

## §21. Menelaos



“Which of the twain then is victor, and proves himself to be stronger,  
his be the treasure at stake; let him to his home lead the woman.  
All we others will pledge sure oaths with a treaty of friendship.”

– *Hector, in Iliad 3:92-93*

In Trojan War times, Menelaos was one of the two poles of the magnet: the aggrieved husband, whose duel with the seducer Paris brought the issue of the story right down to the battleground, and fought it out to a finish – a necessarily inconclusive finish, or the story would end right there, and that is not what the audiences of the time wanted it to do; they wanted it to go on and on, and they wanted to revel in it as it did so. It was their heroic past, they had no other worth mentioning, and they could not relive it too often, or too vividly.

But the Menis is no longer the Trojan War. No more are mighty armies ranged in service of a unifying national ideal, or anything so highminded. As far as the Menis is witness to itself, they are there in the cause of brigandage. Achilles mentions the many coastal cities he has helped to loot. The ships are full of swag from the many lootings, and the only quarrel is how much of the swag each gets, and who gets the best part – the prettiest girls, the most gold. Those who remember the 'Apiru of early Canaan,<sup>1</sup> the roving bands of thugs who terrorized and looted the cities of that particular plain; who could now and then even occupy them, and rule them, and try to establish the sort of local sovereignty that we see reflected in the lesser corners of the Catalogue of Ships, a palace and a few satellite towns and fields – *they* will understand..

In the Menis, with its more realistic view of things, Menelaos is a holdover, and a military embarrassment. His military weakness is a constant concern,. Even the Odyssey can find little more for him to do in foreign countries, on his way home, than accumulate gifts from the monarchs by whom he is received.

So no, we do not look for great warlike things from Menelaos in the Iliad.

<sup>1</sup>Moran **Amarna**; Pritchard **Ancient** 483f; Brooks **Habiru**. This situation persisted until the time of the historical David, more or less contemporary with the Trojan War. Was there ever a highminded Trojan War? Did the historical Aphrodite really promise Paris Helen as his wife, if he would judge in her favor? The archaeological evidence is slim, and it may be that we are dealing, not with a unity tradition, but with a unity myth. The role of the poets, in filling out that myth, is obvious. Myth is not attenuated history, it is history as later people wish it had been.

Nor mighty speeches neither. But what *is* there? Is there stylistic continuity? Did the writer of one Menelaos speech in the Menis “have in mind” another? Here is a brief test of some of the possible instances.