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Telemachus in Ithaca: Delimitation of Identity Frontiers in the Ancient Iron Age (XII-VIII BC)

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Telemachus in Ithaca: Delimitation of Identity Frontiers in the Ancient Iron Age (XII-VIII BC)

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Abstract- In this article, we will try to understand how the description of space in Homer's Odyssey contributes to the delimitation of an Hellenic identity during the ancient Iron Age. We will first analyze the first book of the so-called Telemachia, part of the Odyssey that narrates the journey of Telemachus, Odysseus' son, to the kingdoms of Sparta and Pylos in search of news of his missing father. We believe that the young Ithacan's journey will help us in our task of understanding the way through which the Greeks saw the place (topos) where they lived and what makes of it a place of identity (isotopia).

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I. Introduction

Our interest in this article is understanding the way through which the landscape described by Homer helps the process of definition of a Hellenic identity throughout the ancient Iron Age (XII-VII BC). By landscape, we mean the group of places present in Homer; however in this paper we will restrict ourselves to the space of Ithaca as described in the first four books of the Odyssey, collectively known as Telemachia.

In order to do that, we will use as technical landmarks the ideas of Henri Lefebvre about space defined as isotopia. This concept, as developed by Lefebvre (2008), essentially refers to real, physical spaces that represent belonging, identity. However, according to Coelho (2010, p.278), it is possible to use that author's approach to read spaces in symbolic dimension, articulated with the imaginary – such as in Homer – since the literary text is not restricted to the mere reproduction of a physical space.

Many times, archeologists – and historians – tend to disconsider the importance of literary reports, considering them useless and evidence of the historicity of the events they describe. In the case of the Odyssey, if it is not a faithful witness – and does not intend to be – of the movement of populations through space during the ancient Iron Age, at least it expresses the ethnicity and the importance of ethnic belonging in Greece during the first millennium before Christ. The conscience of a Hellenic identity ("hellenicity") is being generated in the 8th and 7th centuries BC. and appears as a result of the process of definition of political communities – the poleis (HALL, 1997, p. 65).

According to Buxton (1994, p.155, 212), the Odyssey allows us to understand the "Hellenicity" by contrast with the other peoples that Odisseus meets in his wanderings. The model built by those oppositions marks the development of new concepts of space and territory when whole populations migrate to new lands outside the Greek world or establish new kinds of organizational structures such as the polis (Hall, 1997, p.43). However, no kind of "Greek conscience" is yet clear. That is very evident in the Iliad, where we see the conflict between Greeks and Trojans – the representation of the Other –, however, both worship the same gods, speak the same language and have the same customs.

We consider that the work of Homer is an important instrument to understand the relationship between humans and the space they occupy. The Odyssey is especially helpful, because it is a poem about trips and cultural contacts. In its narrative, tales of the exploration of a "New World" are mixed with popular tales, producing therefore a rich and complex picture of a world in transition (DOUGHERTY, 2001, p. 11; POWELL, 2004, p. 38). Homer makes that clear in the opening of the poem (Hom. Odyssey, I, 1-9):

> Sing in me, Muse, and through me tell the story
> of that man skilled in all ways of contending,
> the wanderer, harried for years on end,
> after he plundered the stronghold
> on the proud height of Troy.
> He saw the townlands
> and learned the minds of many distant men,
> and weathered many bitter nights and days
> in his deep heart at sea, while he fought only
> to save his life, to bring his shipmates home.[1]

In the original Greek, Odysseus is polítropos, the one with many habilities and that, from his voyages, has accumulated knowledge about many peoples and places. As Hartog points out in "Memória de Ulisses" (2004, p. 14) the many wanderings of Odysseus, even though he does not want them, since his main goal is to return to Ithaca, allow the hero to accumulate great knowdlege of the world that surrounds him and, at the same time, to outline a Hellenic identity. By circulating between fantastic and "real" spaces, the king of Ithaca

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[1] All the translations in this paper are from the work of Robert Fitzgerald.

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bounds the frontiers between human and divine, between Greek and the Other.

The expansion of new horizons had great influence on how the people we call the Greeks saw themselves and the others. For Malkin (2005, p. 58-9), the movements of the formation of settlements outside Hellas (intensified after VIII BC) are mainly responsible for boosting the development of a Greek identity, especially from the enlargement of the contact with the Other.

Homer's narration carries the marks of the contact and interaction between peoples of different perspective and culture. The author of the Odyssey show a clear interest in exploring questions of identity and difference, selectively drafting pre-existing information about foreign peoples. The poems were executed for an audience more or less engaged in the construction of meaning: thinking about culture – be it their own or others' – and imagining distant lands, such as Egypt and Arcadia, Scythia and Sparta (SKINNER, 2012, p. 238).

The space that emerges in the Odyssey is very wide, different from the Iliad which has a scenario basically concentrated in Troy, the plot develops in an amplitude that goes from Troy to Egypt, including the imaginary lands that can not be placed anywhere, such as the Phaeacians' island (LATEINER, 2005, p. 417).

In this article, we will analyze in closer detail the Telemachia (something that can be translated as challenges or adventures of Telemachus), the part of the narrative that depicts the journey of Odysseus and Penelope's son to the kingdoms of Sparta and Pylos, in search of news of his missing father.

The Telemachia is divided in two parts: action in Ithaca (Books 1 and 2) and trip to Pylos and Sparta (books 3 and 4, respectively). However, for this paper, we chose to analyze the action developed in Ithaca, starting point of Telemachus' journey, his native land, place where the youth starts the preparations for his trip in search of news of his father who never returned from the Trojan war.

We believe, with Foxhall (2005, p. 75-6), that landscapes are human artifacts in which a complex cultural history is embedded. These landscapes should be interpreted as manifestations of historically specific identities, shaped by different human societies for many millennia, deeply rooted in cultural principles. What we want, by analyzing the Ithacan landscape, is comprehend in which way that kingdom – as represented by the poet – corresponds to a space of belonging for Odysseus and Telemachus, an isotopia, and, therefore, defines the hero's identity.

Telemachus' adventure begins when the gods, in a council in Olympus, decide to send the goddess Athena to Ithaca, to inject hope in the young man to search for news of his father. The gods use the absence of Poseidon – Odysseus' fierce enemy who was far, in Ethiopia, receiving sacrifices of bulls and sheep (Hom., Odyssey, I, 19-27) – to organize a meeting. Helping the hero is only be possible when the god of the seas is absent. So, the goddess Athena can fulfill her role of Odysseus' protector. Thereby, she intercedes for him opposite the meeting of gods. In her entreaty, she points out where the hero is located (Hom., Od., I, 38-52).

The goddess informs us that Odysseys is in Ogygia, island belonging to the nymph Calypso. The gods decide to send Hermes, the messenger, to order the deity to free the hero immediately. From then on, the action goes back to Ithaca, and the poet narrates the arrival of Athena to that kingdom. The daughter of Zeus arrives disguised as Mentes, king of the Taphians, that inhabit Themesos.

Mentes is an old acquaintance of the king of Ithaca. In the past, Odysseus had gone to the kingdom of the Taphians to get poison for his arrows. There, he received the hospitality due to foreigners. Therefore, it is expected of Telemachus that he receive the stranger with the same courtesy once given to Odysseus in tha land of the Taphians.[2] (Hom., Od., I, 260-4)

Having fulfilled the rites of hospitality to Mentes; Athena, the goddess reveals herself as an ally of Telemachus in the fight against his mother's suitors, that dilapidate his family's heritage. She counsels the young man to go to Pylos in search of news of his father, but, as Powell (2004, p. 118) observes, the goddess knows where the hero is. Her intention, in encouraging Telemachus, is for the trip to make the youth into a man, that he leaves his childish world for the world of adulthood.[3] We believe that Telemachus' journey can

[2] The rituals involving the reception of a guest and the exchange of gifts (boon and counterboon) played a very relevant role in homeric epic poetry. The boons (generally speaking, material gifts) are offered or exchanged to establish or confirm friendship between members of different communities. Once established, these relations are transmitted for generations. That can be observed in the scene where Mentes describes to Telemachus the hospitality offered by his own father to Odysseus, being that a form of claiming a similar treatment to himself (SEAFORD, 1994, p. 16-7). Cf. also FINLEY, 1988.

[3] Many authors especulate about the real reason for Telemachus' journey, encouraged by Athena. For Alden (1987, p. 134) it would be an educational journey, of personal transformation. Like Powell, the author believes that the *Telemachia* is a kind of rite of passage, the opportunity for the boy to become a man. Rose (1967, p. 391-4), however, emphasizes the declared purpose of the trip: searching for news of his father. But, as mentioned before, the goddess knows of the whereabouts of the hero. This ambiguity made scholars search for supplementary explanations. Rose argues that the goal of Telemachus' journey is the search for glory (*kleos*), because the goddess says in the meeting of the gods that she will send the youth to Sparta and Pylos in order to find whatever he can about his father's return and conquer *kleos esthlon*, that is, a good reputation among men (Hom., *Od.*, I, 88-95). His glory is only acquired after the revenge against the suitors. For that author, Athena's plan is to make Telemachus see that his own *kleos esthlon* will only come through the revenge, but that demanding revenge depends partly on knowing the truth about Odysseus, which, in its turn, demands traveling to Pylos and Sparta. Jones (1988) argues that Telemachus' journey is in itself a

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be understood also as a search for one's own identity. The young man had never met his father, Odysseus had left when he was a newborn. In some passages of the poem, Telemachus even doubts his own progeny (Hom., Od., I, 215-16).[4]

In her speech, Athena/Mentes asks Telemachus to summon the assembly of citizens, so the young man can talk about the problem of the suitors. Many scholars question the purpose of summoning an assembly for that, since, in the Homeric world, the group of citizens, that is, the demos or mass of soldiers – in the case of the Iliad – has no voice, and only watches as the prominent figures debate. The assembly does not vote or make decisions. Therefore, there is doubt around the reason why the meeting is called since the population of Ithaca has no authority to help Telemachus in his needs (EMLYN-JONES & YAMAGATA, 2006, p. 20). Following Athena/Mentes' plan, this could be an opportunity for the boy to display maturity since, for the first time since Odysseus had left, an assembly was called, and, this time, conducted by Telemachus.

The assembly takes place in the agora. This is the space that represents order, maintenance of a status quo and perfect organization of society, an isotopia for the town's citizens. According to Magalhães (2005, p. 39) gathering in the agora is, for the Greeks, a distinctive sign of a refined culture, conferring superiority to that society and offering privilege to those who stand out in it. Following Homeric heroic morals, the battlefield is a preferential place for the attainment of glory (GABRECHT, 2009). However, the agora also plays that role of glory-giver; as much as the battlefield, in the agora a man can face his opponents, surpass his rivals and see his own superiority recognized by others (MAGALHÃES, 2005, p. 40). Not only that, but it is also a space of gathering of citizens and solution of problems between individuals. That is why Telemachus summons the citizens of Ithaca at dawn of the day after the arrival of Mentes/Athena. And it is with rude words that the young man challenges the suitors to face him in the agora:

> At daybreak we shall sit down in assembly
> and I shall tell you – take it as you will -
> you are to leave this hall. Go feasting elsewhere,
> consume your own stores. Turn and turn about,
> use one another's houses.
> (Hom., Od., I, 411-4)

In reply, one of the suitors, Antinous, challenges Telemachus:

> "Telemakhos, no doubt the gods themselves
> are teaching you this high and mighty manner.
> Zeus forbid you should be king in Ithaka,
> though you are eligible as your father's son."
> (Hom., Od., I, 423-6)

Since Odysseus had left, Ithaca had been in a state of anomia, the power is shattered because of the inefficiency of Telemachus against the suitors.[5] Apparently, the absence of Odysseus and the problem with the suitors imposed a state of anarchy in Ithaca. The assembly had never again been summoned, according to the spech of the ancient man named Aegyptius, who questions the reason for such gathering:

> "Hear me, Ithakans! Hear what I have to say.
> No meeting has been held here since our king,
> Odysseus, left port in the decked ships.
> Who finds occasion for assembly, now?
> One of the young men? One of the older lot?
> Has he had word our fighters are returning-
> news to report if he got wind of it -
> or is it something eles, touching the realm?
> The man has vigour, I should say: more power to him.
> Whatever he desires, may Zeus fulfill it."
> (Hom., Od., II, 26-35)

As soon as Telemachus arrives at the agora, the other citizens of Ithaca give him the old seat of Odysseus (Hom., Od., II, 14), a gesture that demonstrates the authority and the important role in the meeting given to the young man. He also receives the scepter from the hands of the herald, Pisenor (Hom., Od., II, 37-8), the object that confers the right to speak in the assembly (GABRECHT, 2006, p. 87).

In the space of the agora, the young son of Odysseus explains the problem that afflicts his house:

> No need to wonder anymore, Sir,
> who called this session. The distress is mine.
> As to our troops returning, I have no news -
> news to report, if I got wind of it -
> nor have I public business to propose;
> only my need ad ge trouble of my house -
> the troubles. My distinguised father is lost,
> who ruled among you once, mild as a father,
> and there is now this greater evil still:
> my home and all I have are being ruined.
> Mother wanted no suitors, but like a pack
> they came […]
> No; these men spend their days around our house
> killing our beeves and sheep and fatted goats,

central element in the conquering of *kleos,* and not only the revenge against the suitors.

[4] DAWE (1993, p. 62) argues that the way in which Telemachus speaks about his own progeny "They say he is my father" may be read as an idiomatic expression, not necessarily as expressing doubt as to his relation with Odysseus.

[5] Odysseus' old father, Laertes, is still alive, but does not govern anymore, apparently having abdicated in favor of his son, and living isolated in his own property. As Mentes tells in verses 223 to 229: "Years back, my family and yours were friends / as Lord Laertes knows: ask when you see him./ I hear the old man comes to town no longer,/ stays up country, ailing, with only one/ old woman to prepare his meat and drink/ when pain and stiffness take him in the legs/ from working on his terraced plot, his vineyard."

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carousing, soaking up our good dark wine,
not caring what they do. They squander everything.
We have no strong Odysseus to defend us,
and as to putting up a fight ourselves -
we'd only show our incompetence in arms.
(Hom., Od., II, 42-64)

From what has been told, and after a tough debate with some of the suitors, Telemachus requests the collaboration of the other citizens in solving the tribulations that grieve him. The young man wishes for a manned ship and so explains to the citizens of Ithaca his plan of travelling in search of news of his missing father:

But give me a fast ship and a crew of twenty
who will see me through a voyage, out and back.
I'll go to sandy Pylos, then to Sparta,
for news of Father since he sailed from Troy -
some traveller's tale, perhaps, or rumoured fame
issued from Zeus himself into the world.
If he's alive, and beating his way home,
I might hold out for another weary year;
but if they tell me that he's dead and gone,
then I can come back to my own dear country
and raise a mound for him, and burn his gear,
with all the funeral honors that befit him,
and give my mother to another husband.
(Hom., Od., II, 220-32)

In his speech, Telemachus informs the Ithacan citizens that he intends to gather a crew and travel to Pylos and Sparta for news of Odysseus. We will follow him in his journey through both Hellenic kingdoms in search of his father, but also of his own identity, but, at the same time, we see the movement through the spaces of Hellas as a means of understanding how the poet conceives and represents his own territory and how this helps to shape the outlines of a Hellenic identity.

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