

Homer and Collective Memory: The End of the *Odyssey*

This paper will approach the end of the *Odyssey* (starting at 24.412) by using the interpretive tools that research on collective memory has presented to us. This approach ultimately will enable us to better understand the self-awareness of the *Odyssey*.

Building on the work of Maurice Halbwachs and Pierre Nora, research in practically every discipline of the humanities has directed its attention to the role collective memory plays in the shaping of how all kinds of sociological groups perceive themselves and their surroundings in terms of how they perceive their past, how they assess their present situation and what plans they are making for their future. This theoretical approach is also applied in Classics - not limited to, but especially in ancient history. Studies in classical literature should also avail themselves more of the tools that researchers have developed for the study of the role and the behavior of collective memories.

The key for this paper will be *Od.* 24.484f. Zeus promises Athena that the gods will make the people of Ithaca forget that brothers and children were slain. Then, Zeus claims, people will be friends again. At the moment of this prophecy, Ithaca is at the verge of civil war. Eupheithes is trying to gather an alliance for the sake of punishing Odysseus for having lost so many comrades while he was away and for having killed all of the suitors who were members of noble families. Not all of the citizens of Ithaca want to join Eupheithes since Halitherses in particular reminds the Ithacans of the guilt of the suitors. At any rate, civil unrest breaks out at the farm of Laertes a little later in the *Odyssey*. It is ultimately Zeus himself who is needed to put an end to the fight (*Od.* 24.539f.).

Halitherses' speech is of particular interest. Research on collective memory has repeatedly pointed out the importance of dealing responsibly with the items that are stored in a group's collective memory. Implicitly, Halitherses emphasizes the necessity to have a complete memory of a given sequence of events that becomes a part of the collective memory of a given group is essential because these groups tend to be the victims of selective memories only. As Eupheithes' example shows, the consequences of constructing incomplete collective memories even can be deadly.

Homer himself points our attention to the fact that he will indeed perpetuate the memory of the slain suitors. "Forgetting" the deaths of the suitors, therefore, means that their memory will not continue to trigger further bloodshed and thus give way to reconciliation. Their memory will not

really cease to exist. This observation nicely ties in with other passages from the Homeric poems who talk about the function and task of both *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.

Therefore, it is not only possible to detect traces of Homer's awareness that groups of people share certain kinds of memories and let these memories direct their actions individually and as a group. Homer is also acutely aware of the challenges that these memories can mean for any given society. And furthermore, this awareness shows us that whoever gave Homer's poetry its actual shape knew what was at stake.