About a perfect start for a world-wide web of song

Citation

Published Version
https://classical-inquiries.chs.harvard.edu/about-a-perfect-start-for-a-world-wide-web-of-song/

Permanent link
https://nrs.harvard.edu/URN-3:HUL.INSTREPOS:37366747

Terms of Use
This article was downloaded from Harvard University’s DASH repository, and is made available under the terms and conditions applicable to Other Posted Material, as set forth at http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:dash.current.terms-of-use#LAA

Share Your Story
The Harvard community has made this article openly available. Please share how this access benefits you. Submit a story.

Accessibility
**Classical Inquiries**

**Editors:** Angelia Hanhardt and Keith Stone  
**Consultant for Images:** Jill Curry Robbins  
**Online Consultant:** Noel Spencer

**About**

*Classical Inquiries* (CI) is an online, rapid-publication project of Harvard's Center for Hellenic Studies, devoted to sharing some of the latest thinking on the ancient world with researchers and the general public.

While articles archived in DASH represent the original *Classical Inquiries* posts, *CI* is intended to be an evolving project, providing a platform for public dialogue between authors and readers. Please visit [http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:hul.eresource:Classical_Inquiries](http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:hul.eresource:Classical_Inquiries) for the latest version of this article, which may include corrections, updates, or comments and author responses.

Additionally, many of the studies published in *CI* will be incorporated into future CHS publications. Please visit [http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:hul.eresource:CHS.Online_Publishing](http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:hul.eresource:CHS.Online_Publishing) for a complete and continually expanding list of open access publications by CHS.

*Classical Inquiries* is published under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/). Every effort is made to use images that are in the public domain or shared under Creative Commons licenses. Copyright on some images may be owned by the Center for Hellenic Studies. Please refer to captions for information about copyright of individual images.

**Citing Articles from Classical Inquiries**

To cite an article from *Classical Inquiries*, use the author’s name, the date, the title of the article, and the following persistent identifier:  
[http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:hul.eresource:Classical_Inquiries](http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:hul.eresource:Classical_Inquiries).

For example:

§0. Homeric poetry, at a pivotal moment where it represents the making of Homeric poetry itself, pictures a blind singer of tales in the act of starting his song. The singer is shown in the act of ‘starting from a thread [οιμή] that had at that time a fame [κλέος] reaching all the way up to the wide sky’. That is how I translate line 74 in Rhapsody 8 of the Homeric Odyssey: οἴμης τῆς τότ′ ἄρα κλέος οὐράνῳ συνεικόρομεν. The song that the singer of tales is singing here is pictured as a world-wide web of song, reaching all the way up to an unlimited celestial expanse. And the threading or οιμή that becomes the song is being made by a master weaver who starts weaving his web with a heading band, as weavers call it. Ancient Greek weavers called it the exastis (ἐξαστίς), and we see it pictured in the drawing that I show as the illustration for the cover of this essay. The drawing originates from Elizabeth Barber, who is not only a renowned expert in ancient textiles but also a deft weaver in her own right. And such a heading band, as pictured in this drawing, makes for a perfect start of Homeric song as sung by the singer of tales. There is a primal metaphor at work here. If a weaver makes a perfect start, then the web that is woven by the weaver can lead to a perfect finish. Comparably, a perfect start for Homeric singing leads to a perfect song, that is, to a marvel of unified poetry.

§1. In their post for Classical Inquiries 2020.08.07, guest-editors Rachele Pierini and Tom Palaima have published comments by Elizabeth Barber that I find relevant to the meaning of the word οιμή, used in the genitive case (“genitive of origin”), at line 74 of Rhapsody 8 in the Homeric Odyssey. In this context, we find Demodokos, the blind singer of tales, ‘starting from a thread [οιμή] that had at that time a fame [κλέος] reaching all the way up to the wide sky’. As I already indicated in my introduction to this brief essay, I argue that we see here a metaphor where the making of epic song is compared to the weaving of a web—and where the beginning of the song is compared to the weaving of a heading band for the web. I quote here the relevant comments of Barber in Classical Inquiries 2020.08.07 concerning the craft of weaving in the Mycenaean era:

For weaving, the Mycenaean used the warp-weighted loom [here she shows the same line drawing that I showed for illustrating my essay], on which the warp-tension is produced by stretching the warp threads between a top beam of wood and heavy weights tied onto bunches of warp threads near the floor. [...] In order to be able to tie the weights on, the weaver must first attach each warp thread firmly to the top beam. The only efficient way to do this is to weave a band, called a heading band, in which the weft of the band is pulled out in very long loops to make what will be the warp threads of the future cloth [Figures 4 and 5 in Barber’s commentary]. This firmly-woven band, with its cargo, is then lashed.
firmly across the top beam so that the newly-made warp threads for the future cloth hang down. These are then separated—one forward, the next one back, etc.—to form the primary shed. The weights are then hung on. This whole long process can be called dressing the loom. Only then can the weaving begin.

§2. I argue, then, that the oimé in Odyssey 8.74 is metaphorically the web of song, and, as the singer of tales starts to weave his web, as it were, he has to make a heading band for the song.

§3. I now go on to argue that such a heading band is what Greeks in the classical era called the prooimion, translated into Latin as the prooemium, ‘proem’. I repeat here the basics of my argumentation as I present it in Homer the Classic (Nagy 2008|2009) 2§92:

In the case of the compound noun prooimion / προοίμιον, conventionally translated as ‘proemium’, the element –oiμ/-οιμ- is derived from a root that we find also attested in two simple nouns, oimos/oìμος and oimē/oιμή. The Attic by-form of prooimion/προοίμιον, which is phroimion/φροιμίον, elucidates the prehistory of the root: we must reconstruct it not as *oiμ- but as *hoim-, from *soim-. This reconstruction helps elucidate the surviving contexts of both oimos/oìμος and oimē/oιμή, which do not always give a clear picture of the basic meaning of either form.\[1\] In some contexts, the meaning seems to be ‘song’,\[2\] while in others it seems to be ‘way, pathway’.\[3\] With the help of comparative evidence, however, the primary meaning of oimos and oimē can be reconstructed as ‘thread, threading’, and the meanings ‘song’ or ‘way, pathway’ can be explained as secondary: that is, ‘song’ and ‘way, pathway’ are metaphorical generalizations derived from the meaning ‘thread, threading’.\[4\] And it is such a primary meaning ‘thread, threading’ that we find in comparable forms attested in other Indo-European languages: for example, the form *soimoθ that we reconstruct from Greek oimos is attested as Old Icelandic seimr, meaning ‘thread’.\[5\] In terms of such a primary meaning, the etymology of the compound noun prooimion ‘proemium’ can be interpreted as a metaphor referring to the ‘initial threading’ of a song. A close semantic parallel to the etymology of Greek prooimion ‘proemium’ as an ‘initial threading’ of a song is the etymology of Latin exordium, which likewise means ‘proemium’ in poetic and rhetorical contexts: the meaning of this noun as well can be traced back to the basic idea of an ‘initial threading’.\[6\] The poetic and rhetorical concepts of both Greek prooimion and Latin exordium in the sense of ‘proemium’ have a common Indo-European ancestry.

Bibliography


Notes

[1] For a survey of contexts, see Chantraine DELG under the entries οἶμος and οἶμη.
[2] For example, oimē can be translated as ‘song’ in Odyssey 8.74 and 22.347.
[3] For example, oimos can be translated as ‘way’ in Hesiod Works and Days 290. In the case of the form δύσοιμος in Aeschylus Libation-Bearers 945, it is explained in Hesychius (under the appropriate entry) as δύσοδος.
[4] Nagy 2020:72, 81. See also Nagy 1996:63n20, with reference to Durante 1976:176–177, who disagrees with Chantraine DELG (again, under the entries οἶμος and οἶμη). Chantraine concludes that the basic meanings of oimos and oimē are distinct, but the contexts that he adduces point to an opposite conclusion, as noticed already by Pagliaro 1953:34–40.

Tags: heading band, Homeric epic, Homeric Odyssey, proem, weaving

Comments are closed.