



15. THE *ODYSSEY*

The second Poem of Homer, the *Odyssey* (Ὀδύσσεια, read *Odússeia*), relates the sea travels of Odysseus (Ὀδυσσεύς, read *Odiussèus*¹), the Greek hero returning to his Kingdom, the island of Ithaca, after the destruction of Troy.

From a profane and superficial point of view, the Poem is generally considered as a simple account of adventures. However, the *Odyssey* also tells in a symbolic and sometimes enigmatic form the difficult and tiring inner journey of Odysseus² in order to restore the mental purity of the original humanity.



1. Mask of a Cyclops

Odysseus left Ithaca to take part in the Troy War. After ten years of war, he departed from the Trojan shore with his twelve ships to return back home. When the island was already in sight, winds pushed him far off in the direction of the Atlantic Ocean. For ten years Odysseus drifted on the sea out of any normal human experience. His journey to the reign of the dead is described in a succession of fabulous events³.

Throughout his numerous misadventures, the astute (πολύμητις, read *polímetis*) Greek hero always received the protection of Athena, the Goddess of knowledge and art (ἐντεχνος σοφία, read *entèkhnos sofia*). On the contrary, Poseidon, the

¹ Probably his name derives from the verb ὀδύσσομαι (read *odússomai*), to be disgusted. The same root appears in the Latin verb *odiare*, to hate.

² In Latin he was known as Ulysses.

³ During his descent to the underworld one predicts him: "You seek the return that has the sweetness of honey": so the journey of Odysseus clearly aims to reach the *madhu vidyā*.





God of the sea, always remained hostile to him. The adventures of Odysseus and his warriors are fascinating and susceptible to symbolic interpretations. Among them it is famous his landing on the island of the Cyclops⁴ where the hero risked being devoured with all his comrades by *Polyphemus*, son of Poseidon. Thanks to his proverbial artfulness Odysseus managed to save himself and most of companions by blinding the Cyclopes, but in this way he attracted the wrath of the God.



2. Polyphemus blinded by the companions of Odysseus

Then he arrived to the island of the Laestrygonians, man-eating giants, where he lost eleven ships with their crew. Later he landed on the island of Eeas, abode of Circe, an enchantress who turned men into animals by magic. The sorceress, however, fell in love with Odysseus and so his warriors, who had been turned into pigs, regained their human form. After leaving Circe, Odysseus descended to the Realm of the Dead where he received clues on how to return home. He then passed near a shore where he heard the dangerously charming songs of the Sirens⁵. Hungry, the Greeks reached the island of the Sun, where they killed and fed on the sacred cows to the God. Zeus, angry for the sacrilege casted a storm upon the crew and sank the ship. All died except Odysseus.

⁴ Cyclops were giants with a single eye on the forehead. The legend represents them as a wild and cruel race.

⁵ Dangerous spirits half women and half birds.



3. Odysseus and the sirens

The castaway then reached the island of Ogygia, "where is the navel of the sea", as Homer says. There, for seven long years, the hero was kept in sweet imprisonment by the nymph Calypso⁶ (Καλυψώ, read *Kalipsò*).



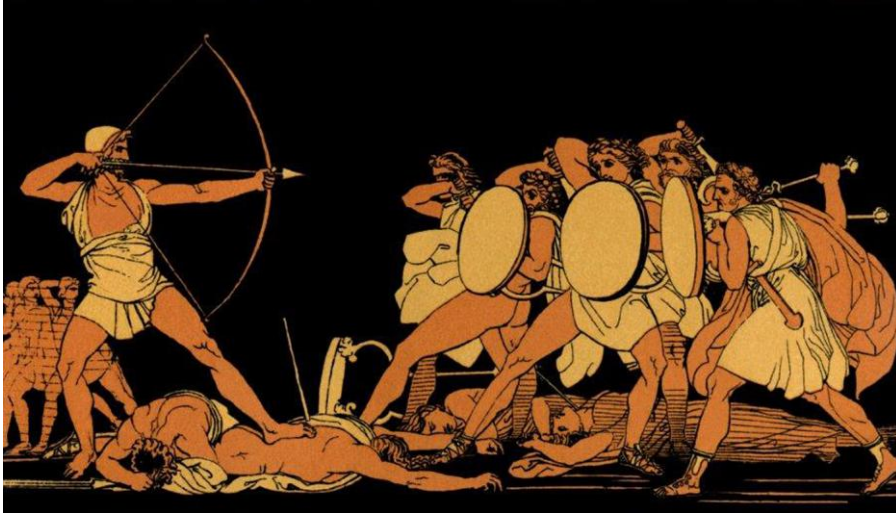
4. Circe turns Odysseus's crew into pigs

Finally the Gods decided that Fate could no longer wait: it was determined that the hero would eventually reach his destination. It was, therefore, necessary to intervene. Calypso reluctantly obeyed Zeus's will and allowed the hero to set sail on a raft. However Poseidon sent a storm against the will of the King of the Gods, and Odysseus shipwrecked once again. However he survived it and landed on the

⁶ Her name derives from the verb *καλύπτω* (read *kalípto*), to hide, to conceal. It corresponds to the thirteenth year of hiding of the Pāṇḍavas at the end of the exile. Calypso was the daughter of Atlas, so she represents an Atlantean imprisonment. Also in the *Mahābhārata* the Kingdom of the Matsyas and its King Virāṭa show many features of the Atlantean tradition.



island of the Phaeacian people, (Φαίακες, read *Fàiakes*⁷), who helped him to return home. The Phaeacian island was called Skheria (Σχερία, read *Skheria*, the perennial one, sskr. *sanātana*), a happy land where nature always produced flowers and fruits, which in fact was the very Elysian Fields. Twelve Kings ruled the island, and a thirteenth one reined over them all⁸. Flying over the waves with a Phaeacian ship (similar to a *vimāna*) Odysseus finally landed at Ithaca, but, not knowing the situation of his kingdom, he preferred to remain incognito.



5. Odysseus killing the Proci

The swineherd Eumaeus⁹ hosted him in his humble home and revealed that, even after twenty years of absence, the fidelity of Penelope to her husband had always remained untouched. She was constantly harassed by suitors (Proci), who were forcing her to marry one of them. The Proci were young, overbearing and arrogant princes who wanted to take over the island by marrying the Queen. In the meantime, they were living in the Odysseus' Royal Palace, dilapidating his wealth. During a competition with the bow, Odysseus massacred all the suitors. The Palace was finally set free and he reunited with Penelope. The order was restored according to the laws that should govern human existence.

⁷ This name probably derives from the verb φαίνω (read *fàino*), to shine.

⁸ Like the sun on the twelve signs of the Zodiac.

⁹ In fact, the humble swineherd was the son of the King of Ortigia, the island of Delos, which was part of the hyperborean lands and of which the Mediterranean Delos was only an equinoctial projection. Therefore, here swineherd means "inhabitant of *Varāhī*", the arctic Home.





In the Poem, Penelope¹⁰ is always described as wise, the wisest of women. She represents the Knowledge located in the heart of Odysseus, who has never forgotten her¹¹.

The return to home marks the achievement of the inner purification of Odysseus and the restoration of the Golden Age in Ithaca. This resembles the ideal kingdom of Rāma when he returned to Ayodhyā.



6. Odysseus reunited with Penelope

However, a prophecy predicted that Odysseus had to depart again for one last journey carrying an oar on his shoulders. His peregrination would have been completed only when, in a faraway land, a man, not recognizing the oar, affirmed that he had on his shoulder was not an oar but a winnowing stick for wheat. In this way, a further degree of realization was prophesied to him. In fact, the winnowing stick symbolizes the separation of the hero from all the limits and obstacles: so any transient tie should be cut¹².

From this passage of the *Odyssey* we can argue that in very remote times there were two different initiatic paths: Small Mysteries and Great Mysteries. In Homeric times those listening to epic poetry would understand such meaning. But in the immediate aftermath, that knowledge was deprived of its original meaning finally losing its metaphysical dimension. However, even if the *Odyssey*

¹⁰ In Greek Penelope is the name of a swan or goose, the *Eurasian Anser*, i.e. the *haṃsa*.

¹¹ In the *Tripurā Rahasya* Jāmadagnya thus addresses the master: “[...] The Goddess has always lived in my heart...”. The Tripurā Goddess is Knowledge, just like Penelope.

¹² In the *Brahma Sūtra Śaṅkara Bhāṣya* (IV.1.12), the phrase "when rice grains are beaten" is commented in the same way: it is required that the beating must continue until the chaff separates from the grains. With such separation, that is to say with the achievement of the *mokṣa*, any further beating would be unnecessary. Beating rice is a way of representing the *ātmānāṭma viveka*. The beating of the rice represents the “*neti neti*”.



is much more symbolic and initiatic than the Iliad, here too any truly sapiential section remains absent.

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