] 155–72) and the 2004 book cited in the next note are the only publications not mentioned there.


7 On Finley and anthropology, see M. I. Finley, “Anthropology and the Classics,” in Finley, The Use and Abuse of History (London and New York, 1975) ch. 6; and the editors’ introduction in Finley, Economy and Society in Ancient Greece, ed. B. D. Shaw and R. P. Saller (New York 1982) xxiv. On the application of anthropology to elucidate Homer’s world, see Finley (above, n.2) 9: The World of Odysseus (above, n.2) offers “a picture of a society, based on a close reading of the Iliad and Odyssey, supported by study of other societies to help elucidate obscure points in the poems. The social institutions and values make up a coherent system, and, from our present outlook, a very alien one, but neither an improbable nor an unfamiliar one in the experience of modern anthropology.” See also Hornblower’s comments, in Finley (above n.2) xvi–xxii: “Above all, it was . . . the first really sophisticated application of scientific modern Anthropology . . . to the ancient world” (xvi).

8 On Homeric warfare, see esp. J. Latacz, Kampfparänese, Kampfdarstellung und Kampfwirklichkeit in der Ilias, bei Kallinos und Tyrtaios (Munich 1977); van Wees, Status Warriors (above, n.2); van Wees “The Homeric Way of War: The Iliad
specifically, I will discuss Homer's battle descriptions and try first to clarify the role of the masses of commoners in such battles and then to explain the battles' extraordinary duration. The latter in turn helps us understand the role of chariots in Homeric battle.

I deliberately ignore here the aspects of outside influences and possible Indo-European traditions. Interminable battles between immense armies, of course, are standard components of heroic epic all over the world.9 My questions today concern the way the poet actually describes these battles (whatever influences or traditions stand behind them) in order to make them palatable to audiences in his specific time and world.10

II.

To begin with some preliminary remarks on methodology,11 we need to take seriously that the epics are heroic songs that focus on the deeds and conflicts of heroes who supposedly lived in a "Heroic Age." This age, visible as well in Hesiod's "Myth of the Ages,"12 was conceptualized as distant in time and different in character: for example, humans interacted directly with the gods and were much taller and stronger than they were in the singer's or poet's present. Hence he stylizes them as "superhuman" by various means of "heroic exaggeration." He equips them with all those items that historical


10 Comparison, for example, with the Mahabharata might prove greatly useful here.

11 Additional methodological principles will be discussed below (at n.26 and n.40).

memory vaguely remembered as typical of a long bygone era, such as bronze weapons, the use of chariots in battle, the famous boar’s tusk helmet.\textsuperscript{13} And he places them in events (especially the Trojan War) that the ancients generally considered historical and which, as the mighty ruins of Troy and Mycene suggested, also belonged to a distant era of greatness.\textsuperscript{14}

Exaggerated and fantastic elements are a firm component of heroic poetry. Ajax’s shield, for example, covers the whole person from head to toe, is round, thick, covered with several layers of oxhide and bronze. Clearly, such a shield cannot have existed, for a man-high shield cannot be round and covered by bronze: it would be far too wide and heavy. As van Wees suggests, it is to be explained not, as is usually assumed, by an amalgamation of the Mycenaean tower-shield with the round hoplite-shield, but by the poet’s description of fantastically large and heavy arms of fantastically large and strong heroes. We remember that even Patroklos is unable to handle Achilles’ tree-like spear.\textsuperscript{15} Such heroic exaggeration is visible in many areas: the heroes’ fantastic wealth, the huge numbers (of fighters at Troy, of slaves or herds belonging to the leaders), and the “epic” time frames (ten years of war at Troy, ten more of Odysseus’ nostos). These elements can usually be identified rather easily and lifted off without loss of substance. Combined with a marked archaizing tendency, their purpose is to create “epic distance,” the illusion of a heroic world that is clearly separated from the poet’s present.\textsuperscript{16}

For my purposes it is important that similar effects are visible also in the battle descriptions: in the numbers of fighters, in the amazing aristeiai (extended brilliant solo-performances) of individual heroes, and in the duration of battles that last with undiminished intensity from morning to evening.

Now, such heroic exaggeration affects only the description of the major heroes, the leaders. Their qualities, deeds, and conflicts

\textsuperscript{13} I. M. Shear, \textit{Tales of Heroes: The Origins of the Homeric Texts} (Crestwood, N.Y., 2000) has a very different view on all this.


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are foregrounded and strongly emphasized. Yet they are not isolated from their social environment. Hence we can correct heroic distortion by focusing on the background, the social context in and against which the heroes act and react, excel and fail. As Donlan demonstrated impressively, the poetic depiction of this background is sufficiently consistent and realistic to permit the reconstruction of an historical society which we can fit into the social development of early Greece:

The society depicted in Homer may be, as some maintain, a fictional construct; if so, it is an internally logical one, whose complexities, throughout 28,000 lines of epic verse, form an intelligible and coherent pattern. To that extent Homeric society is "real"; and it is more likely that such a social structure existed in space and time than that it was made up, or that it is an amalgam of institutions concocted from bits and pieces of social background extending over a period of four (or more) centuries.17

Donlan initially followed Finley in dating this society early, well in the Dark Ages. Most scholars now prefer the eighth or, at the latest, early seventh century. As Hermann Strasburger observed, such a realistic background is indispensable to enable the poet's audiences to identify with the dilemmas of the otherwise superhuman heroes.18 Similarly, it is helpful to pay attention to issues that are not emphasized or foregrounded but mentioned in passing, as side remarks or in etiological stories. Presumably, these were taken for granted by singers and audiences.19


Using these methods, I have tried to demonstrate elsewhere that the world of Homer is a world of early poleis that are firmly embedded in the heroes’ thoughts and actions.\textsuperscript{20} Besides the leaders and councils of elders, in these poleis the assembly plays a communally indispensable role as well.\textsuperscript{21} Whether it consists of all free men or only part of them, and if the latter, what criteria determine inclusion and exclusion, we do not know. But epic assemblies, although lacking initiative and dominated by the leaders, take place not only in peace (as on Ithaca or among the Phaeacians) but also in war (whatever its form and purpose).\textsuperscript{22} Whenever a decision needs to be made, the men involved convene for an agorē. Given the assembly’s importance in communal life, its members cannot have been insignificant either. What was the foundation of their communal significance? Two answers suggest themselves: they were free landowning farmers and they were soldiers. Both aspects are evident about a century later in the first polis-constitutions in Sparta (the “Great Rheta”) and Athens (Solon’s “timocracy”).\textsuperscript{23} Unfortunately, Homer says nothing about the social background of his nonelite fighters, and he largely ignores aspects of the agrarian economy—probably because such matters were not heroic enough. Hesiod’s focus on the world of small farmers could have balanced this if he had not in turn paid little attention to war.\textsuperscript{24} Hence we need to examine the role of nonelite masses in Homeric warfare.

III.

For a long time scholars maintained that epic battles were decided almost exclusively by the heroes with their superior equipment, training, and strength, while the masses stayed in the background and mostly served as victims of elite heroics. If so, why were they mobilized at all? This raises three questions. Can we demonstrate the


\textsuperscript{21} K.-J. Holkeskamp, “Agorai bei Homer,” in W. Eder and Holkeskamp, eds., Volk und Verfassung im vorhellenistischen Griechenland (Stuttgart 1997) 1–19; Raaf (above, n.19); F. Ruzé, Délibération et pouvoir dans la cité grecque de Nestor à Socrate (Paris 1997) pt. I.

\textsuperscript{22} Hence in the Iliad both Achaians and Trojans meet frequently for assemblies; so do Odysseus and his companions on their way home from Troy in the Odyssey.


\textsuperscript{24} War is a fact (e.g., in the “Myth of the Ages” or the description of the just and unjust cities in Op. 99–201, 227–247 or in the list of the offspring of Eris in Theog. 226–232), but not part of the Hesiodic farmer’s primary concerns; see H. T. Wade-Gery, “Hesiod,” Phoenix 3 (1949) 91–92, who observes that this is as remarkable as if a modern author omitted love.
presence of the masses in the battle (and not only on the battlefield)? Do they matter, that is, do they influence the outcome of the battle? And, if they do matter, does this have any impact on battle formations and tactics? Thanks to insights gained by research over the last thirty years, most scholars—although not necessarily accepting this as historical reality—now agree that Homer, while focusing on the elite and heroic "front-fighters" (promachoi), indeed depicts a form of mass fighting in which nonelite soldiers participate in a significant role.25 The poet alludes to this only occasionally, but these allusions suffice to remind the audiences of the larger picture.

To explain this, I refer to one of Homer's narrative principles: a frequent change of position and perspective. As Latacz and van Wees have shown, in a typical battle narrative panoramic overviews or summaries (taken with a "wide-angle lens") take turns with detailed descriptions (close-up views "through a telephoto lens").26 Narratologists distinguish between panoramic and scenic perspectives.27 The poet focuses on the duels and deeds of the great heroes but reminds his audience frequently that these are only part of a huge battle along an extended battle line.

For example, in the first battle between the Achaian and Trojan armies in book 4 we find the following sequence:28 general introduction (4.422–445), panoramic overview (446–456), scenic details of a series of duels (457–470a), summary and overview (470b–472), more close-up shots (473–504), summary (505–507), then (after a brief interruption by a battle exhortation) more duels (517–532a), summary (532b–535a), details (535b–537), summary (538), and finally the preliminary result of these fights (539–544), leading into book 5 with Diomedes' aristeia.

Duels and mass fighting are juxtaposed but happen at the same time. Mass fighting consists of many duels. Audiences used to such patterns of paratactic narrative and constant change of perspective would have had no problems following and understanding. We read the Iliad in a book, leaf forward and backward, and find contradictions. Yet at any given time, the poet and his audiences could only be at one point in the narrative and observe one event. Specific pointers and changes of perspective helped them keep in mind that the spectacular duels were only part of a much larger panorama of battle.

26 Latacz (above, n.8) esp. 68–95; van Wees, "Homerica Way of War" (above, n.8).
28 Following Latacz (above, n.8) 82–90, summarized by de Jong and Nünnlist (above, n.27) 77.
According to the opinion that seems most prominent today, that of van Wees, Homeric battles unfold as follows:\textsuperscript{29}

The heroic army is composed of many small and loosely organized bands of warriors, held together by personal ties of subordination and companionship. Battles are fought in open order; at any particular moment the majority of men remain at a distance from the enemy, while a substantial minority of individual "front-line warriors" venture closer to fight with missiles or hand-to-hand. There is much mobility back and forth as every man in the army is expected to join combat at least occasionally, and even the bravest heroes retire from battle every so often.

This picture, van Wees concludes, "accounts for the greater part of the narrative"; it is supported by parallels found in "primitive" warfare, even if Homer, in fact, enriches it by the use of heavy armor, chariots, and massed formations.

I disagree on several aspects of this reconstruction. To explain why, I need to mention a small selection of the evidence offered by the epics. For example, many battle similes reflect the clash of whole armies and their engagement in intense hand-to-hand fighting.\textsuperscript{30}

The images invoked concern mass battles, not hit-and-run attacks by individual fighters who step forward from otherwise clearly separated battle formations. The visual impressions and immense noise conveyed by these similes could never be generated by intermittent duels of individual soldiers. It is useful to remember here that even the historian Polybius, himself an experienced general, felt reminded by some of Homer's images of the hoplite phalanx he knew well in his own time.\textsuperscript{31}

Next, often all (aollees) Trojans or Achaians attack or resist, and they fight in masses (homiladon). A good example is offered by the Myrmidons whom Achilles' anger has condemned to long inactivity and who in book 16 excel in a collective aristeia which parallels that of their leader Patroklos. In their eagerness to fight they are compared with wolves (16.157–166): comparison with wild animals is usually reserved for leaders. They are mustered in their units of fifty ships with fifty followers (hetairoi) each (168–197). Achilles addresses them ("Myrmidons!" 198–209) and fills each single one (hekastos) with courage and eagerness (210–211). The simile of a tightly built wall illustrates their compact formation, that of a swarm of wasps their aggressiveness (212–217, 257–267). Then Patroklos

\textsuperscript{29} Van Wees, "Homeric Warfare" (above, n.8) 690.


\textsuperscript{31} Polyb. 18.29.5–6, referring to \textit{II} 13.131–133 = 16.215–217.
exhorts them: “Myrmidons, companions (hetairoi) of Achilles! Be men now, dear friends, remember your furious valour; we must bring honor to Peleus’ son, far the greatest of the Argives, . . . as are we, the followers fighting close to him (anchevachoi therapontes)” (269–272). This exhortation, addressing all Myrmidons as hetairoi and therapontes of Achilles and in this sense as equals of Patroklos, fills every man (hekastos) with even more eagerness: all together (ololees) they attack the Trojans, and the battle begins, as I have described it earlier: panoramic views taking turns with individual duels, followed by flight, chaos, Patroklos’ aristeia, and eventually his death.

There is never a doubt that each single man among the hetairoi who form the heroes’ contingents, counts and is taken seriously. Laoi (the men) and hetairoi are often identical (e.g., 16.393–396, 495–501). Each must feel responsible for the success of the group. Hence calls for help during the battle are addressed not only to the leaders but also to all laoi. One might object that this is contradicted by Odysseus’ famous scolding of the “men of the people” in the Thersites episode in book 2: “Sit still and listen to what others tell you, to those who are better men than you, you skulker and coward and thing of no account whatever in battle or council!” (200–202). But, like van Wees, I consider this an outburst of elite ideology, not social reality.32

In a much discussed passage (2.362–368), Nestor proposes to Agamemnon to muster the army by phulai and phratries, because these units (however they should be interpreted) are intended to help each other.33 Then “you will see who among your leaders is a coward (kakos), and who among your men (laoi), and who is brave,” because in the fighting of such units (kata spheas) it is easier to observe this. Mutual support is thus recognized as crucial, and this concerns the laoi no less than the hégemones. In stark contrast to the Trojans, whose allies speak many languages and thus twitter like birds, the Achaian march into battle silently, “breathing valour, stubbornly minded each in his heart to stand by the others” (3.8–9; see also 4.429–438). To be sure, normally the best fighters—usually the elite leaders—form the first line, while the weaker ones are placed in the middle so that they must fight even against their will (4.300), but apparently even those fighters “in the middle” matter! In a critical situation fighters trade arms and armor so that the best fighters can use the best equipment (14.370–384). This is crucial: it indicates not only that each fighter brings his own equipment but also that the best fighters do not necessarily own the best equipment and are thus not a priori identical with the elite! (When I mentioned this to Donlan, he exclaimed: “That’s a clincher. That seals it!”)

32 Van Wees, Status Warriors (above, n.2) 82–83.
Nobody is dispensable; hence statements like, “We all know how to fight” (13.223); “The effort even of sad fighters combined turns into courage” (13.237); “Friends! You who are outstanding among the Argives, you who are in the middle, and you who are of low account: even if not all of us are alike in battle, there is work for all now!” (12.269–271).

All this is confirmed by the methods of distributing the booty: it is brought into the middle (es meson), into the public and common space (to koinon). The leaders receive their share of honor (geras), and then the rest is distributed evenly (perhaps by lot) among all warriors, by the community, that is, presumably by the leaders in the name of the community. Hence even lowly Thersites can boast of all the treasures “we, the Achaians” have given Agamemnon (2.226–228), and Achilles complains: “The share is the same for the man who holds back, the same if he fights hard. We are all held in a single honour, the brave with the weaklings” (9.318–319).

One passage in particular seems to anticipate the spirit of the later phalanx (17.354–365). Fighting about Patroklos’ body, the Achaians form a dense line. Ajax tells them neither to jump forward out of the ranks nor to recede. The fighting is fierce on both sides, the bodies pile up, but, says the poet, “far fewer [of the Achaians] went down, since they ever remembered always to stand massed and beat sudden death from each other” (364–365). Scholars usually explain such compact formations as emergency measures imposed on the fighters by a crisis. True, but the poet describes similar formations also when there is no specific crisis. Moreover, often a spear misses its target but kills the next man, which makes sense only in a relatively compact, not a very loose, formation.

Of course, I am far from claiming that Homer’s warriors already fight in a hoplite phalanx. They are equipped with the panoply but it retains anomalies (for example, a shorter and lighter throwing spear next to the heavier thrusting spear) and it will be developed further over the next century to meet the needs of specific phalanx fighting.

The Homeric battle line is pretty dense in front but seems to leave some space between the ranks. Hence the comparison with waves in the surf; hence, too, spears thrown too high stick in the ground behind their targets, and leaders circulating from one wing to the other to bring assistance find a free alley there. Missile and hand-to-hand

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Combat are still combined, which requires that, at least intermittently, there be enough space between the battle lines to throw a spear; yet this space does not need to be wide because, as modern experiments triggered by the Troy movie have shown, a thrown spear can have fatal impact only from a short distance. But this suffices to explain the “hanging back” and “storming forward” of individual fighters that is often mentioned in battle descriptions.37 For the same reason, missile specialists still play a prominent role: light-armed archers and slingers appear among the heavily armed infantrymen and take cover under their shields.38

Even if, therefore, the phalanx is still far from fully developed, it seems crucial to me that mass fighting plays a much more important and permanent role than Van Wees admits. I add here that the hoplite dominates in pictorial representations, that in all literary descriptions the hoplites enjoy primacy, despite the presence of light-armed fighters, that the earliest polis constitutions establish hoplite republics, that military deposits in tombs and dedications in sanctuaries are virtually all part of the hoplite equipment, etc.39 From the mid- or late seventh century, at the latest, it is certain that the hoplites are predominant, after the elite, in terms of military significance and social prestige. Overall, Homer’s evidence suggests that this was the case already in the late eighth or early seventh century.

Even the “commoners” among Homer’s warriors, then, were “proto-hoplites” and played a significant role in battle. They helped determine the outcome of battles, and this already began to influence formation and tactics.

IV.

I turn now to the second problem mentioned at the beginning: the duration of battles. For Homeric battles usually last in undiminished intensity all day long, from morning to evening. This is clearly impossible and unrealistic. What do we make of it?

Again we should remember that if we analyze the evidence offered by the epics as if we were dealing with an historical description, we

37 Had the battle lines been separated by a wider margin, an individual running forward for a duel would have been exposed to an intensive barrage of missiles (spears, arrows, stones). This happens to Hector when he steps forward to announce the duel between Paris and Menelaos (3.76–83). The scene described in 4.517–538 suggests a small distance of a few meters. In 13.601–617 hand-to-hand fighting follows immediately upon the throwing of spears. In 13.496–498 spears are thrown in hand-to-hand fighting.

38 E.g., 8.266–272; Van Wees, “Development” (above, n.36) 151–54.

run into contradictions that cannot be resolved logically. But, as we all know, the Iliad is neither a history book nor a sociological or military treatise. It is poetry and a piece of art, and as such it follows its own rules and logic. This does not mean that it does not contain historical realities that can be grasped logically or rationally; it only means that we cannot discover these realities unless we understand the principles underlying the poet’s or singer’s narrative. We must try to put ourselves into the shoes of his audience to whom these principles were obvious and natural, since they had been familiar with them all their lives.

I mentioned one of these principles before: the frequent alternation between panoramic and scenic views. Another concerns a well-known phenomenon: the frequent use of formulaic or type scenes that are only slightly varied (such as arming for battle, the march into battle, or battle exhortation).\footnote{B. Fenik, Typical Battle Scenes in the Iliad: Studies in the Narrative Techniques of Homeric Battle Description (Wiesbaden 1968); see also, generally, Edwards (above, n.30) 71–81.} Such scenes appear even in places where they logically do not belong. As an example, we might think in book 4 of the beginning of the battle which had been delayed by the truce and duel between Paris and Menelaos (described in book 3). When Pandaros’ treacherous arrow shot has violated the truce (4.105–147), the poet describes the reactions of the Achaians (148–219: Agamemnon’s concern and anger, Menalaos’ response, the treatment of his wound, etc.) but says nothing about the reaction of the Trojans. They must immediately have begun to prepare for the battle that was now inevitable. When the poet remembers them, they are already approaching in closed ranks, which forces the Achaians as well to get ready for battle (220–222). Even so, Agamemnon has time to inspect his troops, contingent by contingent, to blame the slow and encourage the eager, and to exhort the leaders ironically and critically (332–421). Only after this long intermezzo the massed armies clash, and the battle begins. From a rational perspective, this is absurdly unrealistic, especially since during the duel both armies were sitting opposite each other, separated only by a space large enough for an “arena” (3.115).

Yet what disturbs us must not necessarily have done the same to audiences used to it. It might be useful here to draw a parallel with a modern art-form that is also performed orally. I think of opera and especially of those well-known scenes in which the pursuers are already at the door, but the threatened lovers still have time for a long and moving aria before they run off. Actors and public focus entirely on one side of the action; the other side escapes our attention; time and action are suspended. Again, viewed rationally, this is unrealistic, but in the logic of the art form “opera” the aria is a firmly established, expected, and important element. The interruption of the action by an aria is thus not perceived by the audience as
disturbingly incompatible with the realism of the drama enacted on stage. Just so, in epic, set pieces like the army’s march into battle or the leader’s battle exhortation suspend the progress of the action; they are expected and contribute to the enjoyment of the audience. Long conversations among fighters before they engage in battle or, occasionally, avoid doing so are set pieces as well, and with a similar effect.

Now, similar principles may help us resolve the puzzle of the duration of Homeric battles. In the course of such battles several type scenes follow upon each other: arming, march into battle, clash of the massed armies, intensive exchange of missiles and close fighting (with the frequent changes of perspectives mentioned before), until one of the armies breaks down and dissolves in flight. This usually offers an opportunity for one hero’s aristeia. Then comes a surprise: one of the leaders of the defeated army succeeds in stopping the flight and encouraging his men to resume fighting. They regroup, close their ranks, and the two armies clash again in massed formations, followed by renewed missile and close-up fighting, until one of the sides turns and everything again dissolves in flight, chaos, and aristeia, etc., until night imposes an end to the battle.

It is clear that this cannot be realistic. The key to understanding what is going on here lies in a phenomenon I call the “epic overextension” of battle. To explain, I suspect that before the great mass battles of the Napoleonic age, and especially in antiquity, battles usually were relatively short affairs and lasted at most a few hours.\(^\text{41}\) In Greek hoplite fighting the battle was usually over as soon as one army succeeded in breaking the opposing phalanx.\(^\text{42}\) Once the soldiers were in full flight, sometimes even throwing their shields away to run faster, it was virtually impossible to stop them, turn them around, reorganize the tight battle formation, and lead the army back into battle with any chance of success. Very rare exceptions in the classical period can be explained by special circumstances.\(^\text{43}\) When such maneuvers succeeded in the Hellenistic and Roman periods, they depended both on the courage and charisma of the general and on the availability of reserves (infantry and especially cavalry): we think of Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar.\(^\text{44}\) Hoplite fighting in archaic

\(^{41}\) Thuc. 4.134.2 suggests a battle that was ended only by darkness; it took place in winter, but we do not know when it began (I thank Larry Trittie for this reference).


\(^{43}\) Such as a retreat onto higher terrain or the late arrival of reinforcements (e.g., Thuc. 4.43; Xen. Hell. 3.5.19–20). Archilochus (fr. 5 West) famously boasts of having thrown his shield away to save his life; similarly Alc. fr. 428 Campbell.

\(^{44}\) A. Ferrill, The Origins of War from the Stone Age to Alexander the Great (Boulder 1997) chs. 5–6.
and classical Greece knew neither reserves nor a sophisticated use of cavalry. Homeric battles, too, therefore normally and realistically should have ended after the first breakthrough achieved by one army and the mass flight of the other. The defeated army would evacuate the battlefield, the victors erect a *tropaion* (an improvised victory monument) with some of the arms and armor of the fallen enemies; a truce would allow both sides to collect and bury their dead, and on a later day the war would resume. This is indeed what happens in book 7 of the *Iliad* (325–432).

Yet in Homer we are not dealing with normal men but with the heroes of the “Heroic Age” who are capable of most astonishing deeds. Their endurance is virtually unlimited, they fight from morning to evening, and they even succeed in renewing the battle out of their army’s flight. Clearly, this is another element of “heroic exaggeration. “Epic overextension” of battle thus means that an epic battle repeats *ad libitum* a basic sequence of “normal battles” and chaotic flight phases. Normal battles consist of the elements described above: march into battle, clash between massed armies, intensive and extended missile and close-up fighting described from changing perspectives, and flight of one side.

By contrast, the chaotic flight-phases offer the poet an opportunity to give free rein to his fantasy and to glorify the greatest heroes: here we find the most astonishing deeds, innumerable variations of flight, resistance, local massing of fighters, and renewed chaos: a constant movement back and forth. These scenes contain several fantastic elements: the *aristeiai* of the great heroes, in which they reach a level of achievement far beyond human potential, mowing down scores of enemies and single-handedly chasing whole armies across the entire battlefield: this too, of course, is heroic exaggeration. *Aristeia* of the victor and *aristeia* of the loser complement each other, for it is no less an accomplishment of which only the greatest heroes are capable to stop, reorganize and remotivate a fleeing army. Not surprisingly, in such “superhuman” achievements often the gods are involved: they facilitate the turnaround by encouraging and strengthening, or discouraging and weakening, the leaders. Here too, horses and chariots play their most important role: during the normal battles they are usually parked behind the front, but as soon as the flight begins, they appear very prominently and permit the main actors to move freely about the entire battlefield. Incidentally, this goes a long way in explaining the role of chariots in Homeric battles that has always baffled scholars. Gods, chariots, and *aristeia* thus belong mainly to the fantastic flight-phases; in normal battles they are much less visible.

All this can be illustrated by close analysis of one of the great battles described in the *Iliad*. I have done this elsewhere.45 The result,

45 Raaflaub (above, n.1) 239–44.
I think, is encouraging. The normal battles, I suggest, correspond to a reality with which the singer’s audiences were closely familiar. We should not forget that these audiences had experience with war, personally or from the accounts of others. To what extraordinary degree this must indeed have been the case has been demonstrated recently in an unexpected area. Larry Tritle fought as an officer in Vietnam and observed there the mutilation of fallen enemies by both Vietnamese and Americans. This clearly was a violent psychological reaction to the devastating brutality of infantry fighting. Tritle sees close parallels in Achilles’ mutilation of Hector’s body. Jonathan Shay, a psychiatrist who worked with many Vietnam veterans, recognizes close analogies between Achilles’ reaction to Patroklos’ death—his excessive grief, self-incrimination, and going berserk in the subsequent battle—and the “Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder” (PTSD) typical of many war veterans.46 No doubt, therefore, Homer’s audiences knew all too well the devastating impact of war on the soldiers’ psyche.

V.

In conclusion, then, the normal battles involve participation of masses of commoners who have an impact on the outcome of battles and fight in relatively dense formations. We see here first indications of what was to evolve into the hoplite phalanx. The flight and aristeia phases represent heroic and fantastic exaggeration. We moderns feel uncomfortable with the combination of such realistic and fantastic elements. But, as the use of set pieces demonstrates as well, the poet’s audiences were used to this. They must have enjoyed these greatly entertaining episodes with sensational “special effects” and were not deterred by them from identifying with the realistic scenes of normal battles that corresponded to their own experiences. As a consequence, if we want to find answers to our historical questions, we need to focus on the normal battles.

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