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# HOMERIC HYMNS

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*H o m e r*

**Homer**

# **Homeric Hymns**

**Ancient Greek Hymns Celebrating Individual Gods**

e-artnow, 2021

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## **INTRODUCTION**

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## **THE SO-CALLED HOMERIC HYMNS**

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“The existing collection of the Hymns is of unknown editorship, unknown date, and unknown purpose,” says Baumeister. Why any man should have collected the little preludes of five or six lines in length, and of purely conventional character, while he did not copy out the longer poems to which they probably served as preludes, is a mystery. The celebrated Wolf, who opened the path which leads modern Homerologists to such an extraordinary number of divergent theories, thought rightly that the great Alexandrian critics before the Christian Era, did not

recognise the Hymns as “Homeric.” They did not employ the Hymns as illustrations of Homeric problems; though it is certain that they knew the Hymns, for one collection did exist in the third century B.C.<sup>4</sup> Diodorus and Pausanias, later, also cite “the poet in the Hymns,” “Homer in the Hymns”; and the pseudo-Herodotus ascribes the Hymns to Homer in his Life of that author. Thucydides, in the Periclean age, regards Homer as the blind Chian minstrel who composed the Hymn to the Delian Apollo: a good proof of the relative antiquity of that piece, but not evidence, of course, that our whole collection was then regarded as Homeric. Baumeister agrees with Wolf that the brief Hymns were recited by rhapsodists as preludes to the recitation of Homeric or other cantos. Thus, in Hymn xxxi. 18, the poet says that he is going on to chant “the renowns of men half divine.” Other preludes end with a prayer to the God for luck in the competition of reciters.

This, then, is the plausible explanation of most of the brief Hymns—they were preludes to epic recitations—but the question as to the long narrative Hymns with which the collection opens is different. These were themselves rhapsodies recited at Delphi, at Delos, perhaps in Cyprus (the long Hymn to Aphrodite), in Athens (as the Hymn to Pan, who was friendly in the Persian invasion), and so forth. That the Pisistratidæ organised Homeric recitations at Athens is certain enough, and Baumeister suspects, in xiv., xxiii., xxx., xxxi., xxxii., the hand of Onomacritus, the forger of Oracles, that strange accomplice of the Pisistratidæ. The Hymn to Aphrodite is just such a lay as the Phæacian minstrel sang at the feast of Alcinous, in the hearing of

Odysseus. Finally Baumeister supposes our collection not to have been made by learned editors, like Aristarchus and Zenodotus, but committed confusedly from memory to papyrus by some amateur. The conventional attribution of the Hymns to Homer, in spite of linguistic objections, and of many allusions to things unknown or unfamiliar in the Epics, is merely the result of the tendency to set down “masterless” compositions to a well-known name. Anything of epic characteristics was allotted to the master of Epic. In the same way an unfathered joke of Lockhart’s was attributed to Sydney Smith, and the process is constantly illustrated in daily conversation. The word ὕμνος, hymn, had not originally a religious sense: it merely meant a lay. Nobody calls the Theocritean idylls on Heracles and the Dioscuri “hymns,” but they are quite as much “hymns” (in our sense) as the “hymn” on Aphrodite, or on Hermes.

To the English reader familiar with the Iliad and Odyssey the Hymns must appear disappointing, if he come to them with an expectation of discovering merits like those of the immortal epics. He will not find that they stand to the Iliad as Milton’s “Ode to the Nativity” stands to “Paradise Lost.” There is in the Hymns, in fact, no scope for the epic knowledge of human nature in every mood and aspect. We are not so much interested in the Homeric Gods as in the Homeric mortals, yet the Hymns are chiefly concerned not with men, but with Gods and their mythical adventures. However, the interest of the Hymn to Demeter is perfectly human, for the Goddess is in sorrow, and is mingling with men. The Hymn to Aphrodite, too, is Homeric in its grace, and charm, and divine sense of human limitations, of old

age that comes on the fairest, as Tithonus and Anchises; of death and disease that wait for all. The life of the Gods is one long holiday; the end of our holiday is always near at hand. The Hymn to Dionysus, representing him as a youth in the fulness of beauty, is of a charm which was not attainable, while early art represented the God as a mature man; but literary art, in the Homeric age, was in advance of sculpture and painting. The chief merit of the Delian Hymn is in the concluding description of the assembled Ionians, happy seafarers like the Phæacians in the morning of the world. The confusions of the Pythian Hymn to Apollo make it less agreeable; and the humour of the Hymn to Hermes is archaic. All those pieces, however, have delightfully fresh descriptions of sea and land, of shadowy dells, flowering meadows, dusky, fragrant caves; of the mountain glades where the wild beasts fawn in the train of the winsome Goddess; and the high still peaks where Pan wanders among the nymphs, and the glens where Artemis drives the deer, and the spacious halls and airy palaces of the Immortals. The Hymns are fragments of the work of a school which had a great Master and great traditions: they also illustrate many aspects of Greek religion.

In the essays which follow, the religious aspect of the Hymns is chiefly dwelt upon: I endeavour to bring out what Greek religion had of human and sacred, while I try to explain its less majestic features as no less human: as derived from the earliest attempts at speculation and at mastering the secrets of the world. In these chapters regions are visited which scholars have usually neglected or ignored. It may seem strange to seek the origins of Apollo,



and of the renowned Eleusinian Mysteries, in the tales and rites of the Bora and the Nanga; in the beliefs and practices of Pawnees and Larrakeah, Yao and Khond. But these tribes, too, are human, and what they now or lately were, the remote ancestors of the Greeks must once have been. All races have sought explanations of their own ritual in the adventures of the Dream Time, the *Alcheringa*, when beings of a more potent race, Gods or Heroes, were on earth, and achieved and endured such things as the rites commemorate. And the things thus endured and achieved, as I try to show, are everywhere of much the same nature; whether they are now commemorated by painted savages in the Bora or the Medicine Dance, or whether they were exhibited and proclaimed by the Eumolpidæ in a splendid hall, to the pious of Hellas and of Rome. My attempt may seem audacious, and to many scholars may even be repugnant; but it is on these lines, I venture to think, that the darker problems of Greek religion and rite must be approached. They are all survivals, however fairly draped and adorned by the unique genius of the most divinely gifted race of mankind.

The method of translation is that adopted by Professor Butcher and myself in the *Odyssey*, and by me in a version of *Theocritus*, as well as by Mr. Ernest Myers, who preceded us, in his *Pindar*. That method has lately been censured and, like all methods, is open to objection. But I confess that neither criticism nor example has converted me to the use of modern colloquial English, and I trust that my persistence in using poetical English words in the translation

of Greek poetry will not greatly offend. I cannot render a speech of Anchises thus:—

“If you really are merely a mortal, and if a woman of the normal kind was your mother, while your father (as you lay it down) was the well-known Otreus, and if you come here all through an undying person, Hermes; and if you are to be known henceforward as my wife,—why, then nobody, mortal or immortal, shall interfere with my intention to take instant advantage of the situation.”

That kind of speech, though certainly long-winded, may be the manner in which a contemporary pastoralist would address a Goddess “in a coming on humour.” But the situation does not occur in the prose of our existence, and I must prefer to translate the poet in a manner more congenial, if less up to date. For one rare word “Etin” (πελωρ) I must apologise: it seems to me to express the vagueness of the unfamiliar monster, and is old Scots, as in the tale of “The Red Etin of Ireland.”

## **THE HYMN TO APOLLO**

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The Hymn to Apollo presents innumerable difficulties, both of text, which is very corrupt, and as to the whole nature and aim of the composition. In this version it is divided into two portions, the first dealing with the birth of Apollo, and the foundation of his shrine in the isle of Delos; the second concerned with the establishment of his Oracle and fane at

Delphi. The division is made merely to lighten the considerable strain on the attention of the English reader. I have no pretensions to decide whether the second portion was by the author of the first, or is an imitation by another hand, or is contemporary, or a later addition, or a mere compilation from several sources. The first part seems to find a natural conclusion, about lines 176-181. The blind singer (who is quoted here by Thucydides) appears at that point to say farewell to his cherished Ionian audience. What follows, in our second part, appeals to hearers interested in the Apollo of Crisa, and of the Delphian temple: the *Pythian* Apollo.

According to a highly ingenious, but scarcely persuasive theory of Mr. Verrall's, this interest is unfriendly.<sup>13</sup> Our second part is no hymn at all, but a sequel tacked on for political purposes only: and valuable for these purposes because so tacked on.

From line 207 to the end we have this sequel, the story of Apollo's dealings as Delphinian, and as Pythian; all this following on detached fragments of enigmatic character, and containing also (305-355) the intercalated myth about the birth of Typhaon from Hera's anger. In the politically inspired sequel there is, according to Mr. Verrall, no living zeal for the honour of Pytho (Delphi). The threat of the God to his Cretan ministers, —“Beware of arrogance, or . . . ”— must be a prophecy after the event. Now such an event occurred, early in the sixth century, when the Crisæans were supplanted by the people of the town that had grown up round the Oracle at Delphi. In them, and in the Oracle under their management, the poet shows no interest (Mr.

Verrall thinks), none in the many mystic peculiarities of the shrine. It is quite in contradiction with Delphian tradition to represent, as the Hymn does, Trophonius and Agamedes as the *original* builders.

Many other points are noted—such as the derivation of “Pytho” from a word meaning *rot*,—to show that the hymnist was rather disparaging than celebrating the Delphian sanctuary. Taking the Hymn as a whole, more is done for Delos in three lines, says Mr. Verrall, than for Pytho or Delphi in three hundred. As a whole, the spirit of the piece is much more Delian (Ionian) than Delphic. So Mr. Verrall regards the *Cento* as “a religious pasquinade against the sanctuary on Parnassus,” a pasquinade emanating from Athens, under the Pisistratidæ, who, being Ionian leaders, had a grudge against “the Dorian Delphi,” “a comparatively modern, unlucky, and from the first unsatisfactory” institution. Athenians are interested in the “far-seen” altar of the seaman’s Dolphin God on the shore, rather than in his inland Pythian habitation.

All this, with much more, is decidedly ingenious. If accepted it might lead the way to a general attack on the epics, as *tendenz* pieces, works with a political purpose, or doctored for a political purpose. But how are we to understand the uses of the pasquinade Hymn? Was it published, so to speak, to amuse and aid the Pisistratidæ? Does such remote antiquity show us any examples of such handling of sacred things in poetry? Might we not argue that Apollo’s threat to the Crisæans was meant by the poet as a friendly warning, and is prior to the fall of Crisa? One is reminded of the futile ingenuity with which German critics,

following their favourite method, have analysed the fatal Casket Letters of Mary Stuart into letters to her husband, Darnley; or to Murray; or by Darnley to Mary, with scraps of her diary, and false interpolations. The enemies of the Queen, coming into possession of her papers after the affair of Carberry Hill, falsified the Casket Letters into their present appearance of unity. Of course historical facts make this ingenuity unavailing. We regret the circumstance in the interest of the Queen's reputation, but welcome these illustrative examples of what can be done in Germany.<sup>16a</sup>

Fortunately all Teutons are not so ingenious. Baumeister has fallen on those who, in place of two hymns, Delian and Pythian, to Apollo, offer us half-a-dozen fragments. By presenting an array of discordant conjectures as to the number and nature of these scraps, he demonstrates the purely wilful and arbitrary nature of the critical method employed.<sup>16b</sup> Thus one learned person believes in (1) two perfect little poems; (2) two larger hymns; (3) three lacerated fragments of hymns, one lacking its beginning, the other wofully deprived of its end. Another *savant* detects no less than eight fragments, with interpolations; though perhaps no biblical critic *ejusdem farinae* has yet detected eight Isaiahs. There are about ten other theories of similar plausibility and value. Meanwhile Baumeister argues that the Pythian Hymn (our second part) is an imitation of the Delian; by a follower, not of Homer, but of Hesiod. Thus, the Hesiodic school was closely connected with Delphi; the Homeric with Ionia, so that Delphi rarely occurs in the Epics; in fact only thrice (l. 405, θ. 80, λ. 581). The local knowledge is accurate (Pythian Hymn, 103 *sqq.*).

These are local legends, and knowledge of the curious chariot ritual of Onchestus. The Muses are united with the Graces as in a work of art in the Delphian temple. The poet chooses the Hesiodic and un-Homeric myth of Heaven and Earth, and their progeny: a myth current also in Polynesia, Australia, and New Zealand. The poet is full of inquiry as to origins, even etymological, as is Hesiod. Like Hesiod (and Mr. Max Muller), *origines rerum ex nominibus explicat*. Finally, the second poet (and here every one must agree) is a much worse poet than the first. As for the prophetic word of warning to the Crisæans and its fulfilment, Baumeister urges that the people of Cirrha, the seaport, not of Crisa, were punished, in Olympiad 47 (Grote, ii. 374).

Turning to Gemoll, we find him maintaining that the two parts were in ancient times regarded as one hymn in the age of Aristophanes.<sup>18</sup> If so, we can only reply, if we agree with Baumeister, that in the age of Aristophanes, or earlier, there was a plentiful lack of critical discrimination. As to Baumeister's theory that the second part is Hesiodic, Gemoll finds a Hesiodic reminiscence in the first part (line 121), while there are Homeric reminiscences in the second part.

Thus do the learned differ among themselves, and an ordinary reader feels tempted to rely on his own literary taste.

According to that criterion, I think we probably have in the Hymn the work of a good poet, in the early part; and in the latter part, or second Hymn, the work of a bad poet, selecting unmanageable passages of myth, and handling them pedantically and ill. At all events we have here work



visibly third rate, which cannot be said, in my poor opinion, about the immense mass of the Iliad and Odyssey. The great Alexandrian critics did not use the Hymns as illustrative material in their discussion of Homer. Their instinct was correct, and we must not start the consideration of the Homeric question from these much neglected pieces. We must not study *obscurum per obscurius*. The genius of the Epic soars high above such myths as those about Pytho, Typhaon, and the Apollo who is alternately a dolphin and a meteor: soars high above pedantry and bad etymology. In the Epics we breathe a purer air.

Descending, as it did, from the mythology of savages, the mythic store of Greece was rich in legends such as we find among the lowest races. Homer usually ignores them: Hesiod and the authors of the Hymns are less noble in their selections.

For this reason and for many others, we regard the Hymns, on the whole, as post-Homeric, while their collector, by inserting the Hymn to Ares, shows little proof of discrimination. Only the methods of modern German scholars, such as Wilamowitz Möllendorf, and of Englishmen like Mr. Walter Leaf, can find in the Epics marks of such confusion, dislocation, and interpolations as confront us in the Hymn to Apollo. (I may refer to my work, "Homer and the Epic," for a defence of the unity of Iliad and Odyssey.) For example, Mr. Verrall certainly makes it highly probable that the Pythian Hymn, at least in its concluding words of the God, is not earlier than the sixth century. But no proof