What’s Yours is Mine: The Ethic of Plunder in Homer

Frequently in the Homeric epics violence is used to appropriate others’ material possessions and even their very persons. Thucydides, with this phenomenon from the ancient epics as well as specific passages from the *Odyssey* (3.71-74, 9.252-55) in mind, asserts in his *Archaeology* (1.5) that the practice of raiding by sea was not only engaged in unabashedly by ancient Greeks and barbarians but that its practitioners were accorded honor. Indeed, the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are replete with instances, apart from normal warfare, of pillaging others and their goods. Whether we are to agree with Thucydides in his reading of the practice’s moral standing in the world of the epics, though, remains an open question. Van Wees (1992), as a part of his larger study of warfare in Homeric society, interprets the practice as “predatory warfare,” something commonplace and acceptable because of the “acquisitive ethic of the heroes” and the prestige they gained from it. More recently, de Souza (1999), Jackson (2000) and Dougherty (2001) have argued, albeit in different ways, for a more ambiguous if not outright immoral standing of piracy in Homeric society than proposed by either Thucydides or van Wees. In this paper I approach the issue of piracy’s moral standing in Homer by going beyond the practice of seaborne raids to include other instances of violent appropriation of others and/or their goods in the poems. I argue that these practices are indeed morally acceptable and best understood as part of an “ethic of plunder” active not just among the heroes but at all levels of Homeric society.

Though the *Iliad* references the practice of raids and freebooting, the phenomenon of plunder in various forms can be best analyzed in its broader societal context from passages in the *Odyssey*. The identical salutations of Nestor and Polyphemos in books 3 and 9, respectively, hint at the commonness of piracy, asking whether the strangers were sailing for some business or roving about like pirates (3.71-74, 9.252-55). Stories and comments elsewhere in the *Odyssey* testify to the ubiquity of plunder in Homeric society – kidnapping, raids on cattle, etc. These practices, as described, are not limited to the ἄριστοι or any class in particular and thus should not be understood as behavior exclusive to heroes or aristocrats. In fact, the references to plunder that involve non-heroic agents, like the despicable Melanthios’ wish to take Eumaios away and sell him (17.248-50), make it clear that plunder is not something only or even largely inflicted by the upper classes against lower ones, but a wider social ethic accepted along with its possibly disastrous consequences for all involved. The lack of any clear expression of moral outrage on the part of humans or gods against plunder *qua* plunder in either epic makes the neutral moral status of plunder clear.

The place of plunder, when considered in its many manifestations in the world of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey,* contributes both to our understanding of larger issues of Homeric morality and how the world of the poems presents persons and their relationships to others and their property.

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