

Returning to Ithaca

XX January 2013



Flaxman, *The Shield of Achilles*



Postcards of Alexandria c. 1900 AD

Cavafy, *Ithaka* **(1911)**

As you set out for Ithaka
hope your road is a long one,
full of adventure, full of discovery,
Laestrygonians, Cyclops,
angry Poseidon—don't be afraid of them:
you'll never find things like that on your way
as long as you keep your thoughts raised high,
as long as a rare excitement
stirs your spirit and your body.
Laestrygonians, Cyclops,
wild Poseidon—you won't encounter them
unless you bring them along inside your soul,
unless your soul sets them up in front of you.

Hope your road is a long one.

May there be many summer mornings when,
with what pleasure, what joy,
you enter harbours you're seeing for the first time;
may you stop at Phoenician trading stations
to buy fine things,
mother of pearl and coral, amber and ebony,
sensual perfume of every kind —
as many sensual perfumes as you can;
and may you visit many Egyptian cities
to learn and go on learning from their scholars.

Keep Ithaka always in your mind.

Arriving there is what you're destined for.

But don't hurry the journey at all.

Better if it lasts for years,

so you're old by the time you reach the island,

wealthy with all you've gained on the way,

not expecting Ithaka to make you rich.

Ithaka gave you the marvellous journey.

Without her you wouldn't have set out.

She has nothing left to give you now.

And if you find her poor, Ithaka won't have fooled you.

Wise as you will have become, so full of experience,

you'll have understood by then what these Ithakas mean.

A two-part simile in folk-tale idiom (c. 100 AD)

Πᾶς οὖν ὅστις ἀκούει μου τοὺς λόγους τούτους καὶ ποιεῖ αὐτοὺς
ὁμοιωθήσεται ἀνδρὶ φρονίμῳ, ὅστις ὠκοδόμησεν αὐτοῦ τὴν οἰκίαν ἐπὶ τὴν
πέτραν.

καὶ κατέβη ἡ βροχὴ καὶ ἦλθον οἱ ποταμοὶ καὶ ἔπνευσαν οἱ ἄνεμοι
καὶ προσέπεσαν τῇ οἰκίᾳ ἐκείνῃ,
καὶ οὐκ ἔπεσεν, τεθεμελίωτο γὰρ ἐπὶ τὴν πέτραν.

καὶ πᾶς ὁ ἀκούων μου τοὺς λόγους τούτους καὶ μὴ ποιῶν αὐτοὺς
ὁμοιωθήσεται ἀνδρὶ μωρῷ, ὅστις ὠκοδόμησεν αὐτοῦ τὴν οἰκίαν ἐπὶ τὴν
ἄμμον.

καὶ κατέβη ἡ βροχὴ καὶ ἦλθον οἱ ποταμοὶ καὶ ἔπνευσαν οἱ ἄνεμοι
καὶ προσέκοψαν τῇ οἰκίᾳ ἐκείνῃ,
καὶ ἔπεσεν,
καὶ ἦν ἡ πτῶσις αὐτῆς μεγάλη.

(Matthew, 7. 24ff.)



Carpe Diem
(c. 50 BC)



For the ungodly said, reasoning with themselves, but not aright,
Our life is short and tedious,
And in the death of a man there is no remedy:
Neither was there any man known to have returned from the
grave.



For we are born at all adventure:
And we shall be hereafter as if we had never been:
For the breath in our nostrils is as smoke,
And a little spark in the moving of our heart.
(...)
And our name shall be forgotten in time,
And no man shall have our works in remembrance,



Come on therefore, let us enjoy the good things that are present.
(...)

Let us fill ourselves with costly wine and ointments:
And let no flower of spring pass by us:
Let us crown ourselves with rosebuds, before they be withered.

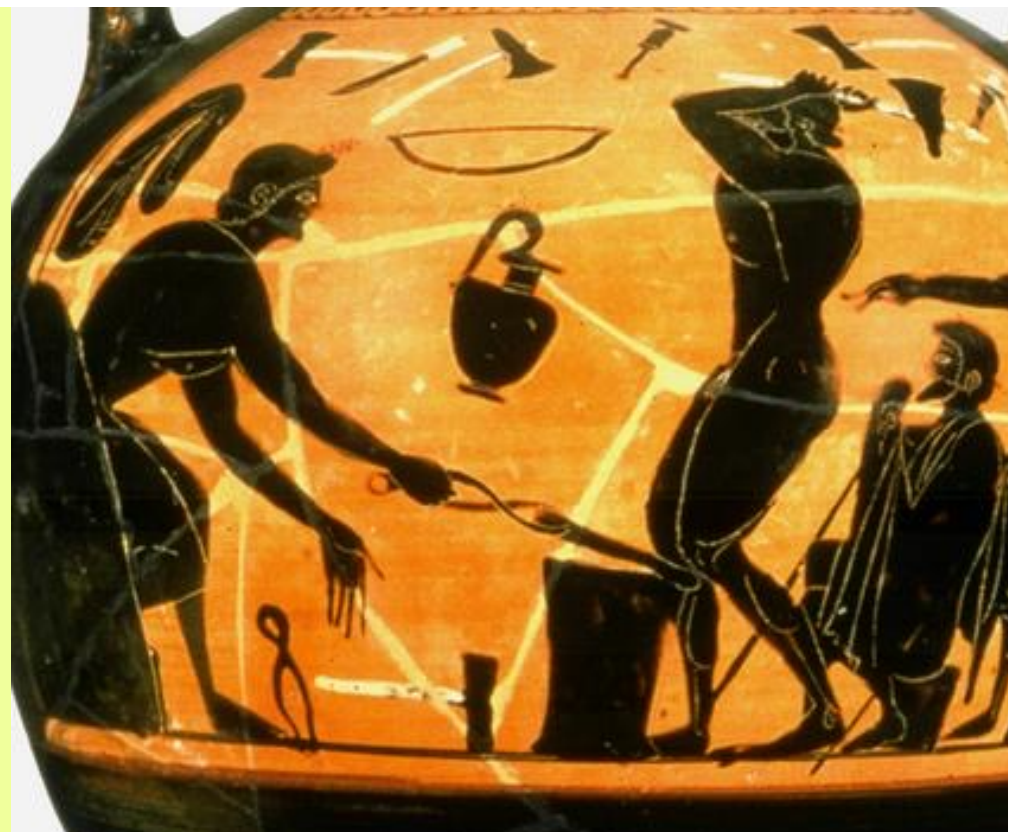
(Wisdom of Solomon, ch. 2)

Praise of craftsmanship (c. 150 BC)

So every carpenter and workmaster,
That laboureth night and day:
And they that cut and grave seals,
And watch to finish a work.

The smith also sitting by the anvil,
And considering the iron work,
The vapour of the fire wasteth his flesh,
And he fighteth with the heat of the furnace:
The noise of the hammer and the anvil is ever in his ears,
And his eyes look still upon the pattern of the thing that he
maketh.

He setteth his mind to finish his work,
And watcheth to polish it perfectly.





So doth the potter sitting at his work,
And turning the wheel about with his feet,
Who is always carefully set at his work,
And maketh all his work by number.

(Wisdom of Sirach, ch. 2)

A poem from the 'Translation of the Seventy' (c. 250 BC)

Κύριος ποιμαίνει με, καὶ οὐδέν με ὑστερήσει.

εἰς τόπον χλόης, ἐκεῖ με κατεσκήνωσεν,
ἐπὶ ὕδατος ἀναπαύσεως ἐξέθρεψέν με,
τὴν ψυχὴν μου ἐπέστρεψεν.

ὠδήγησέν με ἐπὶ τρίβους δικαιοσύνης
ἕνεκεν τοῦ ὀνόματος αὐτοῦ.

ἐὰν γὰρ καὶ πορευθῶ ἐν μέσῳ σκιᾶς θανάτου,
οὐ φοβηθήσομαι κακά, ὅτι σὺ μετ' ἐμοῦ εἶ,
ἡ ῥάβδος σου καὶ ἡ βακτηρία σου, αὐταί με παρεκάλεσαν.









Posidippus (c. 260 BC)

Τιμάνθης ἔγλυψε
[τὸν ἀστερόεντα σάπειρον



Timanthes carved a Persian half-stone gem
Of lapis lazuli, and sold
This piece with starlike flecks of gold
Then to Demylos. Next from him
Dark-haired Nikaia got it, and for this
She traded him a tender kiss. (gf)

Distaff
&
Spindle





Leonidas of Tarentum (c. 250 BC)

ἐσπέριον κήϙον ἀπώσατο
πολλάκις ὕπνον
ἢ γρηὺς πενίην Πλατθὶς ἀμυνομένη,



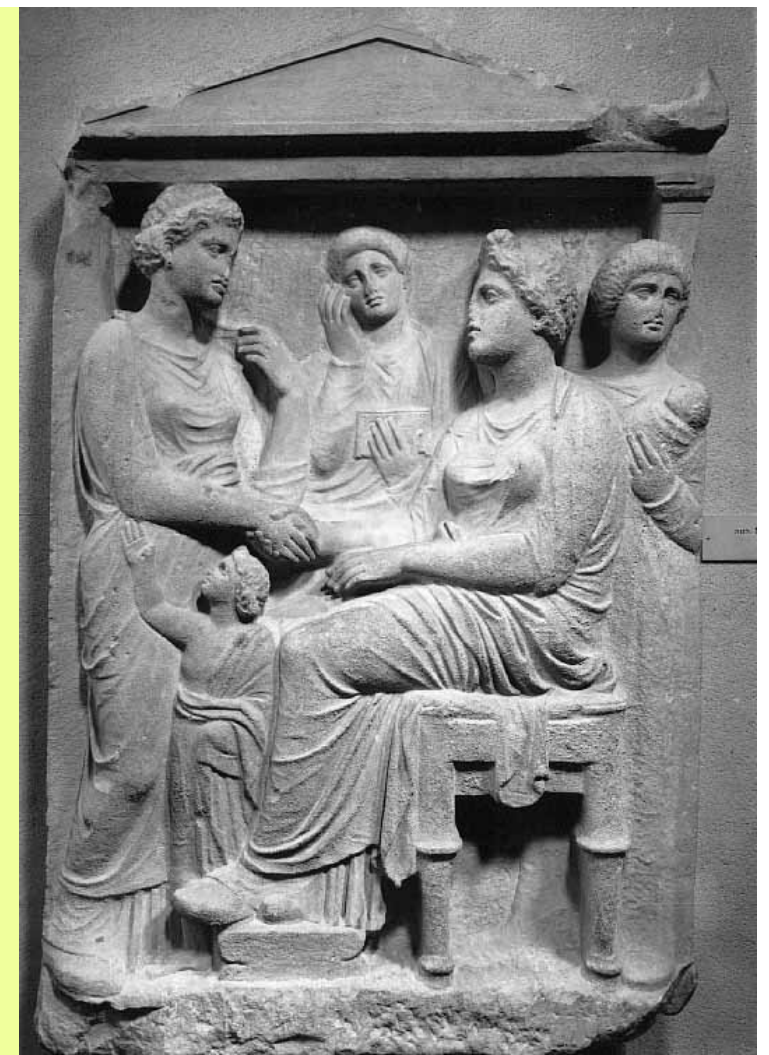
Often she shook off evening and morning sleep,
The old woman Platthis, so she could keep
Poverty far distant; grizzled and grayed,
To distaff and to spindle, spinner's aide,
She sang until the dawn around the place
Of the long course of Athena,



moving with grace,
Twirling in wrinkled hand on wrinkled knee
Enough thread for the loom; lovely was she,
At eighty years the Acheron perceiving,
Who, beautiful, was beautifully weaving. (gf)

Anyte
(c. 300 BC)

ἀντί τοι εὐλεχέος θαλάμου
σεμνῶν θ' ὕμεναίων
μάτηρ στᾶσε τάφῳ
τῷδ' ἔπι μαρμαρίνῳ
παρθενικὰν μέτρον τε τεὸν
καὶ κάλλος ἔχουσιν,
Θερσί, ποτιφθεγκτὰ
δ' ἔπλεο καὶ φθιμένα.



In place of wedding songs and bridal room,
Your mother set upon this marble tomb
A maiden with your grace and form instead,
So, Thersis, we could greet you though you're dead. (gf)

Crates (c. 325 BC)

Πήρη τις πόλις ἐστὶ μέσῳ ἐνὶ οἴνοπι τύφῳ,
καλὴ καὶ πείρα, περίρρυτος, οὐδὲν ἔχουσα,
εἷς ἦν οὔτε τις εἰσπλεῖ ἀνὴρ μωρὸς παράσιτος,
οὔτε λίχνος πόρνης ἐπαγαλλόμενος πυγῇσιν,
ἀλλὰ θύμον καὶ σκόρδα φέρει καὶ σῦκα καὶ ἄρτους,
ἐξ ὧν οὐ πολεμοῦσι πρὸς ἀλλήλους περὶ τούτων,
οὐχ ὅπλα κέκτηνται περὶ κέρματος, οὐ περὶ δόξης.



There is a town called Haversack,
in the midst of wine-dark Delusion,
fair, fruitful, filthy, possessing nothing.
No fools of a parasite sail there,
no one lusting after the buttocks of a tart.
Thyme it produces, garlic, figs and bread –
things men don't then fight each other for –
nor are they equipped to go for cash or fame. (ms)

Sappho

(c. 600 BC)

φαίνεται μοι κῆνος ἴσος θεοῖσιν
ἔμμεν' ὦνηρ, ὅττις ἐνάντιός τοι
ἰσδάνει καὶ πλάσιον ἄδυ φωνεί-
σας ὑπακούει

καὶ γελαίσας ἰμέροεν, τό μ' ἦ μὰν
καρδίαν ἐν στήθεσιν ἐπτόαισεν,

That man seems like a god, sitting
near you, listening to you while
you talk and laugh so sweetly –
it makes my heart flutter.



ὥς γὰρ ἔς σ' ἴδω βρόχε' ὥς με φώναι-
σ' οὐδ' ἐν ἔτ' εἵκει,

ἀλλ' ἄκαν μὲν γλῶσσα πᾶπαγε, λῆπτον
δ' αὐτίκα χρῶι πῦρ ὑπαδεδρομήκεν,
ὀππάτεσσι δ' οὐδ' ἐν ὄρημμ', ἐπιρρόμ-
βεισι δ' ἄκουαι,

καὶ δέ μ' ἴδρως κακχέεται, τρόμος δὲ
παῖσαν ἄγρει, χλωροτέρα δὲ ποίας
ἔμμι, τεθνάκην δ' ὀλίγω ἔπιδεύης
φαίνομ' ἔμ' αὐται.

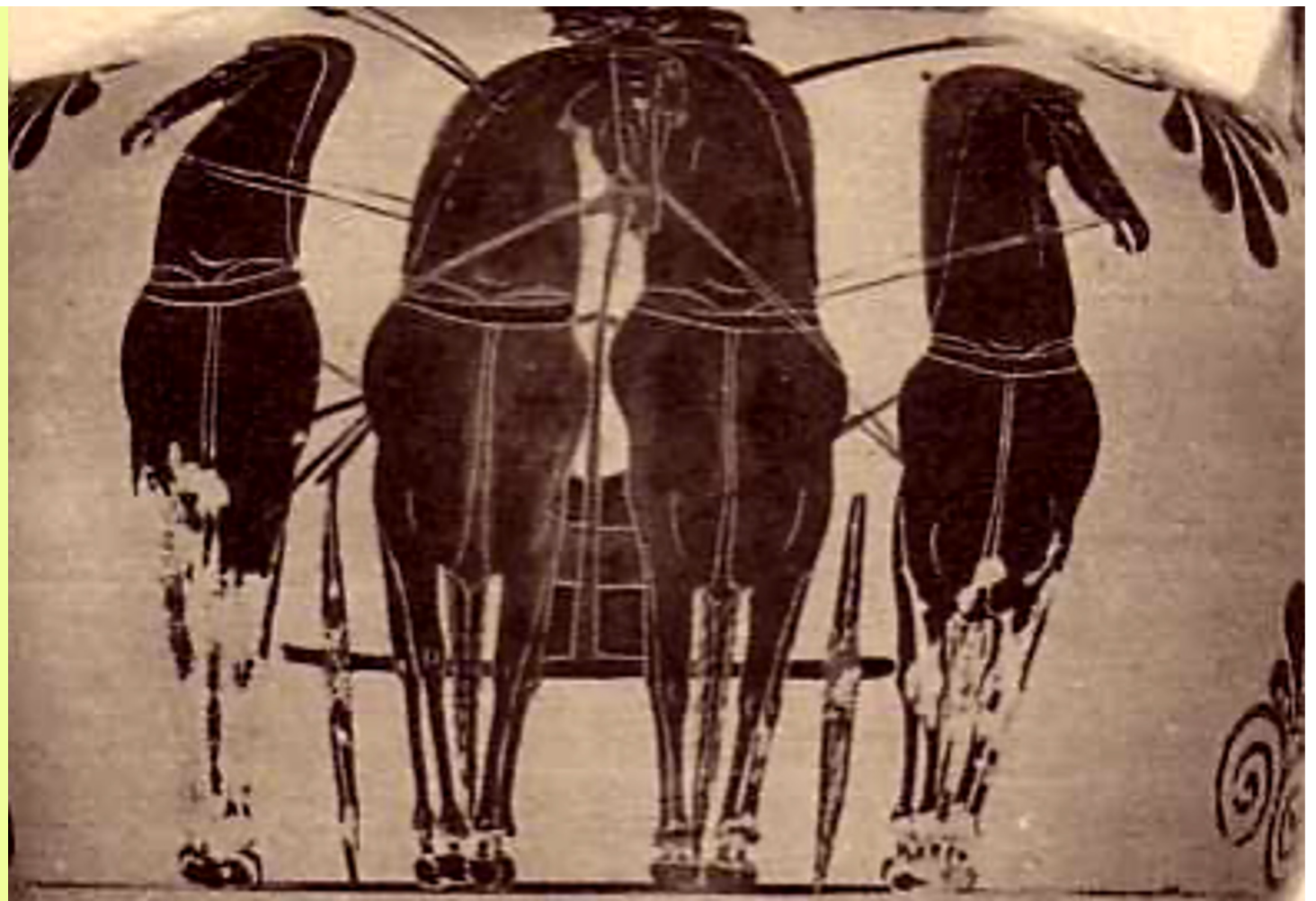
For when I see you, I can't talk,
my tongue freezes, my flesh burns,
I am blind, my ears throb,
I sweat, shiver and go pale
and feel as if I am dying.





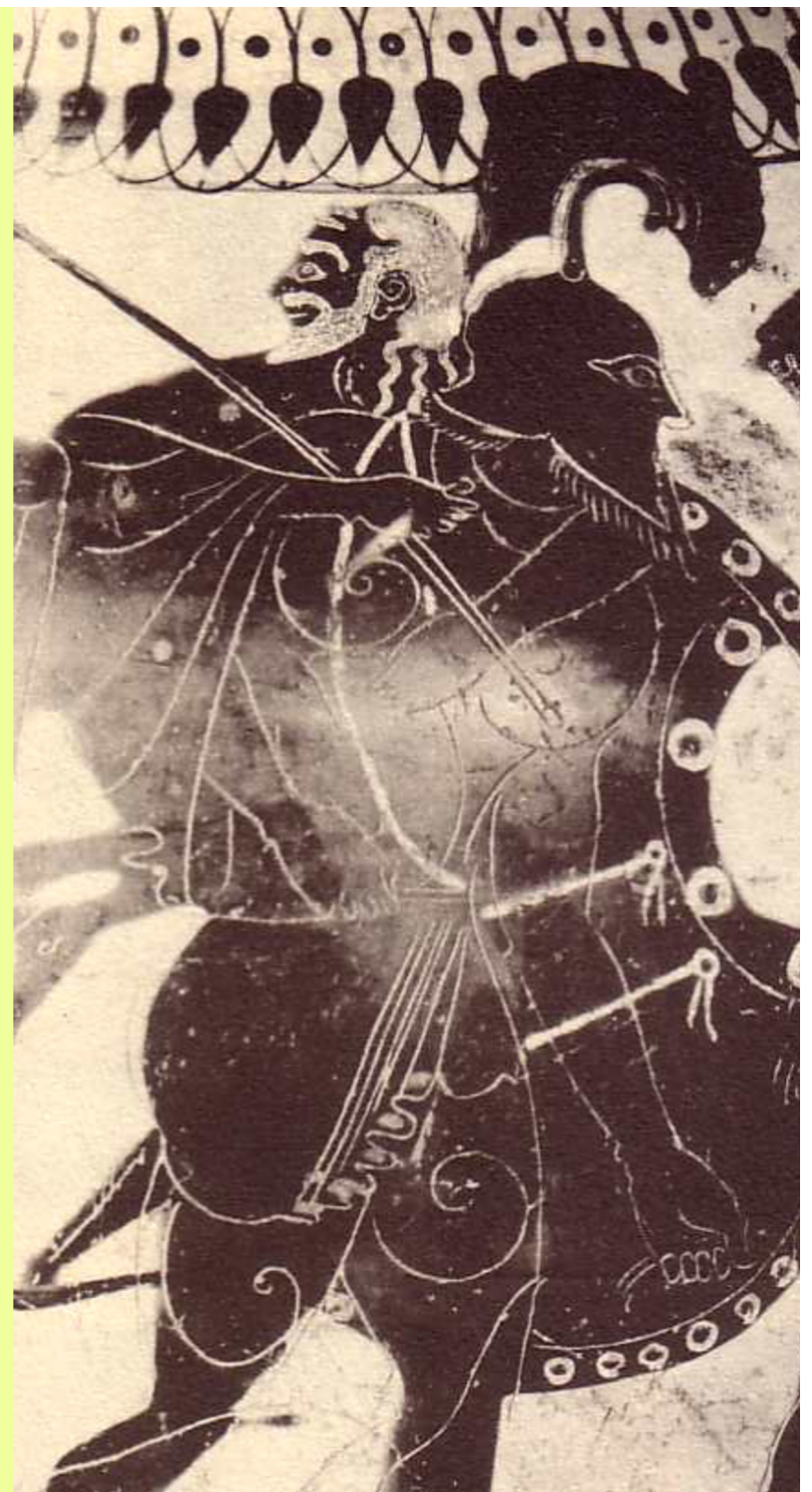


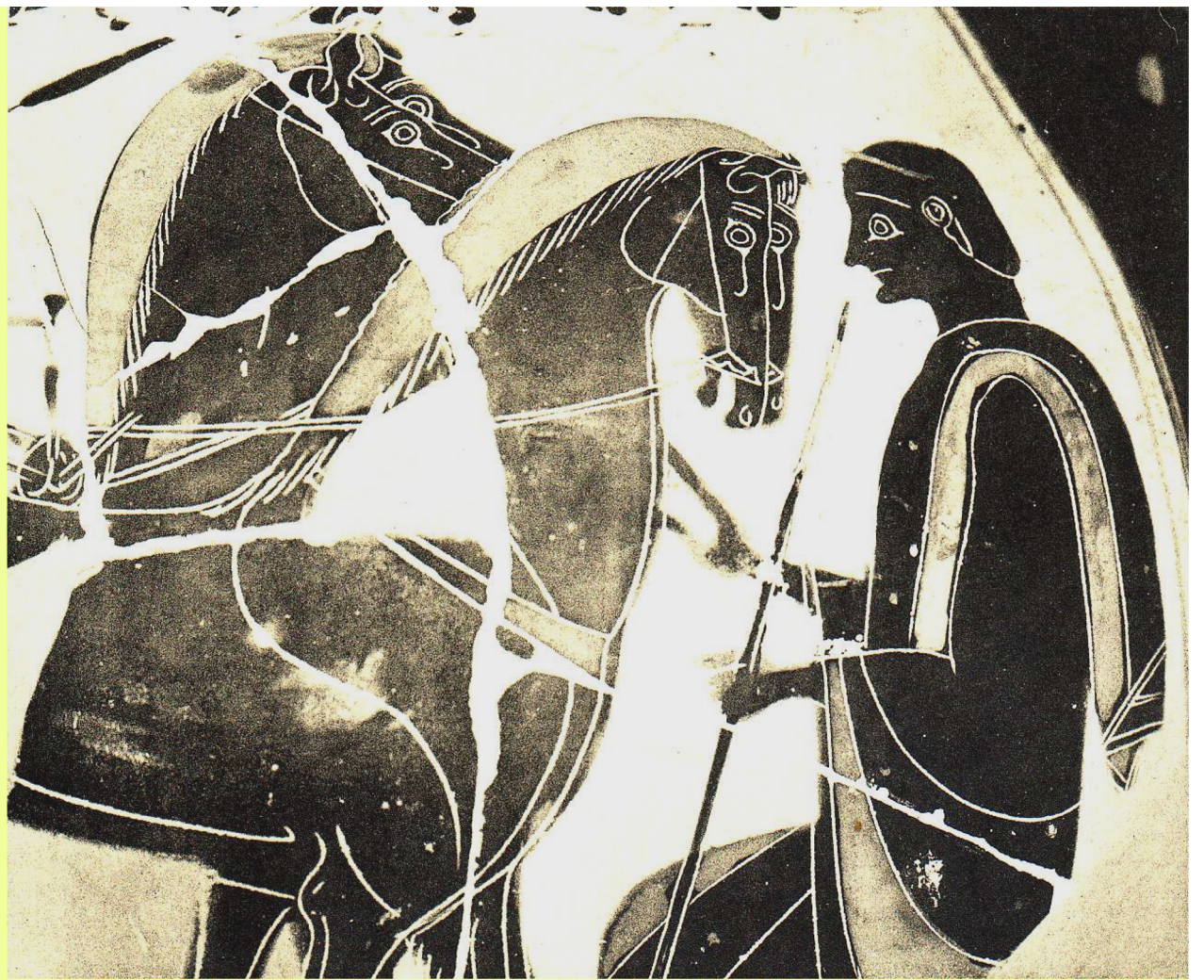
Flaxman, *The Shield of Achilles*



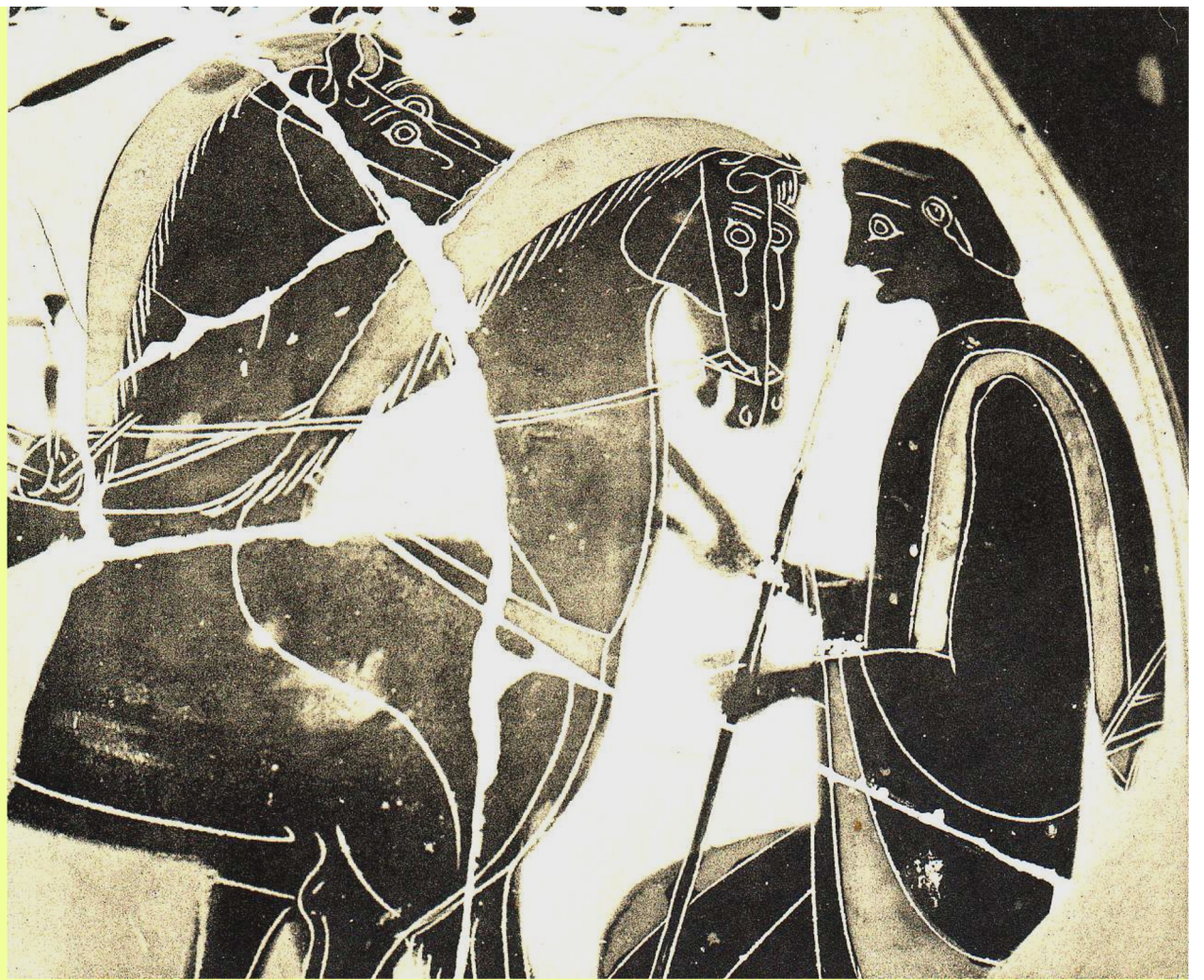
Automedon and Alcinous
yoked the horses; Automedon
grasped the whip in his right hand
and leapt on to the chariot.

Behind him came Achilles, armed,
gleaming like bright Hyperion.
He called to his father's horses:

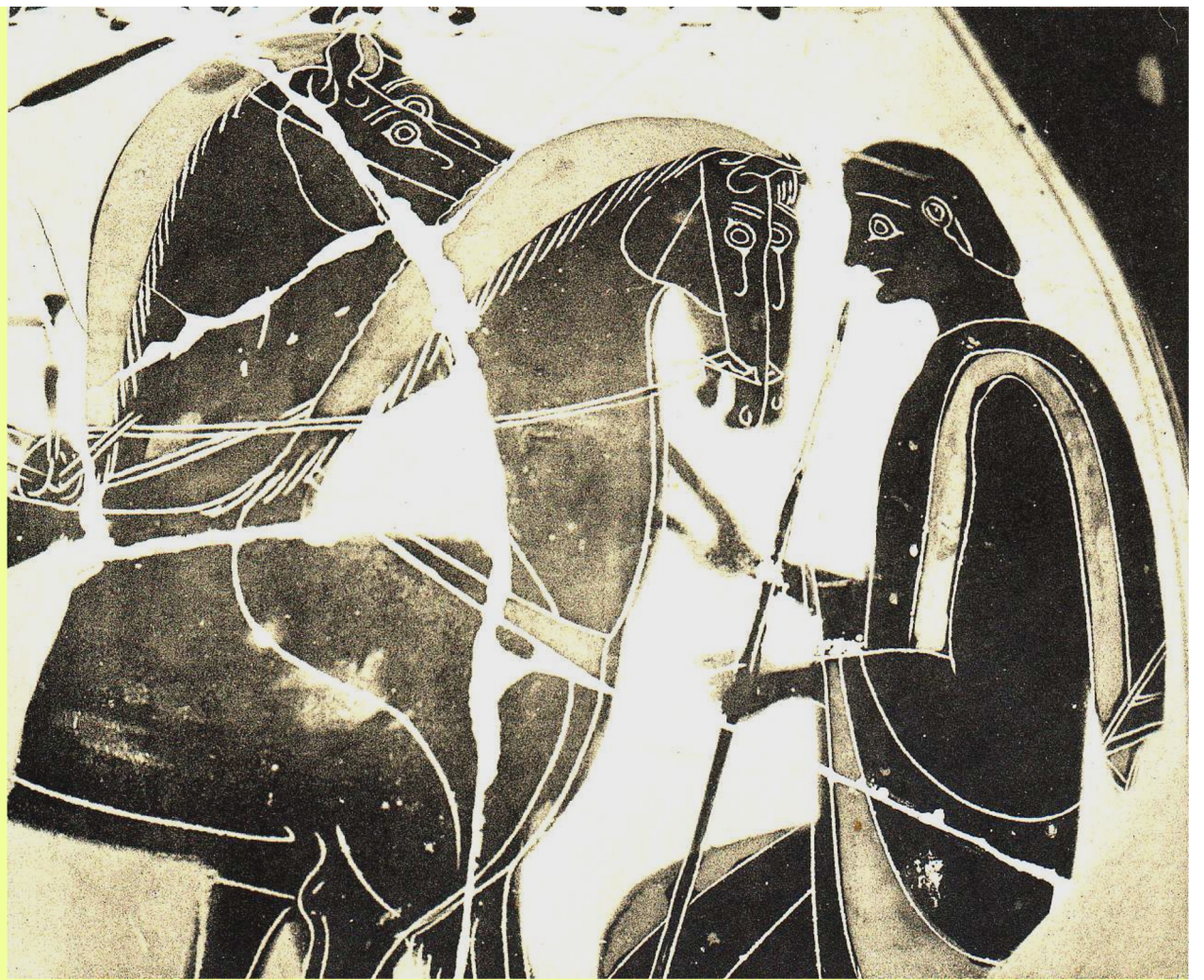




‘Xanthus, Balius, famous offspring
of Podarge, find another way
to bring your charioteer back safely,
not leave him dead like Patroclus.’



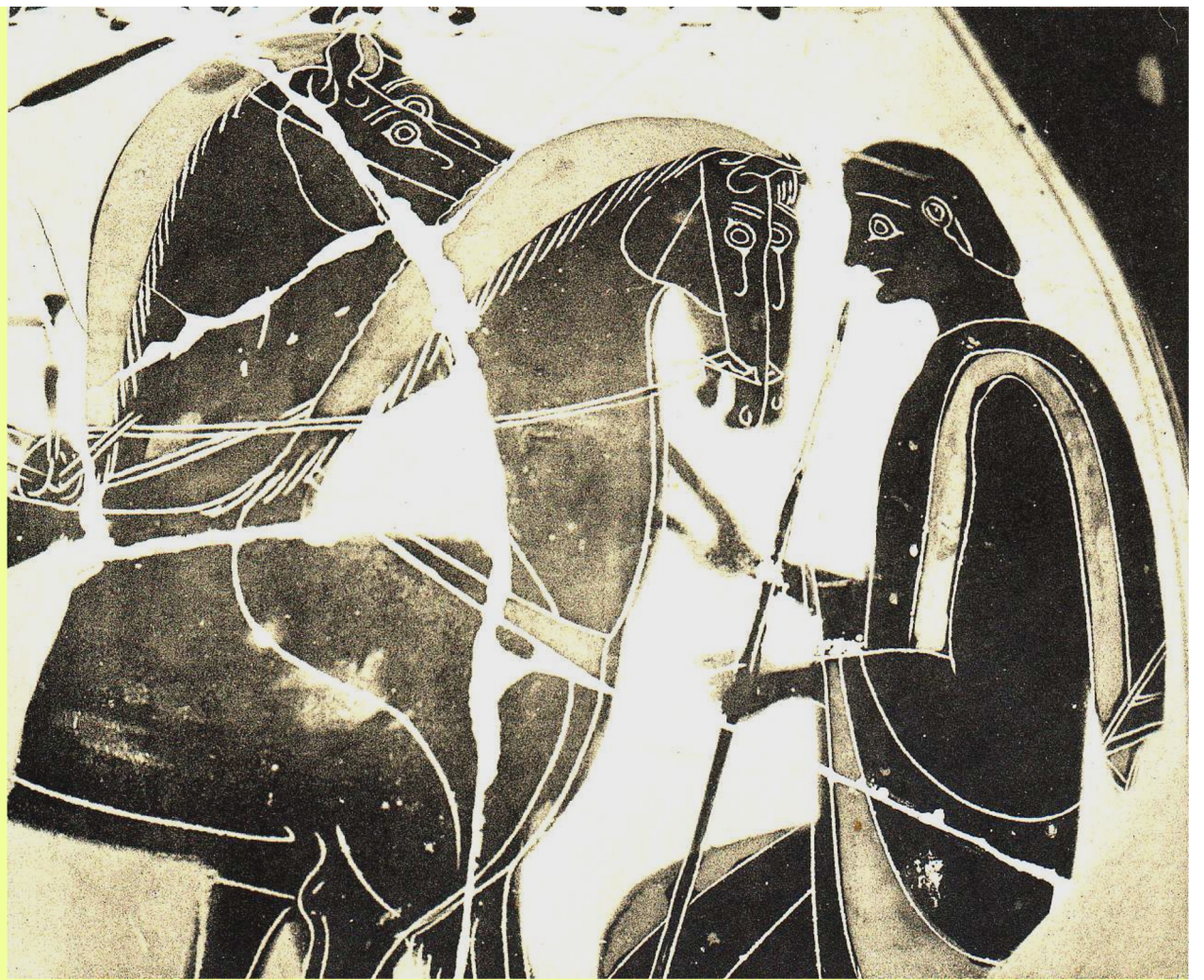
Then Xanthus of the swift feet spoke;
he bowed his head, his mane streamed down
to the ground, and the goddess,
white-armed Hera, gave him speech.



‘We shall save you this time, Achilles,
though your doom is near, caused not by us
but by a god and by Fate. Not we
but Apollo caused Patroclus’ death.



‘We run like the west wind, but you
are fated to be defeated
in fight by a god and a mortal.’
He spoke, and the Fates stopped his speech.

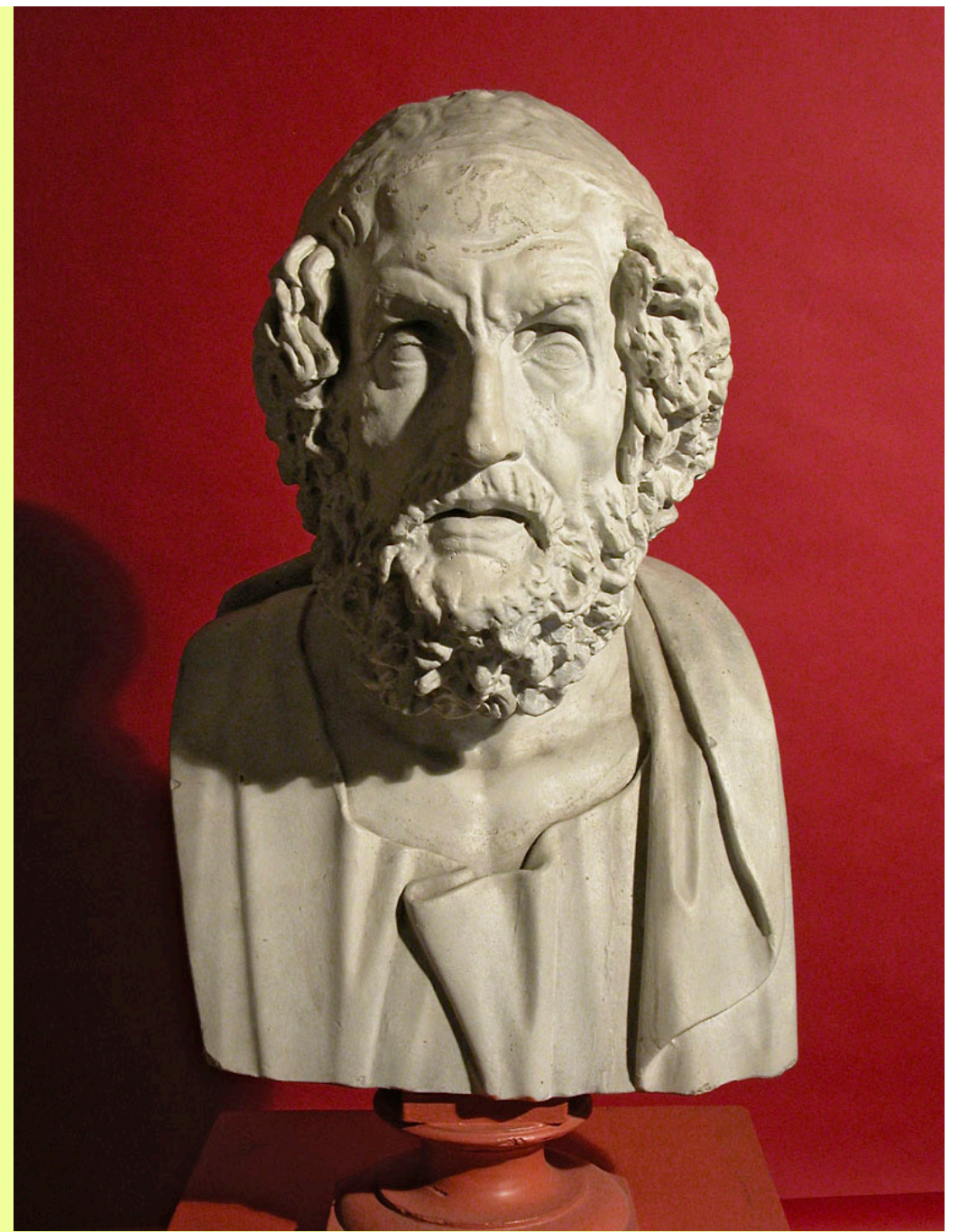


Then swift Achilles spoke to him:
'Xanthus, why do you foretell my death?
You need not. I know I must die here,
far from my father and mother.

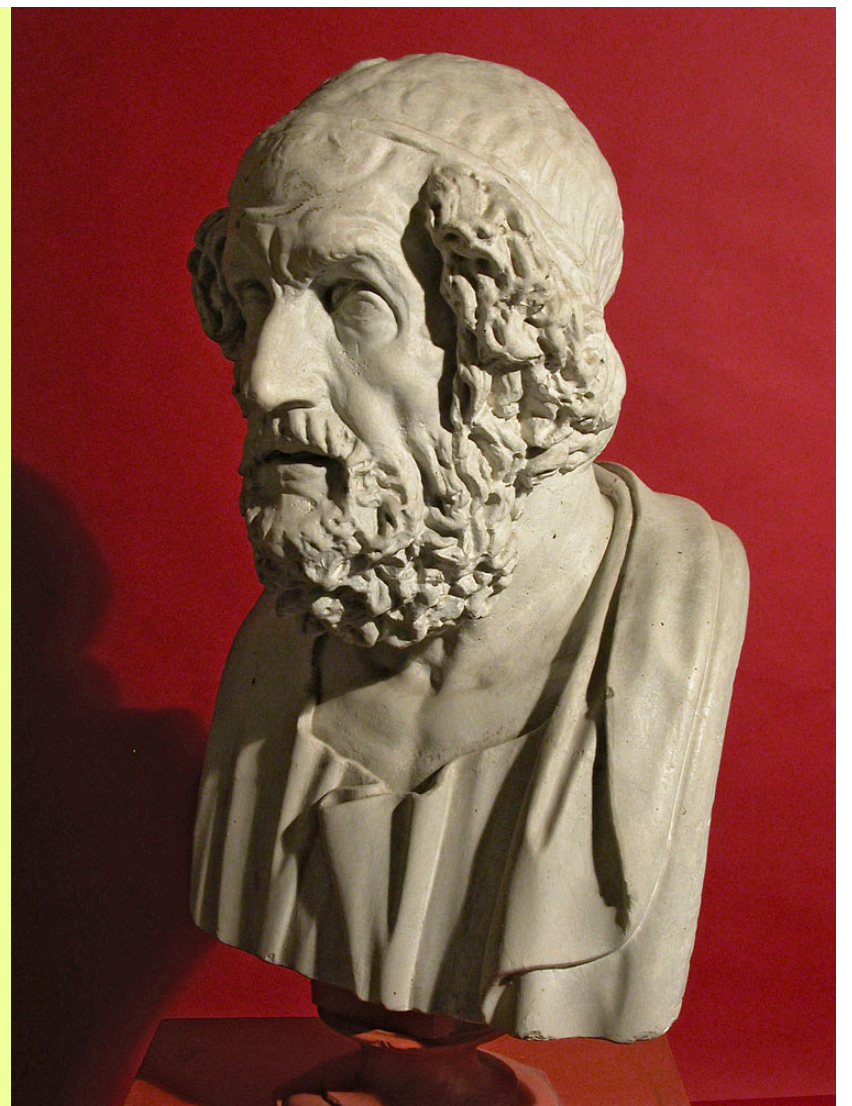


‘But still I shall go on until
the Trojans have enough of war.’
He spoke, and with a cry he drove
his horses on among the foremost.

Nostos



**The gods sat down in council,
among them Zeus the thunderer
whose power is the greatest.**



**Athene began to speak to them,
recalling Odysseus' ordeal;
it grieved her that he was still held
captive in the house of the nymph.**



**My heart is torn for Odysseus;
far from his friends he suffers
on the island of a goddess,
daughter of Atlas.**



**She keeps that luckless man,
trying to make him forget
Ithaca. But he longs to see
his own hearth-smoke rise:
or else die.**

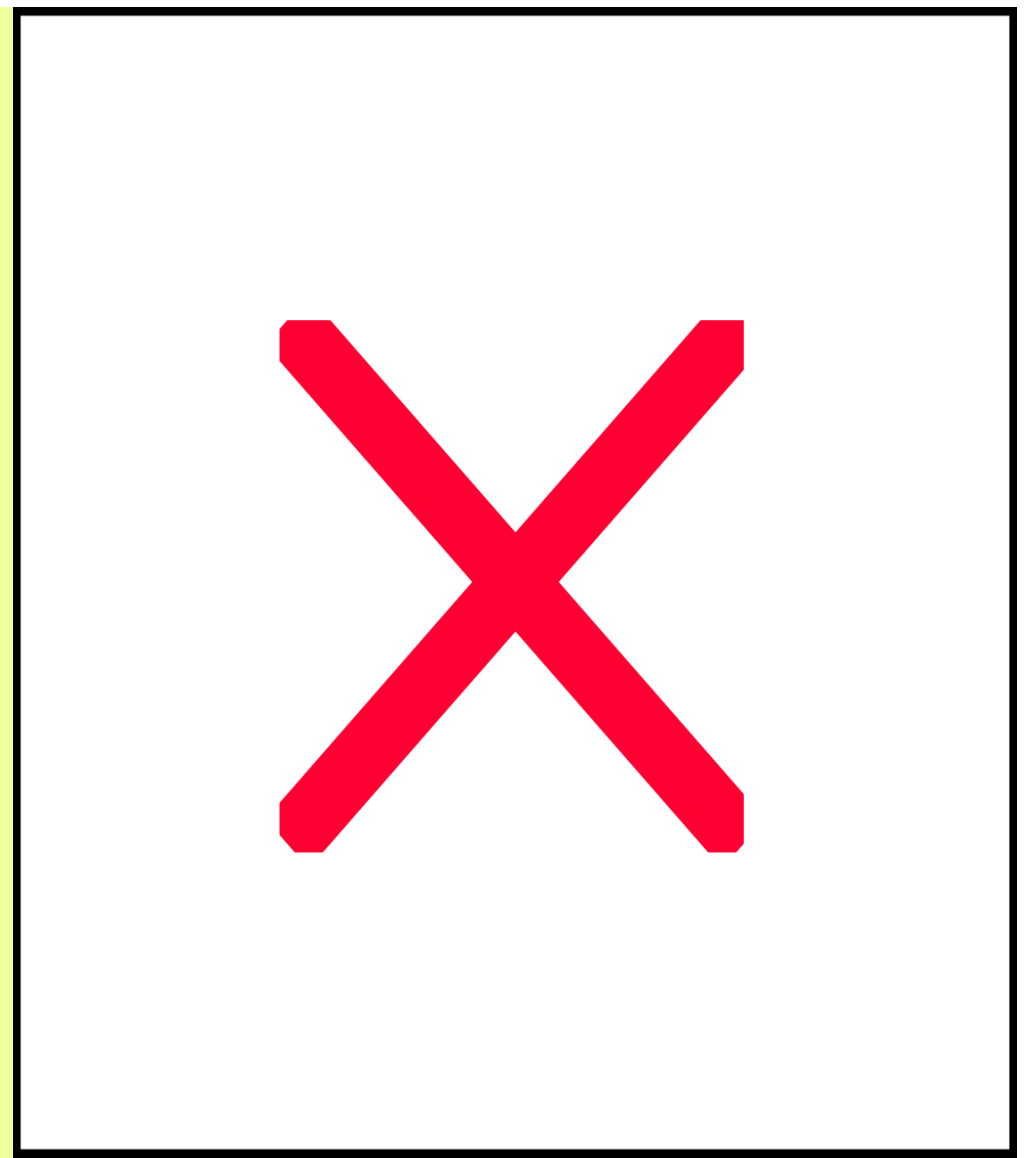




**You do not care, Olympian;
yet did he not give you offerings
by the ships, on the plain of Troy?
Why, Zeus, so harsh to him now?**

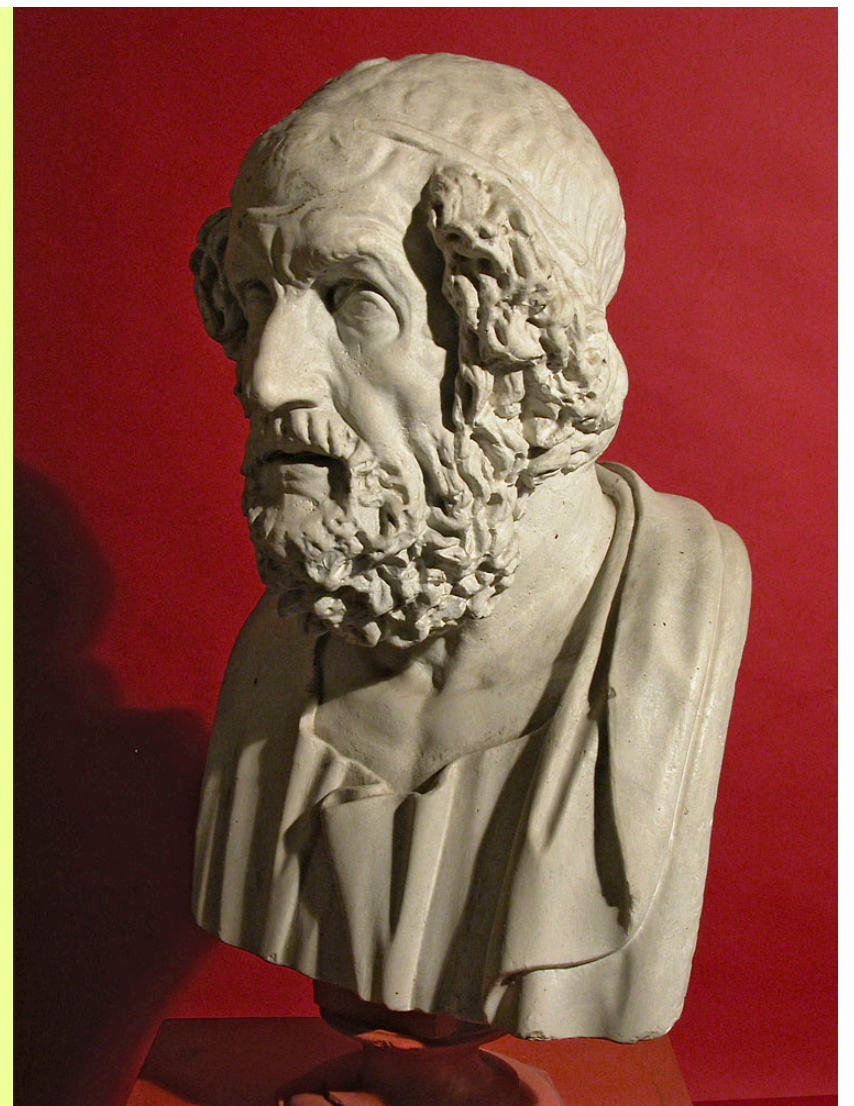
O Father, if he may go home,
let us send Hermes to Ogygia,
to tell the nymph our resolve
that Odysseus is to leave.





Hermes, go to the nymph
and tell her our fixed resolve:
Odysseus is fated to go home
to his people and his father's land.

Hermes obeyed,
fastening on the golden sandals
that carry him over land and sea
as swift as the wind.





**“Zeus commands you to send him
away at once: he is not fated
to die here, far from his friends,
but to return to friends and home.”**

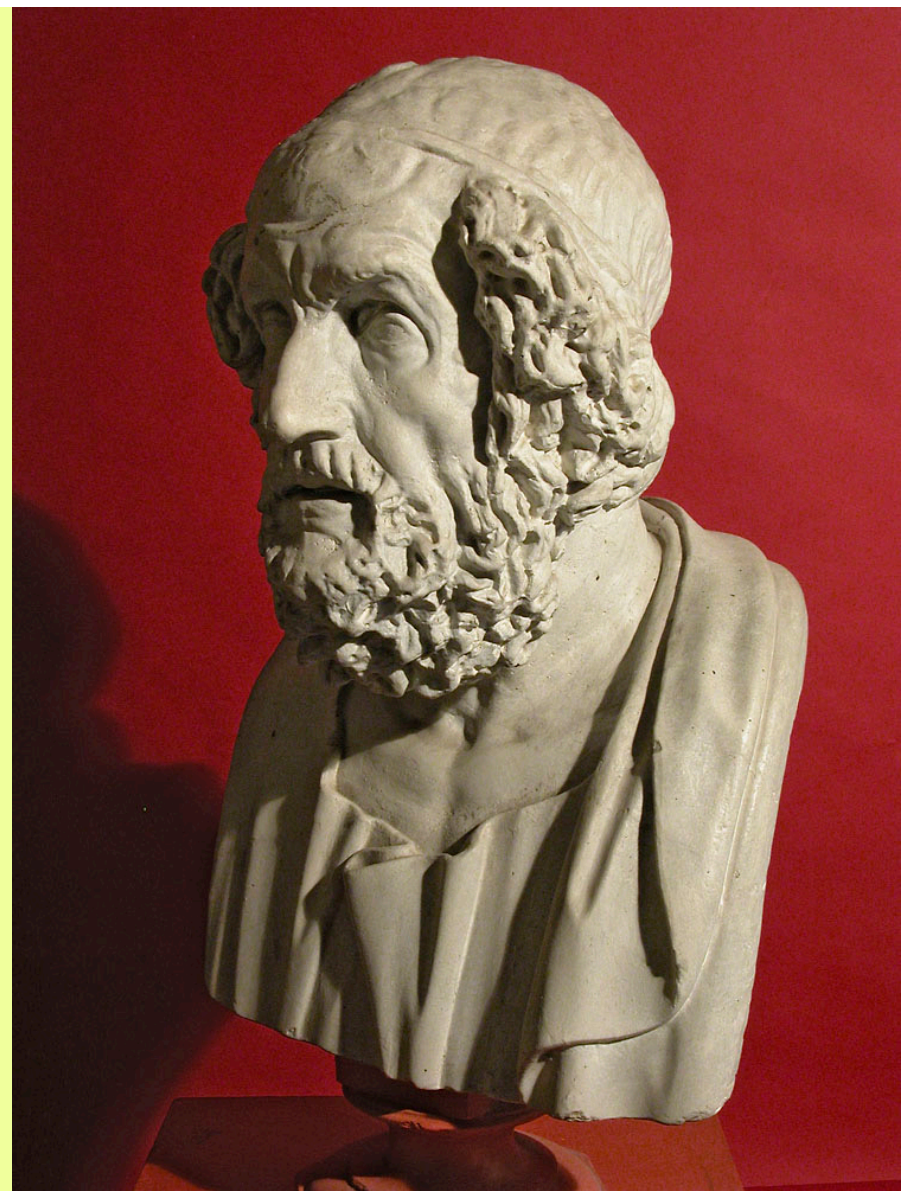


He began to fell trees; the work went quickly. He cut down twenty and trimmed and smoothed them all and trued them up to a straight line.

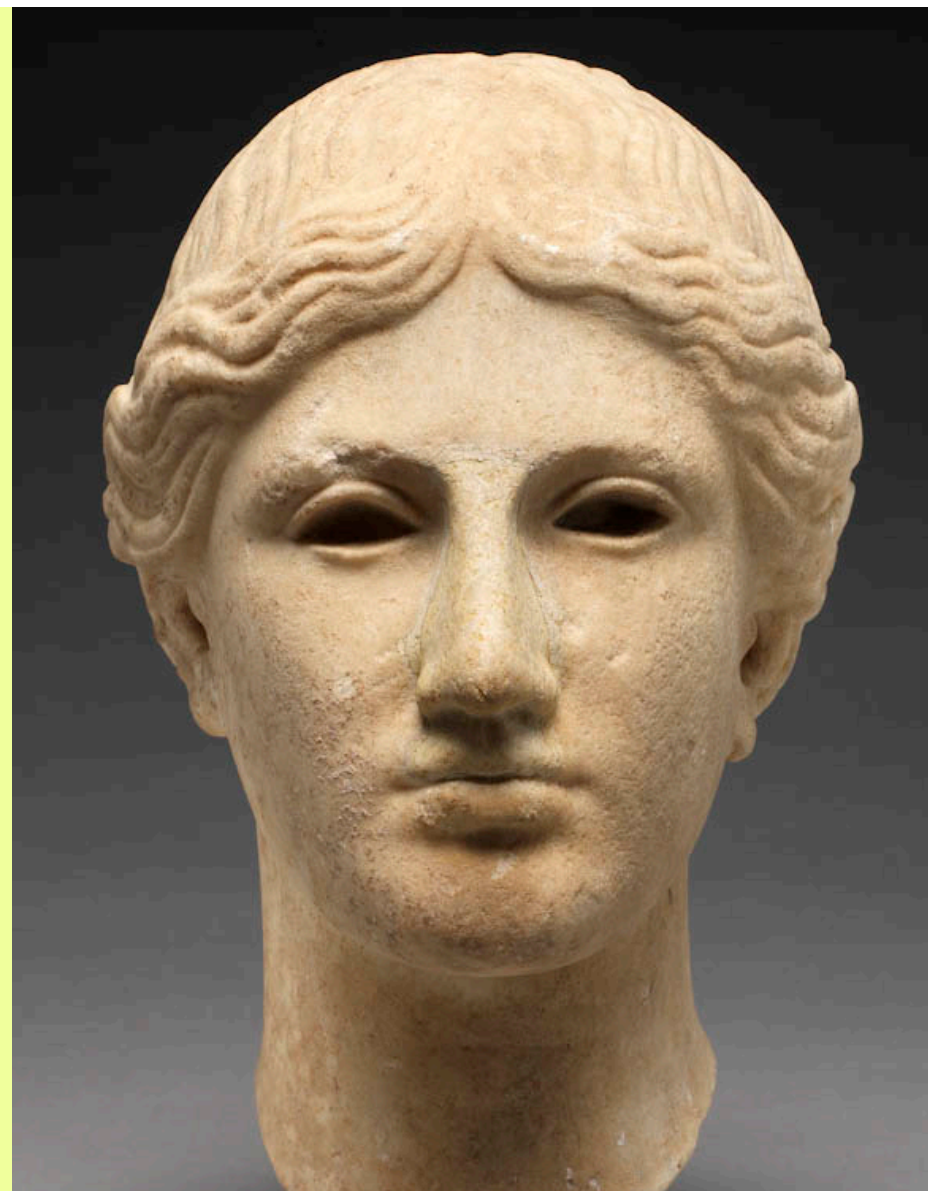


**He drilled and pegged them together.
As a carpenter builds the hull
of a freight ship, so broad of beam
did Odysseus build his raft.**

**Then he attached the rigging
fixing it expertly in place,
and levered the raft to the sea.
On the fourth day his work was done.**

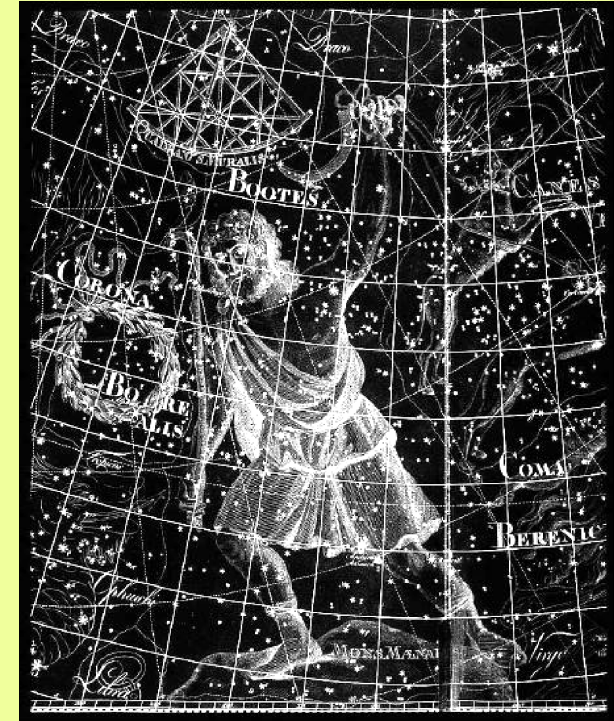
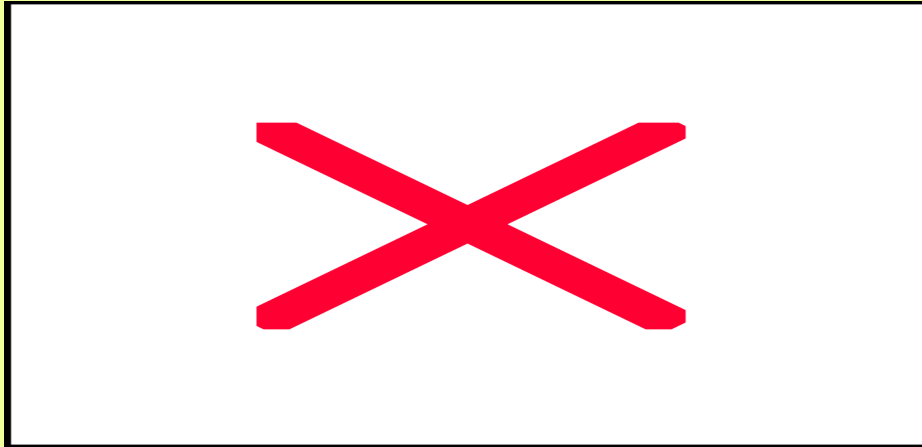


On the fifth day fair Kalypso
sent him off from the island
giving him wine, water and food
and a mild following wind.



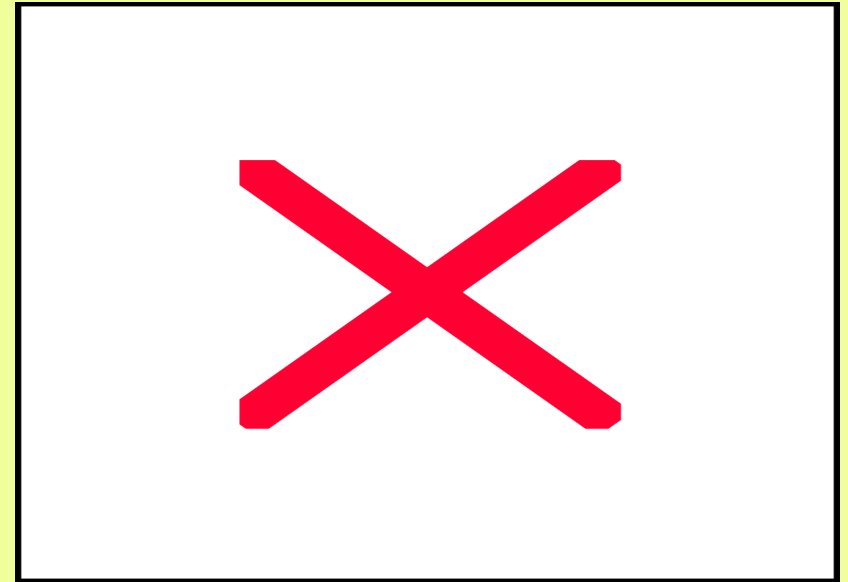


**Odysseus gladly spread his sail
and seated at the helm
steered his raft skilfully.**



Sleep never closed his eyes
as he gazed at the Pleiades,
Boötes, and the Great Bear
which some men call the Plough.



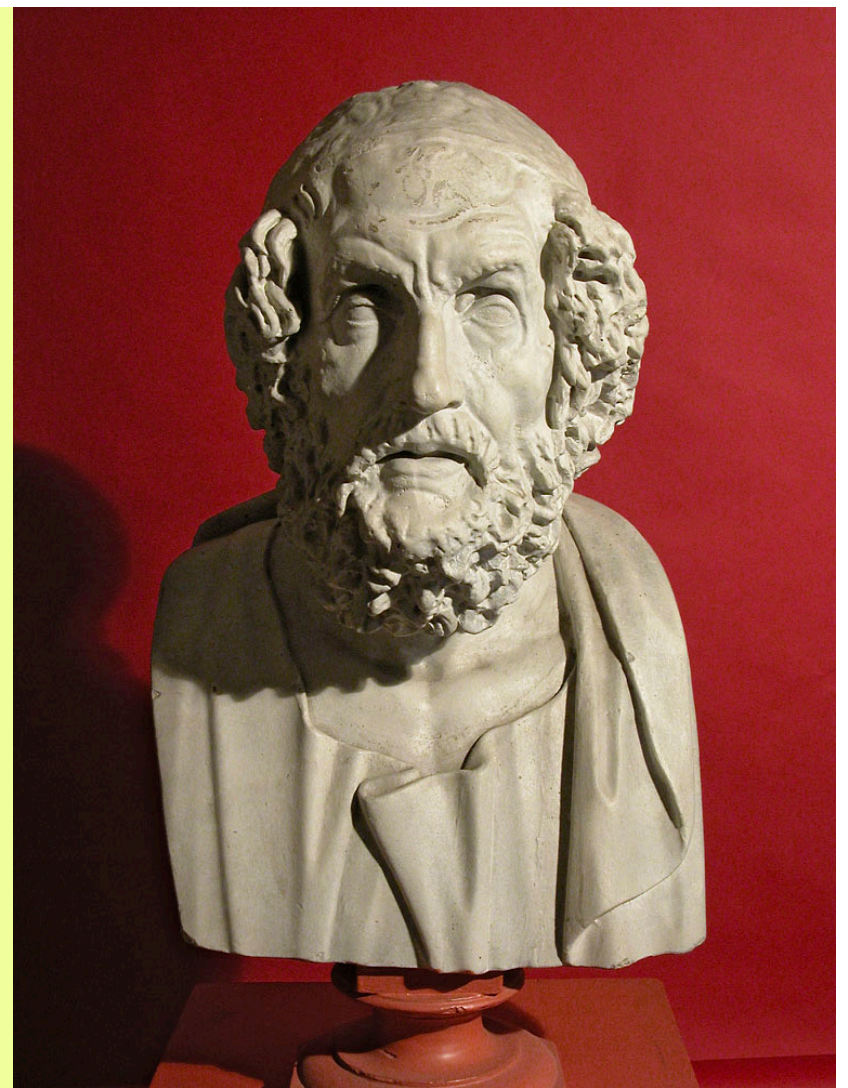


**For Kalypso had told him always
to keep the Great Bear on his left
as he sailed across the sea.**

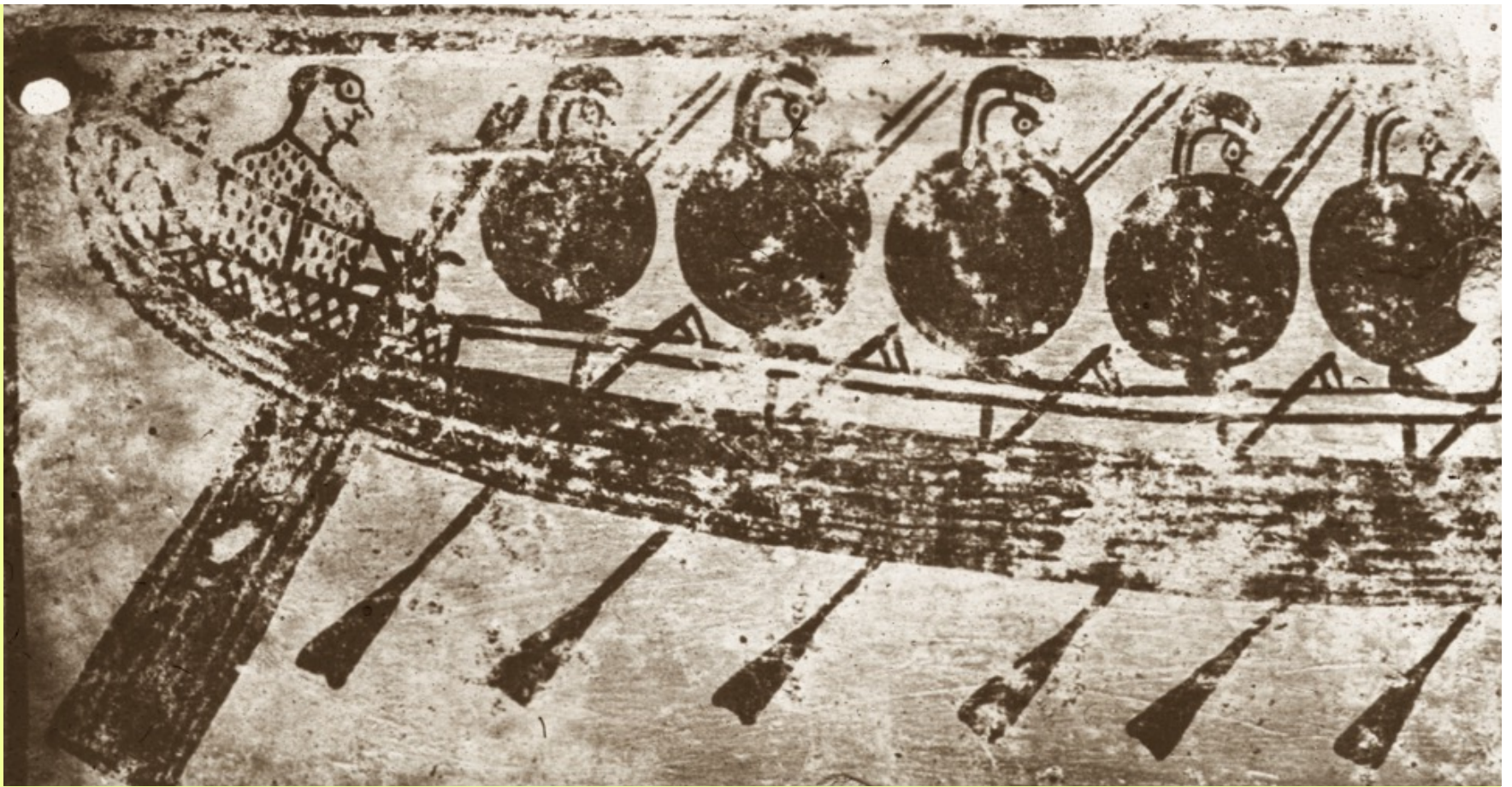


Nostos





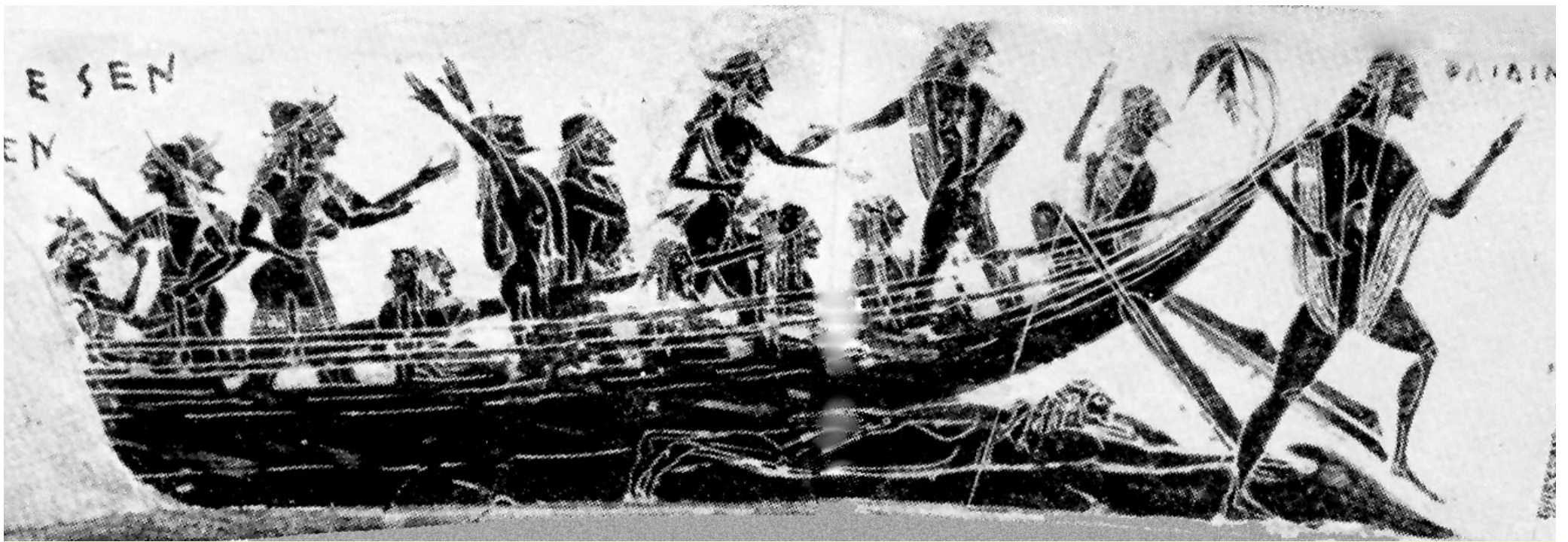
When they came to the ship and the sea
the young men stowed everything away.
They spread a rug and sheet in the stern
so that Odysseus could sleep soundly.



Odysseus boarded too and lay down in silence. The rowers took their seats loosed the ship and began to row and at once he fell into sweet sleep, never stirring, like the sleep of death.



The ship sped on with this god-like man who had suffered much in war and on the perilous sea but now he slept, forgetting all his travails.



In Ithaka there is a harbour
which the Phaeacians knew. They rowed in,
bore Odysseus out with rug and sheet
and laid him on the sand, still sleeping.

Odysseus woke up in his own land but did not know it, for he had been away from it for so long.



Groaning, he struck his thighs
with the flat of his hands and said:
'Alas! To the land of what people
have I now come?'





So now you know “what those Ithakas mean”.

Πάντα στον νού σου νάχεις την Ιθάκη.
Το φθάσιμον εκεί είν' ο Προορισμός σου.
Αλλά μην βιάζεις το ταξείδι διόλου.
Καλλίτερα χρόνια Πολλά να διαρκέσει
Και γέρος Πιά να αράξεις στο νησί
Πλούσιος με όσα κέρδισες στο δρόμο,
Μη Προσδοκώντας Πλούτη να σε δώσει η Ιθάκη.

Keep Ithaka always in your mind.
Arriving there is what you're destined for.
But don't hurry the journey at all.
Better if it lasts for years,
so you're old by the time you reach the island,
wealthy with all you've gained on the way,
not expecting Ithaka to make you rich.

Η Ιθάκη σ' έδωσε το ωραίο ταξίδι.
Χωρίς αυτήν δεν θάβγαινες στον δρόμο.
Άλλα δεν έχει να σε δώσει πιά.

Κι αν πτωχική την βρεις, η Ιθάκη δεν σε γέλασε.
Έτσι σοφός που έγινες, με τόση πείρα,
Ήδη θα το κατάλαβες η Ιθάκη τι σημαίνουν.

Ithaka gave you the marvellous journey.
Without her you wouldn't have set out.
She has nothing left to give you now.

And if you find her poor, Ithaka won't have fooled you.
Wise as you will have become, so full of experience,
you'll have understood by then what these Ithakas mean.



If thou be made the master of a feast, lift not thyself up.
But be among them as one of the rest;
Take diligent care for them, and so sit down.
And when thou hast done all thy office, take thy place,
That thou mayest be merry with them.

(Sirach, ch. 32)