



*The Tradition of the Trojan War in Homer and the Epic Cycle*, Jonathan S. Burgess. Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001.  
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The title of Jonathan Burgess' book clearly identifies his subject and his approach to his material. He exhaustively investigates the depictions of mythological stories about the Trojan War in Homeric epic, the group of lost poems known collectively as the Epic Cycle that we now know about indirectly from fragments and prose summaries, and visual media of various kinds. These investigations lead him to conclude that the Homeric poems had little impact on visual representations of stories from the Trojan War mythological cycle before the 5th century BCE. Instead, events concerning Troy that lie outside the Homeric epics predominate in early artistic representations. Burgess shows that many references in early artistic media (both literature and art) which have been thought to refer specifically to the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey* in fact do no such thing: some early depictions of the Trojan War merely share a common mythological heritage with the Homeric poems, rather than referring to them specifically, while other supposed Trojan War images and texts may not refer to the Trojan War at all. In sum, then, Burgess is concerned to bring our view of the influence of the Homeric epics on early art and poetry more in line with their actual influence on ancient artists and poets (as opposed to historical notions of their overwhelming importance); correspondingly, he argues that the importance of the Epic Cycle has been systematically underappreciated, not only because of the dominance of Homeric poetry but because of an assumption that Epic

Cycle poetry is late, derivative, and inferior. Although some of the discussion is aimed at refuting arguments no longer widely favored, the reader comes away from the book with an enriched understanding of the full range of early tellings of stories about Troy.

The book has a brief introduction, three chapters (each of which has several subdivisions), a conclusion, five brief appendices, sixty pages of endnotes, an extensive bibliography, and an index. The first chapter, “The Epic Cycle and the Tradition of the Trojan War”, gives an overview of Burgess’ notions of how the Epic Cycle came into being. “Homer and the Tradition of the Trojan War” examines the Homeric poems in the context of the range of early artistic representations of stories of the Trojan War. The final chapter, “The Epic Cycle and Homer,” brings together Homeric epic and the Epic Cycle in order to show that the latter, rather than being derived from or composed to complement the former, were in fact—at least in origin—free-standing poems that overlapped in subject, sometimes significantly, with the Homeric epics. The appendices give complete lists of early Trojan War images, of textual passages referring to leaves, and so on. There is no separate index nominum or index locorum—these are included in the general index. The notes, unfortunately, extensive and stimulating though they are, are compromised in usefulness by the editorial practice of Johns Hopkins University Press of favoring endnotes rather than footnotes. This is regrettable, particularly in the case of a book as exhaustively documented as this one: chapter 2 has 300 footnotes and the text of the notes is one-third as long as the regular text. It would greatly improve the effectiveness of the notes if the press had formatted them as footnotes instead of endnotes.

Chapter 1 hypothesizes that originally, the individual poems of the Epic Cycle had no particular relationship either to one another or to the Homeric epics. They were linked together into a series by Hellenistic editors and then went through several more stages of transmission before eventually reaching us via Photius’ description (9th c. CE) of Proclus’ summaries in the *Chrestomathy* (either 2nd or 5th c. CE). The changes that this Hellenistic editorial process made in the poems to be included produced inconsistencies and discrepancies between individual poems, as did the later process of summarizing the individual poems of the Epic Cycle. After an extensive discussion, Burgess eventually concludes that Proclus was summarizing poems which had been abridged by having books removed from them, so that they would fit together relatively harmoniously into a longer narrative about the Trojan War. This part of

the discussion is very stimulating and persuasive, but it seems unclear at times how it relates to the overall argument that Burgess is making. The chapter concludes by giving a survey of art and literature which retell incidents from the Trojan War story that are also told in the Epic Cycle. It is here that Burgess first makes one of his most significant and compelling points: “non-Homeric images of the Trojan War precede Homeric images and remained far more popular through the seventh century and into the sixth century” (p. 35).

The bulk of the second chapter discusses the images that have previously been thought to “illustrate” Homeric epic. This is the weakest section of the book because—to my mind, at least—Burgess overestimates the extent to which scholars still make the assumptions of Homeric primacy that were common in the mid-20th century. It is notable, for instance, that stretches of his endnotes rely predominantly on work dating from the 1960s or earlier (see e.g. notes 52-65 for pages 62-65). While the notion of Homeric primacy in art may not as be much in need of refutation as Burgess suggests, he does make a very important point when he relates the paucity and lateness of visual images of Homeric stories to the possible date of the poems. In one of his many pithy and effective statements, he says, “It would seem that the poet often credited with changing its [i.e of the Archaic Age] mythological tradition (or even its culture) at the end of the eighth century was first noticed by only a few artists a century later” (p. 89). Toward the end of the chapter, he speculates on why the Homeric epics might have been slow to influence artists and poets of the period. The significance of this chapter lies not so much in establishing that so-called “Homeric” images are not in fact of Homer, but rather in linking the lack of Homeric scenes in early art to 1) larger issues about the origins of the poems and 2) the frequent appearance in the same time period of images of other parts of the Trojan War mythological cycle.

The final chapter argues that the Homeric epics and the poems of the Epic Cycle stem from a common heritage of story and myth rather than from having any kind of direct relationship to one another. Burgess discusses many examples of supposed correspondence between the Epic Cycle and Homeric poetry, showing that in general, a common mythological or formulaic ancestor most likely explains the similarity. This chapter also goes back to the discussion in chapter 1 of the hypothetical abridgement of individual poems within the Epic Cycle to suggest that these abridgements are specifically in response to the dimensions of the Homeric epics. The end of the chapter argues that the

non-Homeric aspects of the Epic Cycle are not unified by being 1) chronologically late or 2) of poor quality, thereby casting doubt on what Burgess describes as the general scholarly assumption that the Epic Cycle is late and substandard in comparison to the Homeric poems. A brief conclusion gives a clear and concise retrospective on the book's major points, firmly foregrounding the overall conclusion that—far from being late and derivative—the Epic Cycle provides important evidence for early mythological traditions about the Trojan War which can and should be used to understand the background for all early versions of these tales. It would have been useful if Burgess had given some examples in the conclusion of specific ways in which this might be done.

Burgess sometimes gets in his own way by not being as clear as he might be in his organization of his material and his use of terminology. The introduction, for example, gives a brief, broad historical overview and a general statement as to what the book will be about. It does not give the reader a sufficiently detailed explanation of the book's methodology or organization. If the introduction were more extensive on these points, the rest of the book would be easier to follow. The individual chapters could use more signposting to enable the reader to follow the wide-ranging discussions more easily and to set off the main conclusions of the argument more effectively.

Similarly, there are some difficulties with the book's terminology. In the book's introduction, Burgess introduces without discussion the term "Archaic Age." Eventually, it becomes clear that he means the period before the fifth century, but it would have been helpful if he had explained this at the outset and given some background and discussion, since "archaic" means different things in different contexts. For instance, when he uses "the Archaic Age" on p. 3 to describe a *terminus ad quem* (the first use of the term "Archaic Age"), it is not clear what he means. "Cyclic" sometimes means stories told by texts of the Epic Cycle (e.g. p. 132), and sometimes the parts of the traditional mythological cycle about Troy that are not narrated by Homeric epic, whether or not they are narrated by the Epic Cycle in particular (e.g. p. 33). These issues lessen the effectiveness of Burgess' argument, but they do not change the fact that he has something important to say about the nature and presentation of early versions of the Trojan War story that scholars of early Greek poetry and art should read.