GREEKS AND BARBARIANS IN HOMER'S "*ODYSSEY*"

Ph. D. Ştefania VOICU,
University of Bucharest
stefvoicu@yahoo.com

Abstract:
Homer's "*Odyssey*", viewed as a relevant literary source for Archaic Greece, has led to the development of different research domains through the medium of hermeneutics or text interpretation. One of these directions regards the reconstitution of social aspects pertaining to the Archaic Greek world. Given that Odysseus' adventures unfold beyond the borders of the world known by the hero, Greek identity can only be rendered by exclusion, the exclusion of the *Other*: the reverse of the reprehensible deeds or aspects of the *Other* comes to define the real, or at least desirable, characteristics of the one operating the exclusion.
Key words: Mythology, society, barbarians, Odysseus.

Rezumat:
Greci şi barbari în "Odysseia" lui Homer
Odysseia, în calitate de izvor literar relevant pentru perioada Greciei arhaice, a oferit oportunitatea dezvoltării mai multor direcţii de cercetare pe filiera hermeneuticii, a interpretării de text. Una dintre aceste direcţii este reconstituirea aspectelor sociale ale lumii greceşti arhaice. Cum aventurile lui Odiseu sunt plasate dincolo de lumea greacă propriu-zisă, identitatea greacă nu se poate reconstitui decât prin excludere, excludere a *Celuilalt*: reversul aspectelor condamnabile la *Celălalt* devin trăsături reale sau, cel puţin, dezirabile ale celui care exclude.
Cuvinte cheie:
Mitologie, societate, barbari, Odysseus.

To some extent, subscribing the *Odyssey* to the so-called *euhemerism*[1] has presented us with the chance of reinterpreting the myth so as to reveal the social reality of the Archaic Greek world. Given its analytical spirit,

[1] The word *euhemerism* derives from the name of the philosopher Euhemeros. He lived around 300 B.C. and considered that the gods were in fact people who lived at some point on earth. Their mythological adventures were no more than legendary exaggerations of events that had actually taken place. (F. Robèrt , 1950, p. 113) To some extent, we could translate the *euhemerism* as any attempt to reduce mythology to a simple alteration of historical, real events. (F. Robèrt , 1998, p. 10)

BDD-A4012 © 2013 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 23:57:20 UTC)

philosophy is the first science of the ancient Greeks to have provided a key of access to the mythical world, which is allegorical interpretation. By reversing the poles of the comparison, philosophy has provided us not only with a tool, but also with a method. With mythical thought, everyday experience is given a clear meaning by reference to the great deeds accomplished *in the beginnings* by the gods, whilst with Ionian philosophers, primary events and the forces that created the universe are conceived when observing one's surroundings and everydayness. *The Primary* does no longer clear up or transfigure the ordinary; on the contrary, it is the ordinary that makes *the primary* comprehensible.[2]

Following the same *negative* pattern, "*Odysseus' world*"[3] might become comprehensible as well. By *negative* it is meant that Odysseus' wanderings, happening beyond the borders of the Greek world, cannot render Greek identity other than by exclusion. It is the exclusion of *otherness*: the reprehensible deeds or aspects of the *other*, when reversed, become the traits, real or at least desirable, of the one who excludes.

Ancient moralists such as Plutarch or Maximus of Tyre discovered within the Homeric epic standards of behaviour for individuals as well as for cities, whether they are represented through the heroes' examples of bravery, of reasoning, of moderation, or whether through the gods' embodiments of wisdom and reason.[4] Ancient morality developed around the conflict between reason and instinct. This spiritual struggle is illustrated by Odysseus' adventures: the monsters he escapes from, the dangers he surpasses symbolize the passions restrained by the wise one.[5] Odysseus is thus presented as an ideal of humanity, a metaphorical figure of wisdom itself[6].

The aim of the present paper is not to approach the issue of wisdom or of morality at the ancient Greeks (concept which appeared rather late in the Greek world[7]), but to identify, as far as possible, the traits that might reveal their social structure, diet, and religious life.

[2] J. P. Vernant, 1995, p. 133-134.
[3] See M. I. Finley, 1964.
[4] F. Buffière, 1987, p. 2.
[5] F. Buffière, 1987, p. 209.
[6] F. Buffière, 1987, p. 292.
[7] Towards the end of the 5th century B.C. (see E. Dodds, 1983, p. 56).

BDD-A4012 © 2013 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 23:57:20 UTC)

Odysseus' adventures develop away from the welcoming seas or from civilized humans. He is to encounter barbarian populations, fruit-eaters (Lotus-eaters) or man-eaters (Cyclops and Laestrygonians), monsters (Scylla and Charybdis), arbitrary gods (Eol), sorceresses (Circe), guileful maidens (Sirens) or jealous ones (Calypso). Only a night's distance away from Ithaca will he discover the Phaeacians, a hospitable people led by their kind king, Alcinous, and his enchanting daughter, Nausicaa.[8]

One can identify two different spaces: one that is coherent, of the world known by the poet and implicitly by the hero, where the voyage develops within verisimilar coordinates, and one of extraordinary adventures, of monsters, and of imprecise calls. Therefore, when leaving from the Ciconians, Odysseus actually leaves behind the *bread-eaters*[9] for hyperbolized mankind. Beyond an invisible barrier which cannot be mapped, existence is governed by other laws.[10]

Driven off from his itinerary by the winds, past what was considered to be Cape Maleia, the first land encountered by Odysseus is that of the Lotus-eaters:

> "*Nor did the Lotus-eaters think of killing my comrades,*
> *but gave them lotus to eat.*
> *And whoever of them ate the honey-sweet fruit of the lotus*
> *no longer wished to bring back word or return home,*
> *but there they wished to remain among the Lotus-eaters,*
> *feeding on the lotus, and to forget their homecoming.*"[11]

Therefore, the first trait of such a world is related to their gastronomic habits, to their food, whose main property was not to glut (unlike the bread), but to bring self-abandonment. We can consider a reference to the Lethe stream in the Hades, out of which the deceased was supposed to drink in order to lose his self-consciousness, to become alienated from his human

[8] V. Bérard, 1930, p. 112.
[9] *Od.*, VI, 8.
[10] G. Gérmain, 1954, p. 538.
[11] *Od.*, IX, 92-97.

BDD-A4012 © 2013 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 23:57:20 UTC)

existence.[12] From this perspective, the Lotus-eaters are placed beyond the confines of mankind.

The most accurate definition of the barbarian[13] seems to correspond to the description of the land and of the nature of the Cyclops, which refers to such aspects as their occupation, their diet, their social and religious structure. They are "*an insolent and lawless folk*", and even though they have barley and cereal crops and grapes from vines, they are incapable of leading a different kind of life other than pasturing flocks. They are strangers to ploughing and sowing, for all these things grow solely under the rain of Zeus[14].

This *natural growing* of crops and vines, without any human intervention, is reminiscent of the *Golden Age* sung by Hesiod in his *Theogony*, who suggests that agriculture was closely related to the reverence characterizing the Greeks, which was absent among the Cyclops, who paid "*no heed to Zeus, who bears the aegis, nor to the blest gods*"[15].

The Cyclops weren't concerned with navigation either,

"*For the Cyclops have at hand no ships with vermilion cheeks,*
Nor are there ship-wrights in their land, who might build them well-benched ships,
Which could perform all their wants,
Passing to the cities of other men, as men often
Cross the sea in ships to visit one another-craftsmen."[16]

The everyday activity of the Cyclops, which is looking after their flocks, is reflected in their diet. They eat cheese and drink milk for dinner, but not wine. As he wasn't used to it, Polyphemus becomes intoxicated with the wine he is given by Odysseus. The same inebriating effects seem to have acted upon Odysseus when the Cyclop

"*Sprung up and laid his hands upon my comrades.*

[12] J. P. Vernant, 1995, p. 144.
[13] F. Robèrt, 1950, p. 297.
[14] *Od.*, IX, 109; 111.
[15] *Od.*, IX, 275-276.
[16] *Od.*, IX, 125-129.

BDD-A4012 © 2013 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 23:57:20 UTC)

Two of them together he seized and dashed to the earth
like puppies, and their brains flowed forth upon the ground and wetted the earth.
Then he cut them limb from limb and made ready his supper,
and ate them like a mountain-nurtured lion, leaving nothing -
ate the entrails, and the flesh, and the bones and marrow.
And we with wailing held up our hands to Zeus
seeing these cruel deeds, and helplessness possessed our spirits."[17]

If by *greeting the strangers* Odysseus understood feasting and giving them gifts, out of some sort of diplomatic conception meant to create a bond within a system of mutual obligations and responsibilities[18], Polyphemus, for a change, proposes to Odysseus, as a gift, to eat him last:

"*Nobody*[19] *will I eat last among his comrades,*
and the others before him; this shall be your gift."[20]

The fact that
"*neither assemblies for council have they, nor appointed laws,*
but they dwell on the peaks of mountains
in hollow caves, and each one is lawgiver to his children
and his wives, and they have no regard for one another"[21]

denotes that the Cyclops ignore all that a city-structured society presupposes. It is worth noting, though, the frame of an *oikos*[22] society, organized around the family and thus neglecting the extended structure of the community. The gluttony, the irreverence of the Cyclops are features of what the ancient Greeks defined as *hybris* or *lack of measure*, the punishment for such an abuse being none other than death.

[17] *Od.*, IX, 288-295.
[18] M. I. Finley, 1964, p. 160.
[19] *Nobody* (*Outis*) is the name Odysseus assumes in order to trick Polyphemus.
[20] *Od.*, IX, 369-370.
[21] *Od*., IX, 112-115.
[22] *Oikos* is the Greek term used for *Home*. It also stands for a social structure organized around the family, around the home.

BDD-A4012 © 2013 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 23:57:20 UTC)

The Laestrygonians are to some extent similar to the Cyclops; they also pasture flocks of sheep[23], "*no works of men or oxen appeared*"[24], they are giants ("*Laestrygonians came thronging from all sides, a host past counting, not like men, but like Giants*"[25]) and anthropophagi:

> "*They pelted us from the cliffs with rocks huge as man can lift,*
> *and at once there rose throughout the ships a dreadful din,*
> *alike from men were dying and from ships that were being crushed.*
> *And spearing them like fishes, they carried them home for their loathsome meal.*"[26]

What differs from the Cyclops' way of life seems to be their social structure, suggested by a range of terms such as: city, palace, place of assembly, "*king over people*"[27].

The Cimmerians are stigmatized due to a geographical limitation, living at the edge of the "*deep-flowing*" Ocean:

> "*Where is the land and city of the Cimmerians, wrapped in mist and cloud.*
> *Never does the bright sun look down on them with his rays*
> *either when he mounts the starry heaven*
> *or when he turns again to earth from heaven,*
> *but instead horrid night is spread over wretched mortals.*" [28]

There is a wide range of debates regarding the nature of the Cimmerians, whether real (by association with the Cimmerians from the North of Bosporus) or imaginary, though, from a metaphorical point of view, we can subscribe this folk to a philosophical system of oppositions, common in ancient Greece: the light and the heat of the sun were associated with the civilized, whilst the cold, dark night was the very symbol of barbarianism.

[23] *Od.*, X, 81-84.
[24] *Od.*, X, 98-99.
[25] *Od.*, X, 119-120.
[26] *Od.*, X, 121-124.
[27] *Od.*, X, 110.
[28] *Od.*, XI, 15-19.

BDD-A4012 © 2013 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 23:57:20 UTC)

By contrast, the land of the Phaeacians, even though miles away from the "*bread-eaters*"[29], seems to be both related to and remote from the Greeks in terms of their way of life. The description that Nausicaa gives of the Phaeacian city sketches its fundamental traits: a citadel with towers and great walls, with a port to harbour their ships, a sacred area dedicated to Poseidon, the patron god of the city, and, of course, a place of assembly.[30] What Odysseus describes seems to be mankind in the superlative:

> "*Within (Alcinous' palace), seats were fixed along the wall on either hand,*
> *from the threshold to the innermost chamber, and on them were thrown*
> *robes of soft fabric, cunningly woven, the handiwork of women.*
> *On these the leaders of the Phaeacians were wont to sit*
> *drinking and eating, for they lived in unfailing abundance.*
> *And golden youths stood on well-built pedestals,*
> *holding lighted torches in their hands to give light*
> *by night to the banqueters in the hall.*
> *And fifty slave women he had in the house,*
> *of whom some grind the yellow grain on the millstone,*
> *and others weave fabrics, or, as they sit, twirl the yarn,*
> *busy as the tall poplar tree;*
> *and from the closely woven fabrics the soft olive oil drips down.*
> *For as the Phaeacian men above all others are skilled*
> *in speeding a swift ship upon the sea, so are the women*
> *cunning workers at the loom; for Athene has given to them*
> *above all others knowledge of beautiful handiwork, and excellent character.*
> *Outside the courtyard, close to the doors, is a great orchard*
> *of four acres, and a hedge runs about it on each side.*
> *In it grow trees tall and luxuriant,*
> *pears and pomegranates and apple trees with their bright fruit,*
> *and sweet figs, and luxuriant olives.*

[29] *Od.*, VI, 8.
[30] *Od.*, VI, 262-271.

BDD-A4012 © 2013 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 23:57:20 UTC)

The fruit of these neither perishes nor fails
in winter or in summer, but lasts throughout the year; and continually
the West Wind, as it blows, quickens to life some fruits, and ripens others;
pear upon pear waxes ripe, apple upon apple,
grape bunch upon grape bunch, and fig upon fig.
There, too, is his fruitful vineyard,
one part of which, a warm spot on level ground, is for drying in the sun,
while other grapes men are gathering,
and others too, they are treading; but in front are unripe grapes that
are shedding the blossom, and others that are turning purple.
There again, by the last row of the vines, grow trim garden
beds of every sort, blooming the year through,
and in the orchard are two springs, one of which sends its water throughout all the garden,
while the other, opposite to it, flows beneath the threshold of the court
toward the high house; from this the townsfolk draw their water.
Such were the glorious gifts of the gods at the dwelling of Alcinous."[31]

The Phaeacians are also familiar with the unwritten law of hospitality, organizing a great feast to honour Odysseus. The famous singer, Demodocus, strings his lyre for the guests, the locals engage in athletic competitions, and Odysseus is laden with gifts from the king before embarking for Ithaca.

The Phaeacian society is the exact opposite of the barbarian one of the Cyclops or the Laestygonians, but equally remote from that of the Greeks, given its utopian (it exists in complete isolation, it is extremely wealthy and shows infinite hospitality) and downright fabulous (the Phaeacians are ideal sailors, "*for they have no pilots, nor steering oars such as other ships have, but the ships themselves understand the thoughts and mind of men*"[32])

[31] *Od.*, VII, 91-131.
[32] *Od.*, VIII, 557-559.

BDD-A4012 © 2013 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 23:57:20 UTC)

traits.[33] The fantastic development is characteristic of utopian thinking, and expressive of a longing for a better world. Utopia is born within a society for which it represents an answer (a model of what society should be like).[34] Phaeacia is not just *Ou-topos*, *Nowhere*, but also *Eu-topos*, *The Ideal Place*[35], the ideal society conceived as a goal to reach for.[36]

Therefore, the Phaeacians are to be defined as worthy, pious and hospitable householders. Still, Nausicaa's fear of the Phaeacians' "*evil speech*, *for they are insolent folk among the people*"[37]; Athene's guile of enveloping Odysseus in a mist all the way to Alcinous' palace, as he had been advised not to turn his eyes on any man nor question any, "*for the people here have no patience with strangers, nor do they give kindly welcome to him who comes from another land*"[38]; and, later on, the rude challenge to a competition addressed to Odysseus by one of Alcinous' sons, all these were considered a concession of the author, constantly compelled to reconcile the legendary tradition regarding the hospitality of Phaeacians with what might have been a different reality known to the poet's audience, willing to object to an excessively idealised image of the Phaeacians.[39]

The image of the Greek man, dedicated to working the land, but also a connoisseur of sailing, could be partially revealed through literary comparisons, such as:

> "*And as a man longs for supper,*
> *for whom all day long a yoke of wine dark oxen has drawn the jointed plow through fallow land,*

[33] M. I. Finley, 2002, p. 246.
[34] M. I. Finley, 2002, p. 243.
[35] M. I. Finley, 2002, p. 240.
[36] M. I. Finley, 2002, p. 243.
[37] *Od.*, VI, 273-274.
[38] *Od.*, VII, 31-33.
[39] F. Robèrt considers that the episode concerning the Phaeacians is referring to the inhabitants of the Island Scheria, hinting at their questionable reputation. (see F. Robèrt , 1950, p. 294-295)

BDD-A4012 © 2013 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 23:57:20 UTC)

and gladly for him does the light of the sun sink,
that he may attend to his supper, and his knees grow weary as he goes;
even so, gladly for Odysseus did the light of the sun sink."[40]

"*And soon as on a plain four yoked stallions*
spring forward all together beneath the strokes of the lash,
and leaping high swiftly accomplish their way,
even so the stern of that ship leapt high, and in her wake the gleaming wave of the loud-sounding sea foamed mightily,
and she sped safely and surely on her way."[41]

Conclusions

In the light of the facts presented above, it can be seen that the inhabitants of the lands described by the poet, where no man has ever been before Odysseus, are either giants or privileged folk.

The criteria taken into account for categorizing their *otherness* concern social structure, everyday activity, diet, reverence, degrees of hospitality and geographical positioning, according to which one can identify, when underlining certain aspects, two major categories of barbarians: those limited by their diet (Lotus-eaters and Man-eaters) and those limited by their geographical positioning (Cimmerians and Phaeacians).

As regards geographical positioning, what is worth observing is the mellowing of the barbarians' traits as Odysseus approaches Ithaca – the strangers' attributes are gradually softened, as, having left behind the ruthless Cyclops and Laestrygonians, Odysseus encounters the kind king Alcinous of the Phaeacians, only a night's journey away from Ithaca. For that matter, the Cyclops and the Phaeacians represent two extremes, pitted against each other in a perfect symmetry, more or less intentional, as proved in the lines that open almost every new adventure of Odysseus:

[40] *Od.*, XIII, 31-35.
[41] *Od.*, XIII, 81-85.

BDD-A4012 © 2013 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 23:57:20 UTC)

"*Alas, to the land of what mortals have I now come?*
Are they cruel, and wild, and unjust
or are they kind to strangers and fear the gods in their thoughts?"[42]

Therefore, opposed to the ruthless barbarians are those who revere the gods and observe the rules of hospitality and all that comes from it (offering feasts and gifts).

By reference to their image of *otherness*, the Greeks would define themselves as inhabitants of cities, organized around their *oikos*, but still interested in the greater structure of the community; they are defined as farmers, but also sailors, *bread-eaters*, god-fearing, hospitable, living next to a *euxeinos pontos* (*welcoming sea*).

Bibliography

HOMER, *The Odyssey*, A. T. Murray (ed.), vol. 1-2, Cambridge Massachusetts/London: Harvard University Press, 1995.
BERARD, Victor, 1930, *La résurréction d'Homère au temps des héros*, Paris: Bernard Grasset.
BUFFIERE, Felix, 1987, *Miturile lui Homer şi gândirea greacă*, Bucureşti: Univers.
DODDS, Eric, 1983, *Grecii şi iraţionalul*, Bucureşti: Meridiane.
FINLEY, Moses I., 1968, *Lumea lui Odiseu*, Bucureşti: Editura Ştiinţifică.
FINLEY, Moses I., 2002, *Uzul şi abuzul de istorie*, Bucureşti: Arc.
FINLEY, Moses I., 1974, *Vechii greci*, Bucureşti: Eminescu.
GERMAIN, Gabriel, 1954, *Genèse de l'Odyssee*, Paris: PUF.
GERMAIN, Gabriel, 1958, *Homère*, Paris: Du Seuil.
ROBERT, Férnand, 1950, *Homère*, Paris: PUF.
ROBERT, Férnand, 1998, *Religia greacă*, Bucureşti: Teora.
VERNANT, Jean-Pierre, 1995, *Mit şi gândire în Grecia antică*, Bucureşti: Meridiane.
VERNANT, Jean-Pierre, 1995, *Originile gândirii greceşti*, Bucureşti: Symposion.
VEYNE, Paul, 1996, *Au crezut grecii în miturile lor?*, Bucureşti: Univers.

[42] *Od.*, VI, 119-121.

BDD-A4012 © 2013 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 23:57:20 UTC)

VIDAL-NAQUET, Pierre, 1985, *Vânătorul negru. Forme de gândire şi forme de societate în lumea greacă*, Bucureşti: Eminescu.
WOLF, Armin, 1981, *Drumul lui Ulise*, Bucureşti: Meridiane.

Anexe

FOLK	GEOGRAPHICAL POSITIONING	SOCIAL STRUCTURE	DIET	RELIGION
Lotus-eaters	-*away from Kythera* (IX, 110)	-	- lotus-eaters	-
Cyclops	-	- *an insolent, lawless folk* (IX, 106); - *neither assemblies for council have they, nor appointed laws* (IX, 112); - they live in caves; - they seem to be organized in *oikoi*, ignorant to all that a community implies: *but they dwell on the peaks of mountains/ in hollow caves, and each one is lawgiver to his children/ and his wives, and they have no regard for one another* (IX, 113-115)	- they pasture flocks; - are not familiar with ploughing or navigation; - they feed on cheese, humans and drink milk instead of wine; - they are ruthless;	- they pay paid *no heed to Zeus, who bears the aegis, nor to the blest gods* (X, 275-276)
Laestrygonians	-Telepylos, Lamos' citadel	- citadel with a palace, place for assembly and king to rule over people (X, 110)	- shepherds; - man-eaters; - *no works of men or oxen appeared* (X, 98-99)	-
Cimmerians	-at the fringe of the *deep-flowing* Ocean	-	-	-
Phaeacia	- far away from the *bread-eaters* (VI, 8), but still a night away from Ithaca	- citadel with towers and high walls, place for assembly and royal family	- crafted sailors; - hospitable, connoisseurs of the unwritten law of hospitality (see the feast in honour of Odysseus, his being presented with gifts by the king Alcinous before departure)	- Poseidon is the patron of the city
Odysseus' world	- next to a welcoming sea	- *oikos* social structure, oriented towards the family, but with a sense of community	- occupied with agriculture and sailing; - bread-eaters	- fearing the gods

BDD-A4012 © 2013 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 23:57:20 UTC)