Homer: ‘Works in Greek’

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Homer

Works in Greek

- Florence, 1488
- Editio princeps; bookplates of Labouchère and Duke of Sussex

Μῆνιν ἄειδε, θεά, Πηληϊάδεω
Ἀχιλῆος—“Wrath, Goddess, sing the wrath of Achilles, son of Peleus.”

Thus begins the *Iliad*, and thus begins Western literature.

Who was Homer? Was there a Homer? How were the Homeric epics composed? Were the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* both by the same poet? These still-unresolved questions have occupied scholars for centuries, but the importance and influence of the poems are beyond question. The stories of the Trojan War and the wanderings of Odysseus have been part of our cultural heritage for more than 2,700 years. Who has not heard of Achilles, Hector, Helen, Circe, or the Cyclops?

From the time the epics were first written down in the eighth century BC to the fall of Constantinople in 1453, these poems formed the core of Greek education. Plato had an intimate knowledge and a deep appreciation for Homer’s poetry, although he wanted to ban it from his ideal republic as a bad moral influence. Alexander the Great was fascinated by the *Iliad* and reportedly kept a copy under his pillow. The study of Homer in Alexandria in the third century BC was the origin of philological and literary scholarship.

In the West, Homer’s influence continued primarily through Latin intermediaries until the renewal of Greek learning in the Renaissance. Since then, the study of Homer has flourished, and new translations have appeared in every generation. Until well into the twentieth century, reading Homer in Greek remained an important part of a liberal education in much of Europe and America. Heinrich Schliemann, a wealthy nineteenth-century German businessman, was led by his boyhood love of Homer to devote his later life to archaeology and the rediscovery of Troy and other Homeric cities.

In recent years, the Homeric epics have inspired and influenced writers such as James Joyce, Nikos Kazantzakis, and Derek Walcott, as well as films such as John Ford’s *The Searchers* and the Coen brothers’ *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*
The volumes on display, edited by Demetrius Chalcondyles in 1488, represent both the first printed edition of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* in Greek and the first collected edition of Homer’s works, which include other works attributed to Homer (the *Hymns* and the *Battle of Frogs and Mice*) along with a number of ancient lives of Homer. Chalcondyles, a Greek refugee from the Ottoman invasion, settled in Italy in 1464 as a teacher of Greek; his students included Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, Angelo Poliziano, and the future pope Leo X. Chalcondyles won lasting fame as a pioneer editor of Greek texts for the fledgling printing trade; his Homer was the first substantial work of Greek literature to appear in print. He later produced editions of the rhetorician Isocrates and of the great Byzantine encyclopedia, the *Suda*.

—Fred W. Jenkins, PhD, Professor and Associate Dean for Collections and Operations, University Libraries

**Sources**


