

# Numbers in the Homeric Catalogue of Ships

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SCHOLARS have lately given much attention to the place names in the Catalogues of *Iliad* Book II, but they have tended to ignore the numbers of ships stated by Homer to have accompanied each Achaean contingent. Thus while many hold that the Catalogue of place names originated, or may well have originated, in the later Mycenaean age, the numbers of ships are usually thought to be exaggerated and to be Ionian additions with no Mycenaean tradition behind them.<sup>1</sup> The purpose of this paper is to suggest that the numbers assigned to each contingent deserve greater consideration than they are generally given. Professor Page has written, “We have no reason to believe in the numbers of ships . . .” Let us therefore examine his arguments to see whether his assertion is cogent or not.

1. “It is noticeable that the Catalogue includes all multiples of ten up to a hundred, except the only one (seventy, *ἑβδομήκοντα*) which cannot be fitted into the verse.” That as stated is not true, because no contingent of ten or twenty ships is listed. It is true, however, that *ἑβδομήκοντα* will not fit a hexameter. Are we then to suppose that a poet wishing to say “Seventy ships sailed with him” was unable to do so? Surely not: *ἑπτα δὲ τῷ δεκάδες νήων γλαφυρῶν ἅμ’ ἔποντο* *vel sim.* expresses the idea with Homer’s vocabulary, and the omission of the number *seventy* is thus seen to be less significant—as likely to be due to the poet’s choice as to the exigencies of his metre.

2. Noting that in ten out of twenty-nine places the entries of ships cannot easily be detached from their contexts, Professor Page remarks that the numbers may be thought as old as the names; “but,” he continues, “that inference loses its charm so soon as we take into account the language in which the entries are composed”; and he proceeds to point out that the Mycenaean Greek for “ships” was *nawes*, pronounced *νήες* by the Ionians, which appears in twenty

<sup>1</sup> See for example D. Page, *History and the Homeric Iliad* (Berkeley 1959) 151–154.

places, whereas in the other nine we find the Ionian formation *νέες*. He adds that in four instances *νέες* is accompanied by the new form *ἔστιχόωντο*, which looks to be an Ionian development.<sup>2</sup>

Here we must be careful to distinguish between the language in which the poem is expressed and (what was certainly different) the form in which the poem originated. As has been noticed in an Irish context, “the fact that an extant recension of a tale is considerably later linguistically than the date of its characters does not preclude the possibility that it is merely a modernization of a near-contemporary tale”<sup>3</sup>—a remark which is true of an oral as well as a written tradition. The fact that *ἔστιχόωντο* is Ionian, not Mycenaean, does not prove the numbers of ships found with that verb also are of Ionian origin. The comparable Ionian form *ἔσχατόωσα* is found in the body of the Catalogue,<sup>4</sup> but Professor Page, who believes that the Catalogue originated in Mycenaean times, would be the last to argue that the words *Ποσιδήϊον* or *Ἄνθηδόνα ἔσχατόωσαν* entail that the Boeotian entry is of purely Ionian composition.

3. The same objection applies to the following argument: “. . . one or two of the numbers themselves appear to argue in favour of Ionian composition: it is improbable that the contraction of < \* > *ὄγδωφάκοντα* to *ὄγδώκοντα* could be earlier than the Ionian period; and *ἐνενήκοντα* is surely not replaceable by any conceivable Mycenaean form. We are therefore compelled to admit that about a third of the ship entries are of purely Ionian composition.” Of course we are—at least a third, but we want to know when the numbers originated, not when they were included in the poem in their present form. The body of the Catalogue contains many Ionisms, yet Professor Page reasonably claims that it is substantially an inheritance from the later Mycenaean age. Similarly the Ionisms in the number entries are by themselves no objection to the claim that the numbers too are as likely to be of Mycenaean origin as not. Moreover the claim may still be made, whether or not the entries giving numbers of ships can be disentangled from their contexts.

<sup>2</sup> P. Chantraine, *Grammaire homérique* (Paris 1942) 358–359, who compares the uncontracted form, without *διέκτασις*, *ὄμοστιχάει* [O 635]. *νέες ἔστιχόωντο* may simply be an Ionic variant of an earlier *νῆες* (or *νᾶρες*) *στιχάωντο*. But *νέες κίων* [B509] is less easily reduced.

<sup>3</sup> Brian Ó Cuív, *PBA* 49 (1963) 241.

<sup>4</sup> See G. P. Shipp, *Studies in the Language of Homer* (Cambridge 1953) 62, and Page, *op.cit.* 177.

4. For Professor Page the numbers of ships are “presumably” “reckless exaggerations”: “the figures themselves discourage all but the sturdiest faith. For example, the figures for Thessalian districts (some of them apparently not maritime) are much too high; the total of 1,186 ships is logistically absurd for a landing in the Troad . . .” This characteristically vigorous and stimulating rhetoric demands analysis. (a) Whether the numbers of ships of contingents from northern Greece are too high or not is perhaps a subjective matter. Compared with the hundred ships of Agamemnon, the eighty of Diomedes, the sixty of Menelaos, the ninety of Nestor or the eighty of Idomeneus, the northern contingents from the Greek mainland are not “too high”: Achilles has fifty, Protesilaos had forty, Eumelos has eleven, Philoktetes seven, the sons of Asklepios thirty, Eurypylos forty, Polypoites and Leonteus forty, Gouneus twenty-two, and Prothoos forty. Since the great Thessalian plain was rich and populous in Mycenaean times, we need not be surprised at the number of contingents from that neighbourhood. (b) It is true that some northern Greek heroes who appear in the Catalogue did not have their homes near the sea. But neither did the remote Arcadians, to whom Agamemnon gave sixty ships. We are not told whence the inland northerners obtained their ships, but that does not permit us to assert that their ship numbers are exaggerated. Agamemnon, as commander in chief, may, for example, have ordered other heroes to make ships ready for the inlanders at Aulis or Pagasai, but speculation is pointless. (c) Even if we grant to Professor Page that the total of ships is logistically absurd for a landing in the Troad, it has to be pointed out that the expedition was not aimed at Troy only but at other places in or near northwestern Asia Minor too—as Walter Leaf justly remarked, it was a Great Foray,<sup>5</sup> in which Thebe, Lyrnessos, Lesbos, Tenedos and other places were assaulted. Before we assert that the numbers were exaggerated, we must, to be fair to Homer and his predecessors, know whether or not Mycenaean Greece was incapable of mustering such a fleet. We have no contemporary evidence from the later Mycenaean period to help in this matter, but the Egyptian records of the attacks of the sea peoples suggest the presence of powerful fleets in the eastern Mediterranean about 1200 B.C., and the economic strength of the Mycenaean world was such that a concerted effort

<sup>5</sup> *Troy* (London 1912) Appendix D.

to muster one thousand or more ships may well have been within the powers of the Achaeans. It is better therefore to state that we do not know how accurate the numbers are; we have no right to declare them exaggerated.<sup>6</sup>

5. It is illogical to declare the *numbers* exaggerated while ignoring the *sizes* of the ships. The Boeotian ships contained 120 men, and there were 50 of them making a contingent of 6,000. Philoktetes had fifty rowers in each of his seven ships, and so perhaps brought no more than 350 men to Troy, in Homer's opinion. Achilles too had 50 men in each of his 50 ships, and so brought 2,500 men to Troy (*Iliad* 16. 168–170). By far the greatest contingent followed Agamemnon (*Iliad* 2.577), whose force was therefore much larger than the 6,000 of the Boeotians. If with Thucydides (1.10.5) we strike an average, then the total contingent was  $85 \times 1,186$ , or about one hundred thousand men. This is not an absurdly large number, given the resources of Mycenaean Greece. At the battle of Lade there were, if each trireme held 200 men, about 75,000 men from Ionia and the Aeolis alone.<sup>7</sup> Moreover the majority of the Achaeans' ships may have been closer in size to those of Philoktetes than to those of the Boeotians, so that a total markedly less than 100,000 may have been supposed in the oral tradition to have gone to Troy.

6. We may agree with Professor Page when he writes that "it is prudent to allow that a considerable period of time may have elapsed between the Trojan War and the making of the Catalogue"; but what he says next must be questioned: "... it is unlikely that an Order of Battle composed at the time of the gathering of the clans, or very soon afterwards, would have distorted the facts so far as to assign the largest and most prominent place to Boeotia and her obscure neighbours." Later he concludes that the Catalogue was composed in Boeotia (1) because of the prominence of Boeotia in the list and (2) because Boeotia was the native home of poetry of this type throughout the Dark Ages. The second reason, though not conclusive, is better than the first. The Catalogue has to begin somewhere and where better than in Central Greece near the centre of the Mycenaean

<sup>6</sup> Thucydides adds the interesting point that the entire army could not be employed against Troy at one time, because the Achaeans had to forage (1.11.1 and see also Jacoby on *Hellanikos FGrHist* 4 F 27). Note too that Homer does not absurdly exaggerate the numbers of the Trojans: he thought that if the Asiatic allies were not counted there were more than ten Achaeans at Troy to each Trojan householder (*Iliad* 2.123–128).

<sup>7</sup> C. Roebuck, *Ionian Trade and Colonization* (New York 1959) 22.

domains; close to Aulis where the fleet, whose contingents it is to list, gathered? Twenty-nine places are named, but no sign is given that Boeotia was specially populous or the Boeotian contingent outstandingly large<sup>8</sup>—that is a distinction reserved for Agamemnon. Mycenaean Boeotia contained many sites but few of them are known to have been large; thus the Boeotian entry is not in serious conflict with the available archaeological evidence.<sup>9</sup>

7. Professor Page states that according to Thucydides the Boeotians occupied Boeotia, which was formerly known as the Kadmeian land, sixty years after the Trojan War; he therefore declares that the Catalogue represents Boeotia as it was at least sixty years after the Trojan War, so that the immigrant Boeotians may well have exaggerated the importance of their newly acquired territory, which he implies was of less importance at the time of the Trojan War.

What Thucydides in fact says (1.12.3) is that the Boeotians, being displaced by the Thessalians, occupied the land called formerly Kadmeian and now Boeotia in the sixtieth year after the Trojan War; but that there had been an *ἀποδασμός* before the war, which explains why Boeotians joined in the Trojan campaign. To judge from the Catalogue, which Thucydides evidently has in mind here, the group of Boeotians who arrived before the Trojan War at least sixty years before the others was a large one. There is nothing in Thucydides or in the Catalogue to show that the Catalogue's Boeotian entry represents Boeotia as it was no earlier than sixty years after the Trojan War; Professor Page's contention that the picture of Boeotia is distorted therefore requires other evidence than that of Thucydides to confirm it. The Boeotia of the Catalogue, twenty-nine towns, fifty ships, six thousand men and all may even be the Boeotia whose forces joined the Achaean host at Aulis.<sup>10</sup>

To conclude: the numbers in the Homeric Catalogue of Ships have as strong a claim to serious consideration as the place names and the

<sup>8</sup> T. W. Allen, *The Homeric Catalogue of Ships* (Oxford 1921) 41.

<sup>9</sup> See the judicious remarks of V. R. d'A. Desborough, *The Last Mycenaeans and their Successors* (Oxford 1964) 120. The dense Mycenaean settlement around Lake Copais and elsewhere in Boeotia is documented by R. Hope Simpson, *A Gazetteer and Atlas of Mycenaean Sites* [*BullInstClassStud*, Suppl. 16] (London 1965) 113–129.

<sup>10</sup> It is noteworthy that the Catalogue begins with the two towns closest to the mustering place, Hyrie and Aulis [Strabo 404c]: see also V. Burr, *ΝΕΩΝ ΚΑΤΑΛΟΓΟΣ*, *Klio Beiheft* 49 (1944) 18–20.

heroes.<sup>11</sup> Ionic forms appear in the numbers and beside them; but Ionic forms also appear in the main body of the Catalogue. Logically we cannot condemn the numbers as late intrusions while accepting a Mycenaean origin for the list of places. The Catalogue as we have it is an Ionian version of an ancient list of places, heroes, and numbers of ships which originated long before the time of Homer, possibly in Boeotia where catalogues were long fashionable. In the present state of the evidence we have no right to assert that the numbers of ships entered the oral tradition more recently than the place names and the heroes.

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<sup>11</sup> The small force of ships from Rhodes, nine, is noteworthy (*Iliad* 2.654); they do nothing to support the proposed identification of the island with the kingdom known to the Hittites as Aḫḫijavā. Mr J. F. Lazenby has drawn my attention to the smallness of the contingent from Iolkos and its neighbourhood (*Iliad* 2.713), a populous district in Mycenaean times. One possible explanation of the seeming discrepancy is, as Mr J. N. Coldstream has suggested, that the Iolkians may have had to provide ships for the inlanders and so had few left for themselves. The claim has been made (C. R. Beye, *AJP* 82 [1961] 370–378) that νῆες in the Catalogue means “shiploads” or “ship-units” of troops, not just “ships,” but to extract that meaning from the context is not easy.