

Mapping Homer's Catalogue of Ships

This paper proposes original theories on Homer's use of landscape and travel routes in the Catalogue of Ships, while offering viewers a chance to preview the digital gazetteer being produced in conjunction with our project. Our research team is composed of Jenny Strauss Clay, Courtney Evans and Ben Jasnow of the Department of Classics at the University of Virginia, as well as a number of partners from the Scholars' Lab at the University of Virginia. (For a full list of collaborators, please visit <http://ships.lib.virginia.edu/> and click on "Credits.")

The places named in the Catalogue may be divided into two types: contingents and the cities within those contingents. A well-known geographical principle clearly underlies the narrative order in which Homer relates the 29 contingents that make up the Greek fleet. Beginning from Boeotia, in Central Greece, the poet narrates three circuits of these contingents, moving from one geographical region to the next in a continuous fashion (Clay, 2011; Minchin, 2001). This well organized plan or mental roadmap serves the oral poet as a "spatial mnemonic" (Clay, 2011), allowing Homer to traverse the nearly 190 places he mentions without getting lost in the details (Clay, 2011; Minchin, 2001).

Although the principle according to which Homer moves from contingent to contingent is well understood, the poet's use of geography remains, in its other aspects, mysterious. Several scholars have suggested that Homer may have used ancient travel itineraries to organize the Catalogue (Clay, 2011; Kirk, 1985). However, we lack a detailed analysis of the particular routes and landscape features that Homer would have employed. The main purpose of *Mapping the Catalogue of Ships* is to fill this scholarly gap. Does Homer possess detailed knowledge of local geography for the contingents in the Catalogue? How might Homer use such local geography in

the composition of his poem? These are the main questions that *Mapping Homer's Catalogue of Ships* seeks to answer.

Although *Mapping the Catalogue of Ships* is not yet complete, the process of plotting routes and building digital exhibits has already yielded interesting results. In many cases, Homer does appear to possess detailed geographic knowledge about the disposition of cities along routes or landscape features. In instances where Homer seems familiar with local geography, his syntax mirrors that familiarity: regional subdivisions of towns also constitute syntactic and poetic subdivisions, which we call syntactical and line-by-line groups. Syntactical groups are instances in which a single verb governs a group of towns; line-by-line groups are instances in which several towns fall into a single verse. It turns out that these syntactical and line-by-line groups frequently reflect local geographic features or travel routes. The Mycenaean contingent, for instance, contains four syntactical groups, each of them disposed along well-defined travel corridors. The first syntactical group falls along a route from Mycenae to Corinth; the second along a route from Orneai to Sicyon; the third and fourth syntactical groups fall along the coast, moving east to west. Thus, the entire contingent constitutes four syntactical groups, each disposed along a travel corridor, with the groups narrated in order from east to the west. Homer's division of his narrative according to features of the local landscape in contingents such as Mycenae clearly demonstrates a knowledge of local geography, which he likely uses as a "special mnemonic," as in the contingent-to-contingent narration.

The analysis of cases where syntactical and line-by-line groups fail to reflect local geography has been just as fruitful. Homer's use of geographical space in Boeotia, where the narration of place names does not fall into discernible geographical groupings, differs radically from what we see in Mycenae. Rather than grouping towns according to divisions in the

landscape, Homer seems to envision Thebes as the narrative center of the Boeotian contingent, listing the sites in a rough circle around that city, which is never named itself. This narrative technique finds a parallel in the Catalogue of Trojans, which also envisions Troy as the unnamed center and lists the Trojan allies in a series of spokes around that city. A second parallel is the *teichoscopia* (*Il.* 3), another oral-poetic catalogue with a city as the narrative center. Given these parallels, we propose that the narrative of the Boeotian contingent may ultimately stem from the *Theban Cycle*, which perhaps contained a catalogue of Theban allies akin to the Trojan Catalogue or in the form of a *teichoscopia*.

References

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- Minchin, E. (2001). *Homer and the Resources of Memory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.