

A New Hypothesis on the Meaning of the Homeric Word Merops

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In the Homeric poems the word *merops* appears on several occasions, generally associated with the noun *anthrōpos*, man. It is translated as mortal, however, this interpretation is not sure. In fact, by examining the passages in which this expression appears, we note that this translation is somewhat vague and unconvincing. Furthermore, in the *Iliad* the word also includes a proper name, that of *Merops Perkōsios*, father of two brothers who died in the Trojan War [1], and, even if nothing can be excluded a priori, it is really difficult to believe that a personal name could have such a dismal meaning. Some scholars have even gone so far as to define this term «an unintelligible epithet» [2]. Now, by taking into account the fact that the root of *merops* is connected with the verb *meiromai* (to obtain by lot, in the sense of getting a part, *meros*, by destiny), that in the Homeric world the soldiers could be recruited by lot [3] and that this term usually refers to men in arms, one can rightly assume that, rather than indicating a generic mortal man it refers to a man drawn by lot, that is a conscript, an enlisted man, as well as, in a broader sense, soldier, warrior, fighter.

This way the Homeric passages that contain the word *merops* finally acquire a logical, precise and defined sense. For example, a phrase from the *Odyssey* that the goddess *Athena* addresses to *Ulysses*, usually translated «if fifty troops of mortal men (*meropōn anthrōpōn*) should stand about us, eager to slay us in battle, even their cattle and goodly sheep shouldst thou drive off» [4], reread by interpreting the link not as generic mortal men (an interpretation in which *meropōn* adds nothing to *anthrōpōn*), but as conscripts, this would give it a clearer and more incisive meaning: a great professional in the war cannot be frightened by a group of conscripts, perhaps poorly trained former farmers, even if they were very numerous (it is a situation identical to certain scenes in the *James Bond* films, which often indulge, fortunately with a hint of irony, the same type of hyperbole that transpires from the words of *Athena*). To confirm this we note that, again in that speech of *Athena*, the concept of mortal, precisely in the unequivocal sense of man subject to death, is associated, only three lines before, with

the word *thnētos*, mortal (cognate of *thnēskō*, to die) [5]: it must therefore be excluded that the *meropōn anthrōpōn* that appears immediately after may have the same meaning, whereas the hypothesis proposed here seems much more persuasive. Similarly, it can be assumed that the allusion of the *Iliad* to the cities of mortals [6] conquered by *Achilles* actually implied the fact that, being enemy cities, they had supplied, or were supplying, their conscripts (perhaps enlisted for the occasion) to the Trojans. Reinterpreted in this key, a sentence referring to *Nestor* and his contingent during the Trojan war becomes more realistic: Already under him two generations of conscripts (*meropōn anthrōpōn*) were finished [...] and he commanded above the third [7].

By way of comparison, we point out that the conscripts of the Piedmontese army in the year 1844 were drawn among the twenty-year-olds: they had to do eight years of service, plus other eight in the Reserve. Subsequently, the first draft of the new Italian state was launched in Romagna in 1860 with a recruitment system based on a draw among those who had reached the age of 21 and had been declared fit for military service; the duration of the enlistment was eleven years, of which five in active service and six in discharge [8]. Such an approach to the Homeric world, however bizarre it may seem at first glance, should not be surprising: in fact a society often engaged in wars, but substantially based on agriculture and livestock, whether they were Achaeans or Piedmontese, cannot afford to take too many hands away from working in the fields; therefore, in order to organize a regular army, it must be based on a conscription of twenties-year-olds drawn from those who are fit for military service, for a period which, having to correspond to the period of maximum physical efficiency of a young man, can be compared to the duration of the career of a current professional footballer (on average about ten years, usually no more than fifteen), whose performance is certainly comparable to that of a fighter. We can therefore suppose that each of the «two generations of conscripts» commanded by the old *Nestor*, who had probably also been drawn up by drawing lots, had had to do military service

for a roughly similar period, presumably about ten years, before to be able to return to their occupations. This is congruent with the fact that Nestor in the Trojan War is presumably aged close to fifty: in fact, he has a young son with him, Antilochus (to whom during the games for Patroclus's funeral he gives advice on the best way to drive a war chariot) [9], and he himself moves with the chariot on the battlefield, but no longer has the strength or agility to sustain a duel on foot.

References

1. «Then took they a chariot and two men, the best of their people, sons twain of Merops of Percote, that was above all men skilled in prophesying, and would not suffer his sons to go into war, the bane of men; but the twain would in no wise hearken to him, for the fates of black death were leading them on. These did the son of Tydeus, Diomedes, famed for his spear, rob of spirit and of life, and took from them their goodly battle-gear» (Il. XI, 328-334, transl. by A.T. Murray, revised by W.F. Wyatt, Cambridge [MA], Harvard University Press, 1924 [I. Books I-II], 1925 [II. Books XIII-XXIV], in all Iliadic quotes).
2. Cfr. P. Vidal-Naquet, in J.-L. Backès (éd.), *Homère, Iliade*, Paris, Gallimard, 2013, p. 592. The literature on this subject is conspicuous. Here it is enough to remember that the expression meropes anthrōpoi is one of the formulas of the geographical catalog of the Hymn to Apollo (H. Koller, parts of people, «Glotta», 46, 1968, pp. 18-26), while R. Arena, For an interpretation of the terms Meropes and Chaoi, «Accounts. Lombard Institute, Academy of Sciences and Letters, Class of Letters, Moral and Historical Sciences, 108, 1974, pp. 417-437, dwells on the etymology of the Meropes, interpreted as «those who were born from the earth». It should also be remembered that Merops was the king of Cos, native and eponymous, and the island itself bore the name of his daughter: cfr. Steph. Byz. s.v. Κῶς (p. 402 s. Meineke); Pind. Nem. IV 42, Isthm. VI 41-45; Plut. Quaest. Gr. 58; Hsch. s.v. Μέρορες, μ 865 Schmidt. Cfr. also P. Ramat, New perspectives for the solution of the problem of the Μέρορες of Cos, «Proceedings and Memoirs of the Tuscan Academy of Sciences and Letters» "La Colombaria", 24, 1959-1960, pp. 131-157, and M. Lejeune, Discussions etymological, «Revue des Études Anciennes», 63, 1961, pp. 433-438. V. Pisani, Merope People, «Acme», 29, 1976, pp. 5-7, identified in the attribute designating the predoric population of Cos as well as the genus of birds that usually lay their eggs on the ground, a synonym of chthonios («linked to the earth»). Among those who have deepened the phonetic aspect, with the related etymological implications, there have been A. Quattordio Moreschini, Le formazioni greche suffissate in -op-, -ōp-: Merops ἀνθρώποι e ἐλίωτες Ἀχαιοί, «Studi e Saggi Linguistici», 21, 1981, pp. 41-77, M. Morani, Tre aggettivi omerici, «Sileno», 16, 1990, pp. 151-160, and A. Annus, Are there Greek rephaim? On the etymology of Greek meropes and titanēs, «Ugarit-Forschungen. Internationales Jahrbuch für die Altertumskunde Syrien», 31, 1999, pp. 13-30, who has caught original correspondences with Semitic roots. The interpretation of B. Pastor de Arozena is completely different, as well as that, more recent, of A. Willi. The first scholar argues that the word meropes derives from the Indo-European root *mer, which in Homer and Hesiod expresses brilliance (B. Pastor de Arozena, Meropes «glitterisch», «Classical Philology», 88, 1993, pp. 137-138). The second one, on the other hand, evaluates the expression meropōn anthrōpōn as the evolution for metric reasons of an older *meiropōn anthrōpōn, which would belong to a phase of epic poetry prior to the final prosodic definition of the Homeric hexameter. The radical, *(s)mer, «and» would be connected with «part», and specifically would indicate the *meirops, or the «young member of the army who receives part of the military booty»: cfr. A. Willi, Measures People, in N.N. Kazansky (ed.), Indo-European linguistics and Classical philology. Proceedings of the 17th conference in memory of Professor Joseph M. Tronsky (June 24-26, 2013), Sankt-Peterburg, Nauka, 2013, pp. 893-894.
3. «From these by the casting of lots was I chosen to fare hitherward» (Il. XXIV, 400).
4. Od. XX, 49-51 (transl. by A.T. Murray, revised by G.E. Dimock, Cambridge [MA], Harvard University Press Harvard University Press 1919, just like in the next cases).
5. «Obstinate one, many a man puts his trust even in a weaker friend than I am, one that is mortal, and knows not such wisdom as mine» (Od. XX, 45-46).
6. Il. XVIII, 342.
7. Il. I, 250-252.
8. Cfr. <http://lacampagnappenaiieri.blogspot.it/2011/03/la-leva-obbligatoria-dellitalia-unita.html> (link consulted on 22.7.2021).
9. «And fourth Antilochus made ready his fair-maned horses, he the peerless son of Nestor, the king high of heart, the son of Neleus; and bred at Pylos were the swift-footed horses that drew his car. And his father drew nigh and gave counsel to him for his profit, a wise man to one that himself had knowledge» (Il. XXIII, 301-305).



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