

# ***Homer and the Near East: From Mythological Stories to Historical Memory***

## **Conference Abstract**

International Conference

Ramada Hotel, Alexandroupolis (Thrace, Greece)

End of May 2027

The Homeric epics, while foundational to the Greek literary canon and Western cultural heritage, are deeply embedded in a wider network of mythological, ritual, and historical traditions that stretch across the Eastern Mediterranean and the ancient Near East. As recent decades of research in comparative philology, archaeology, and literary studies have shown, the Iliad and the Odyssey bear the marks of a long and complex process of cross-cultural interaction extending back into the Late Bronze Age (c. 1600–1200 BCE) and into the transitional periods that followed.

This conference seeks to investigate the multidimensional interconnections between Homeric poetry and the cultures of Anatolia, Mesopotamia, the Levant, and the broader East Mediterranean world. Our point of departure is not simply the possibility of direct influence or borrowing, but the larger question of how myth, epic, and ritual function as mediums of historical memory and cultural identity in societies undergoing profound transformations—political collapse, reconfiguration of power, and rearticulation of collective memory.

We aim to reframe Homeric studies within the dynamics of interregional contact zones: spaces where languages, narrative motifs, and ritual frameworks circulated via trade, migration, diplomacy, and performance. These processes, far from linear, suggest a palimpsest of stories and meanings, in which the Homeric epics emerge not as isolated literary monuments but as late expressions of a *long durée* of mythopoeic transmission.

The conference will be organized around four major thematic axes:

### **1. Asia Minor Traditions and Anatolian Interfaces**

This strand explores the cultural, mythological, and ritual continuities between Homeric poetry and the diverse traditions of Late Bronze Age Anatolia, particularly those of the Hittites, Luwians, and other Anatolian-speaking peoples. Recent advances in Hittitology and the study of Anatolian archives (Boğazköy/Hattusa, Arzawa, Wilusa, etc.) reveal a rich narrative repertoire—ritual texts, epics, and diplomatic accounts—that provide striking parallels to Homeric themes: divine councils, warrior ethics, treaty oaths, and mythic geography.

We are especially interested in how Anatolian religious and political institutions—such as oath-taking rituals, sacred kingship, or divine intermediaries—might have shaped the narrative syntax of Greek epic. What interpretive models can we develop to trace convergences between Homeric structures and Anatolian mytho-historical templates? What role did the memory of Troy (Wilusa) play in the formation of Greek epic? Contributions may also address how later Greek traditions absorbed, distorted, or refunctionalized Anatolian legacies in response to evolving geopolitical dynamics in the Early Iron Age.

### **2. Mesopotamian Traditions and Eastern Echoes**

This axis focuses on the Mesopotamian contribution to the mythic, ritual, and cosmological substrate of early Greek epic. From the Epic of Gilgamesh to Enuma Elish and Akkadian royal inscriptions, Mesopotamian texts encode a worldview shaped by divine agency, fate, kingship, and heroic suffering. How might such motifs have travelled westward—via trade, itinerant specialists, or oral storytelling—and found new expression in Homeric verse?

Particular attention will be given to comparative mythological analysis (e.g., flood narratives, descent to the underworld, divine combat), the transmission of ritual formulae, and conceptual frameworks such as cosmic order (me, kismet, moira). We also encourage contributions that explore the mediating role of Syro-Anatolian polities and scribal networks in facilitating cultural brokerage between Mesopotamia and the Aegean. Papers may additionally explore the literary strategies used in both traditions to encode political theology, divine legitimation, and sacred kingship.

### **3. History and Philology**

This thematic axis addresses the historical underpinnings and philological dimensions of Homeric poetry, situating them within the broader processes of colonization and the emergence of writing in early Iron Age Greece. Particular emphasis will be placed on the Greek alphabet—not merely as a technical innovation, but as a cultural medium that enabled the preservation, reshaping, and dissemination of epic traditions. How did the transition from oral to written culture affect the structure, content, and ideological framing of the Homeric epics?

In parallel, we invite contributions on how the Greek colonial movements of the 8th to 6th centuries BCE—particularly along the coasts of Asia Minor, the Black Sea, and the western Mediterranean—shaped the transmission, localization, and adaptation of older Eastern narratives. These colonial encounters functioned as liminal spaces where memory was negotiated, myth was re-inscribed, and new forms of political and ethnic identity emerged. The Homeric epics may thus be seen as reflecting not only Bronze Age survivals but also contemporary realities of mobility, negotiation, and cultural translation.

Philologically, we encourage close analysis of Homeric names, motifs, and formulaic structures that suggest cross-cultural borrowing or shared narrative templates. Can linguistic comparison recover traces of contact zones between Greek, Anatolian, and Semitic traditions? In what ways did epic language encode historical processes of interaction and transformation?

### **4. Archaeology, Material Culture, and the Landscapes of Memory**

This thematic field examines the archaeological dimensions of Homeric memory and the Bronze-to-Iron Age transition in the eastern Mediterranean. What material traces—settlements, cultic installations, funerary assemblages, iconography—can be linked with the world depicted in Homeric epic or its predecessors? How do shifting settlement patterns, destruction layers, and the reuse of Bronze Age sites in the Early Iron Age inform our understanding of continuity, rupture, and reception?

We welcome interdisciplinary papers that bring together archaeological data, geoarchaeological reconstructions, and epigraphic or visual evidence to interrogate how material culture shaped collective memory. What landscapes were imbued with heroic significance, and how were they re-inscribed in later cultural imaginaries? Finally, what can the archaeology of ritual—libations, feasting, sacrifice—tell us about the

performative environments of early epic? We are also interested in how regional archaeological contexts (e.g., Troy, Cyprus, Crete, the Dodecanese) participated in the mnemonic economies that sustained and transformed the Homeric narratives.

### **Academic Rationale**

The Homeric epics occupy a pivotal position not only within the Greek literary canon but also within the broader intellectual and cultural history of the ancient Mediterranean. Recent interdisciplinary research has significantly shifted the paradigm through which these texts are understood, highlighting their entanglement with the wider narrative and ritual traditions of the ancient Near East. The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, far from being solely Greek creations, now appear as complex cultural products shaped by a longue durée of interaction, transmission, and transformation.

This conference seeks to provide a platform for systematic and critical inquiry into the multilayered connections between Homeric poetry and the civilizations of Anatolia, Mesopotamia, the Levant, and the broader Eastern Mediterranean world. Our aim is not to pursue simplistic models of influence or source-hunting, but to interrogate the shared cognitive, mythological, and performative frameworks within which epic traditions emerged and evolved during and after the Late Bronze Age (c. 1600–1200 BCE).

Central to our approach is the question of how epic and myth functioned as vehicles for the preservation and rearticulation of historical memory in periods of dramatic social and political transformation. In particular, we aim to explore how ritual forms, oral narrative structures, and material culture contributed to the encoding of collective experiences—ranging from war, displacement, and colonization to kingship, diplomacy, and divine legitimacy.

The conference encourages a synthetic perspective that brings into dialogue literary analysis, historical linguistics, comparative mythology, and archaeological evidence. We conceptualize Homeric poetry not as an isolated literary achievement, but as a palimpsest of earlier narrative traditions and ritual performances that circulated across contact zones linking the Aegean, Anatolia, and the Levant. These zones—facilitated by trade, migration, warfare, and intercultural diplomacy—provided fertile ground for the exchange and hybridization of narrative motifs, mythological archetypes, and ritual language.

By assembling a diverse group of scholars working across disciplinary and regional boundaries, this international conference seeks to contribute substantively to current debates on cultural memory, interregional connectivity, and the diachronic formation of epic traditions. Moreover, by situating the conference in Alexandroupolis—at the very threshold between Europe and Asia—we underscore both the geographical and symbolic relevance of cross-cultural dialogue in the ancient and modern worlds.

We anticipate that this gathering will not only illuminate the Homeric epics in new light, but also offer broader insights into the mechanisms of cultural transmission, the poetics of memory, and the dynamic interplay between mythology and history across civilizations.

**Organizing and Scientific Committee:**

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