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Riding on Homer's Chariot:
The Search for a Historical 'Epic Society' *

ABSTRACT

This paper continues the author's long-standing quest to define the historicity of 'epic society' and to understand epic warfare and battle descriptions. It summarises the range of questions involved and a number of aspects on which some agreement has been achieved. Further progress is only possible by using new approaches. One of these, the comparative study of epic traditions, has recently yielded important results that are briefly summarised. Another new approach, overlapping with that of narratology, aims at understanding the working methods and conventions of the epic singer's art. The application of this approach to the narrative of epic battles has made it possible to distinguish between two large type scenes: 'normal battles' and 'flight and *aristeia* phases'. The former are essentially historical and thus help us understand early Greek fighting, while the latter are essentially fantastic. Three elements occur predominantly or almost exclusively in these fantasy scenes: the *aristeiai* of the greatest heroes, the active intervention of gods in battle, and the use of chariots *in battle*. The demonstration, provided in the final section of this paper, that the latter – a component of Homeric battle that has long resisted convincing explanation – is part of the singer's arsenal of fantastic entertainment and 'special effects', removes it from historical consideration and further facilitates the explanation of epic battles and their historicity.

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In the sixth book of the *Iliad* (119-236) an Achaean and a Lycian hero, Diomedes and Glaucus, confront each other on the battlefield. We are still in the middle of the first of the four great battles that are described in the epic. The heroes meet for the first time. As is usual in such situations, they challenge each other through aggressive and boastful talk. Obviously, though, by that late stage of the war the two leaders should have known each other.

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