

Greek states of the early historic period: Systematizing the evidence contained in the Homeric poems

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to present as complete as possible the organization of Greek states as that must have been during the period of the composition of the Homeric poems. It is intended to systematize the evidence contained in the Homeric poems regarding the state institutions characterizing Greek societies contemporary with the poems of Homer.

Based on the descriptions of the states occurring in the Homeric poems, it is supposed to demonstrate that, in terms of organization, a state of the early historic period presented a clear tripartite structure – a body of basileis (“kings”), a body of the elders and an assembly (“agora”) of the people; an addition to those, there were also minor public offices, which could be held by representatives of the people. It is the intention of this paper to analyze these institutions with regard to their exact functions, roles, and importance in the states as described in the epic diction. In conclusion, it will be argued that a state as presented in the Homeric poems appeared as a self-governed autonomous community, which in its general features might approximate a city-state (polis); however, it was still too underdeveloped to be compared with states of that type.

Key words: “Homeric” period, Homeric poems, Greek states of the early historic period, Organization of the early Greek states, *Basileus*, *Gerontes*, *Agora*.

1. Introduction

In the scholarly literature, the states, which had existed in Greece during the period conventionally called “Homeric”, that is, the period extending from the late 11th century BC until the end of the 8th century BC, are largely considered as something shapeless and indefinite, while the related studies mainly concern the problem whether those states may be characterized as city-states (Ancient Greek *poleis*).

A number of states and state-like collectives of the Greeks are mentioned in the Homeric poems. Despite the uncertainty regarding the reality of those particular states, the descriptions of those and the references to those states’ institutions, occurring in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, had undoubtedly reflected to a significant extent the socio-political organization of the Greeks roughly contemporary with the Homeric poems (see for the date of the composition of the Homeric poems West 1988, 165-167; Janko 1992, 8-19).

Hence, the aim of this paper is to present as complete as possible the organization of Greek states as that must have been during the period of the composition of the Homeric poems, based on the evidence that the poems contain. It will be taken into account the fact that the information, which will be used, is provided in such a specific way as by means of the epic language.

The states, which are presented in the Homeric poems with many important details and will be used in this paper as an epic reflection of the real states of the “Homeric” period, are those of the Ithakians (in Ithaka island), Pheakians (in Sheria island, which is not identified with certainty with any of the actual Greek islands), and Trojans, as well as one of the unnamed states supposedly depicted by Hephaistos on the Shield of Ahilleus and the Army of the Achaeans, which appears as an organized collective presenting characteristics of a state. In each of those, the common life was similarly regulated by three major institutions: *βασιλεῖς* (plural form of the term *βασιλεύς*, with the epic plural form *βασιλῆες*) – traditionally interpreted as “kings”, *γέροντες* – a group of the elders, and *ἀγορά* – an assembly of the people. Below, these institutions will be analyzed with regard to their exact functions, roles, and importance in the states described in the epic diction.

2. Βασιλῆς

2.1. The meaning of the term

The term *βασιλεύς* was in use from as early as the Mycenaean period: it is attested in the form *qa-si-re-u* (= *g^uasileus* = **γ^wασιλεύς* = *βασιλεύς*) in a number of Linear B tablets from Pylos, Knossos and Thebes, in the nominative case, as an appellative of a male person (Heubeck 1957-1958; Heubeck 1958-1959, 123; Ventris and Chadwick 1973, 576; Jorro and Adrados 1985-1993, v. 2, 189-191). Of various interpretations of the Mycenaean term *qa-si-re-u* = *βασιλεύς* (see Jorro and Adrados 1985-1993, v. 2, 189-191; also Chantraine 1968, 166-167), the most probable one seems to be that this designation was originally applied to a Mycenaean official of local level, probably a chieftain of a village (Ventris and Chadwick 1973, 358-359). The etymology of the word *βασιλεύς*, where *βασ-* < *βαδ-* “to step”, “to tread” (note *βάσις*, -*εως* = *το βαδίζειν* “marching”, “stepping”, Σταματακός 1972, 210), suggesting that *βασιλεύς* may virtually mean “ὁ βαδίζων μπροστά” / “that who goes ahead” (Σταματακός 1972, 210), seems to support this interpretation. More specifically, Mycenaean *qasireu* / *βασιλεύς* may be understood as a designation of a *headman* of a small social-territorial entity of a Mycenaean kingdom, such as *δήμος* (for *δήμος* in the Mycenaean terminology = Linear B *da-mo* as referring to a certain locality and a population living in it, possibly a village / rural settlement with a sort of communal organization, see Chantraine 1968, 273-274; Ventris and Chadwick 1973, 538; Jorro and Adrados 1985-1993, v.1, 153-154; Προμπονάς 1990, 222, based on the PY Un 718.4, interprets the Mycenaean *damos* = *δήμος* as “community”). The original links of the institution of *βασιλεύς* with *δήμος*, understood whether as an inhabited area or an autonomous group of people, seem to have been reflected in the epic phraseology, as, e.g., in the *Il.* 3.200-201: (βασιλεύς) “Ὀδυσσεύς ὃς τράφη ἐν δῆμῳ Ἰθάκης” – (the king) “Odysseus who was reared in the *demos* – land / people – of Ithaka”; in the *Od.* 8.390-391: “κατὰ δῆμον... βασιλῆς ἀρχοὶ κραίνουσι” – “in this *demos* - among this people / at this land - ... kings rule”; and in the *Od.* 13.186: “δήμου Φαιήκων ἡγήτορες ἠδὲ μέδοντες” (= βασιλῆς) – “the leaders and rulers of the *demos* - land / people – of the Pheakians” (see for other occurrences of the term *βασιλεύς* / *βασιλῆς* in association with *δήμος* (in various cases) Tebben 1994, v.1, 186; Tebben 1998, v.1, 265-266). As connected with small territorial communities, and not with the central government of a state presided by *wanax*, the institution of *βασιλεύς* must have survived the crash of the Mycenaean kingdoms and developed, together with the gradual growth of local communities, into that of a ruler of a small state.

2.2. Number

According to the poems, there were normally more than one *βασιλεύς* in a state of that period, e.g., thirteen in *Sheria* (*Od.* 8.390-391), “many” in *Ithaka* (*Od.* 1.394-395: “βασιλῆς Ἀχαιῶν εἰσὶ καὶ ἄλλοι πολλοὶ ἐν... Ἰθάκῃ”) and in the Army of the Achaeans (*Il.* 2.188). This may be explained by that after the fall of the Mycenaean kingdoms and the period of devastation, the new states started to appear on the Greek territory in the process of growth and merging of the survived local communities, each with its own headman – *βασιλεύς*. However, it deserves to be mentioned that in a Mycenaean village referred to in the Pylian tablet PY 40, there were possibly four *basilewes*-*βασιλῆς*, who seem to have been local chieftains (Ventris and Chadwick 1973, 172-173). Characteristically, in the states as described in the Homeric poems, among a number of *βασιλεῖς*, one was recognized by the others as the most distinguished (as *Odysseus* in *Ithaka*, *Alkinoos* in the island of the Pheakians, *Agamemnon* in the Army of the Achaeans); such a *βασιλεύς* may have been that who was coming from the wealthiest and noblest family of a community that had developed into a state or whose family originated from the largest of the communities that had formed a state (note the words addressed to Telemachos, the son of the *βασιλεύς* *Odysseus*, in the *Od.* 15.533-534: “Than yours is no other house in the *demos* – land / people – of Ithaka more kingly; nay, ye are ever supreme”).

It must be noted that in the early historic time, a situation similar to that observed in the states described in the Homeric poems seems to have actually existed at Athens, which must have been ruled by five *βασιλεῖς* during that period: according to sources, there was one *βασιλεύς* in each of the four ancient tribes, known to later tradition as *φυλοβασιλεύς* (Arist. *Ath.Polit.* 8.3; also *IG* II.2.1357a.8), and one major *βασιλεύς* whose institution was eventually transformed into the office of *ἄρχων-βασιλεύς* (Arist. *Ath.Polit.* 3.2). The institution of *βασιλεῖς* (though, with uncertain number and authorities) was still in existence in Chios in the second quarter of the 6th century BC, despite the emergence of certain democratic organs (Meiggs and Lewis 1969, nu.8, pp.14-17). Remarkably, two *βασιλεῖς* remained in Sparta in the historic time.

2.3. Titles

In the poems, the *βασιλῆς* are provided with the following titles: “*σκηπτοῦχοι βασιλῆς*” – “having scepter / sceptured kings” (*Od.* 8.41, and often), “*κλειτοὶ βασιλῆς*” – “glorious kings” (*Od.* 6.54), “*ἀρμπρεπέες βασιλῆς*” – “very distinguished kings” (*Od.* 8.390), “*διοτρεφές βασιλῆς*” – “kings nourished by Zeus” (*Il.* 2.445). The last of

this titles seems to imply the divine nature of the *βασιλῆες* and their especial links with gods; in later time, this idea may have survived in Sparta, as the designation “θεοτίμητοι βασιλῆες” (in Acc.) / “the divinely honoured kings”, applied by Tyrtaeus (second half of the 7th century BC) to the Spartan kings (Tyrtaeus, *Frg.4*, 3) may indicate.

2.4. Social ranking

In their states, *βασιλῆες* form the upper social group: they are “οἱ πρότοι” – “the first ones” (*Il.* 9.12; *Od.* 6.60-61), “ἄριστοι” – “the noblest” (*Il.* 300-301; *Od.* 6.257; 8.91, and often), “ἔσθλοῖ” – “noble” (*Od.* 4.236: Telemachos, the son of Odysseus, and Peisistratos, the son of Nestor, are called “the sons of noble men” – “ἀνδρῶν ἐσθλῶν παῖδες”). Their position is hereditary and passes from a father to a son (*Od.* 1.385).

2.5. Social roles / duties

Undoubtedly, the multiplicity of *βασιλῆες* in a state indicates that their institution was not connected with sovereignty and monarchical power.

The social role of the *βασιλῆες* is formulated with a number of designations applied to them, such as: “ἡγήτορες ἠδὲ μέδοντες” - “leaders and rulers” (*Il.* 2.79 – of the Argives =Achaean; *Il.* 10.301 – of the Trojans; *Od.* 7.136, 186 – of the Phaeacians) and “ἡγεμόνες καὶ κοίρανοι”, which is the older epic formula (where *κοίρανος* - “leader”, “lord”, “ruler”, equated with *βασιλεύς* in the *Il.* 2.204-205) – “leaders and lords / rulers” (*Il.* 2.487; note *Il.* 2.760: “ἡγεμόνες Δαναῶν καὶ κοίρανοι”); also, *ἄρχος* (sing.) - “having power”, “ruler”, “leader”, note *Il.* 4.205: “Μενέλαος, ἄρχος Ἀχαιῶν” (in Acc.) – “Menelaos, a ruler of the Achaeans” (and other occurrences) / *ἄρχοι* (pl.), note *Od.* 8.390-391: “βασιλῆες ἄρχοι κραίνουσι” (where *κραίνω* – “to serve as”, “to be smb.”, “to function as”, “to exercise sway”) – “the kings who function as rulers / who are rulers”. The Homeric *ἄρχος* / *ἄρχοι* may be compared with the Athenian office of *ἄρχων* developed, together with those of *βασιλεύς* and *πολέμαρχος*, in the institution of *nine ἄρχοντες*.

The *βασιλῆες* know, employ and keep the “θέμιστες”, that is, the ancestral customs and unwritten laws of their native land, as well as those supposed to be commonly obeyed by all the “civilized” people (as religious customs and customs of hospitality, Gagarin 1986, 30-32, 33-34; note “ἀθεμιστία” - “lawlessness” (*Od.* 9.189, 428), “ἀθέμιστος (ἀνὴρ)” (sing.) - “a man obedient to no law” (*Od.* 18.141) / “ἀθέμιστοι” (pl.) – “lawless folk” (*Od.* 9.106), all referring to “wild tribes” - “ἄγρια φύλα”, which do not observe any of such customs, *Od.* 8.206). This function of the Homeric *βασιλῆες* seems to have survived in the duty assigned to the Spartan kings to be the keepers of the oracles – some kind of “divine instructions” - uttered by the god Apollo regarding Sparta (Herodotos 6.56).

Based on the *θέμιστες*, the *βασιλῆες* take decisions for their people / “βουλευεῖν” (*Il.* 2.205-206).

One of the *βασιλῆες*, perhaps, the most distinguished one, leads the army (military forces) of his country in a war (as Odysseus); he is also considered the “lord” of his people – that who “ἀνάσσει” (*Od.* 2.231; 7.23).

In his character as a military leader, a king of a Homeric state could be designated as *κοσμησάμενος πολίτας* – “one who orders the men of his city” (leading them in battle) (*Il.* 2.806) or *κοσμήτωρ λαῶν* - literally “orderer of people” (*Il.* 3.236). These designations, formed on the basis of the stem *κοσμ-* with the general meaning “order” (Liddell and Scott 1996, 984 (*κοσμ-*); note “ἀκοσμοῦντες” – “those who break the laws”, Arist. *Ath. Polit.* 6), have a significant number of analogues in the official terminology of some Greek states as attested from the Early Archaic period onward, e.g., *κόσμος* – chief magistrate in Cretan *poleis* (Arist. *Politics*, 2.7.3-4), particular in Dreros (Meiggs and Lewis 1969, nu.2, pp.2-3 - mid 7th century BC) and Gortyna (*IC* 4.14.g-p, 1 – 6th century BC; Willetts 1967, 8.55 - late 6th century BC), whose activity is described with the verbs *κοσμήσει* – “one who has been *kosmos*” (Meiggs and Lewis 1969, nu.2, p.2), *κοσμίων* – “one who is *kosmos*”, *ἐκόσμιον* – “those who were *kosmoi*” (Willetts 1967, 1.52, 5.6), *κοσμεῖν* – “to be *kosmos*” (*IC* 4.14.g-p, 2 – 6th century BC). It is worth noting that in Crete, according to Aristoteles, the *kosmoi* were originally officials who held “the leadership in war”, but took the place of the *βασιλεῖς* when the institution of *βασιλεία* had been abolished (Arist. *Politics*, 2.7.3-4).

The *βασιλῆες* had certain charitable duties to their states, such as to organize, quite regularly and at their own expense, feasts and banquets for other kings and the *elders* in their house (*Od.* 7.98-99; *Il.* 9.70, 89-90), as well as to regale (providing food and drink) those whom the people (*demos*) charged with the task of

accomplishing certain mission on behalf of a state (note the feast organized by Alkinoos for the fifty-two Pheakian youths chosen to escort Odysseus to Ithaka, *Od.* 8.34-56). The *βασιλῆες* could take over organization of public athletic contests and games (*Od.* 8.100-110). The *βασιλῆες* were those who, on behalf of their state, offered the most rich and splendid sacrifices to the gods (note *Od.* 3.418-463 – the sumptuous sacrifice of a heifer to Athena, organized by Nestor at Pylos), accommodated important guests visiting their country and made them expensive gifts (*Od.* 1.175-176; 7.190-198). The practice, widely attested in the period of city-states, to impose on the wealthiest citizens various beneficent obligations to their *polis* (as *trierarhia*, *horegia*, and *eisfora*) may be traced back to the charitable acts performed by the *βασιλῆες* in states of the early historic time.

As responsible for proper honoring the gods and taking care about strangers, the *βασιλῆες* **represented their state and their people in front of the gods** (note the exclusive honorary duty of the Spartans *βασιλεῖς* to be the priests of Zeus Ouranios and Zeus Lakedemonos, Herodotos 6.56; also, the functions of the Athenian *ἄρχων-βασιλεὺς*, which were largely religious, Stanton 1990, 8) and **in front of all the rest world**.

2.6. The way of exercising their social roles

In a state, the *βασιλῆες* seemed to form a *βουλή* – “council” (note *Il.* 10.195: “Ἀργείων βασιλῆες, ὅσοι κεκλήατο βουλὴν” – “the *βασιλῆες* of the Argives, those who had been called to the *council*”; also *Od.* 6.54-55: “μετὰ κλειτοῦς βασιλῆας ἐς βουλὴν” – “in the *council* with the glorious *βασιλῆες*), which assembled, literally “made sessions” - “*θῶκος / θόωκος*” (*Od.* 15.468; 2.26), on a regular basis *in a certain place* (*Od.* 6.54-51, 60-61). The activity of the *βασιλῆες* in such a “*βουλή*” is described with the phrase “*βουλὰς βουλευεῖν*” (*Od.* 6.60-61) – “to discuss matters” / “to think out”. In the states as described in the poems, the *βουλή of βασιλῆες / “council of βασιλῆες”* probably was the *governing body* and a kind of “*small council*”, which, when difficult and serious matters had to be discussed, invited the *elders* to join the *βασιλῆες* in searching for a solution, note *Il.* 2.53-55: “Βουλὴν ... μεγαθύμων ἴξε γερόντων ... τοὺς ὃ συγκαλέσας πυκινὴν ἀρτύντεο βουλὴν” / “(the king Agamemnon) seated the council of the great-hearted elders... And when he had called them together, he contrived a shrewd plan”. Similarly, Alkinoos, troubled by the arrival of a mysterious stranger (Odysseus) in his island, suggests the other *βασιλῆες* to call the *elders* to advise them how they should act in the particular case (*Od.* 7.189-203). Supplemented with the *elders*, the *βουλή* would have appeared in expanded form, as a “*big council*”. Such a situation may be compared with that imposed on Sparta by the so-called *Megale Rhetra*: “...The divinely honoured kings, in whose care is Sparta’s lovely city, and the aged elders are to initiate counseling...” / “ἄρχειν μὲν βουλῆς Θεοτιμήτους βασιλῆας, οἷσι μέλει Σπάρτης ἡμερόεσσα πόλις, πρεσβυγενέας τε γέροντας...” (Tyrtæus, *Frg.* 4, 3-5). The *βουλή* of the Homeric states, whether limited to the *βασιλῆες* or complemented with the *elders*, may also be compared with the Athenian “*τῶν Ἀρεοπαγιτῶν βουλή*” – “*the Council of the Areopagos*”, which is known to have existed in Athens from the early historic time as a non-elective council composed of the most noble and wealthy Athenians who had served as *archons* – the chief magistrates of the state (Arist. *Ath.Polit.* 6). According to Aristoteles, prior to Drakon (c.620 BC), “*ἡ τῶν Ἀρεοπαγιτῶν βουλή*” was typically responsible for guarding the laws, but in fact it administered the largest and most important part of the state’s affairs and even had the authority to impose death penalties (Arist. *Ath.Polit.* 6). Chios in the second quarter of the 6th century BC, in addition to the *βασιλεῖς* (see above), still had an *aristocratic βουλή* apparently opposed to a “*βολὴ δημοσίη*” / “*people’s council*” (Meiggs and Lewis 1969, nu.8, pp.14-17).

In cases when the private wealth of the *βασιλῆες* was not enough to meet properly the needs, which state interests could cause, the *βασιλῆες* could tax the people - “*δῆμος*”, note *Od.* 13.14-15: Alkinoos insists that the *βασιλῆες* of the Pheakians should first present gifts to Odysseus, but later they would “gather the cost from among the people” – “ἀγειρόμενοι κατὰ δῆμον”, and thus would repay themselves. However, nothing is mentioned concerning the mechanism of taxation and the *δῆμος’* reactions on such a practice.

To underline, the *βασιλῆες* of the states as described in the Homeric poems are more like the *leaders* of their people distinguished from the rest by their origin and wealth (note *Od.* 6.299-303 – Alkinoos’ palace; *Od.* 2.337-345 – the treasure-chamber in Odysseus’ house; *Od.* 4.43-47- the marvelous palace of Menelaos; also *Il.* 18.550: “*τέμενος βασιλῆιον*” / “*king’s estate*”, represented on the Shield of Ailleus, where hired workers gathered the harvest). In the states described by Homer, the *βασιλῆες* do not order, but suggest and ask for an opinion or a support; thus, they do not really exercise power over the people, but rather *have responsibilities* for keeping their state in order according to the established customs.

3. Γέροντες – “a body of the elders”

Γέροντες – “the elders” are mentioned in the poems as some kind of authority body under the *βασιλῆες*, but in almost constant connection with them. The presence of such a body is traced in all the main states described in the poems – in those of the Ithakians (*Od.* 2.14), Pheakians (*Od.* 7.189), and Trojans (*Il.* 3.149), in one of the states depicted by Hephaistos on the Shield of Achilleus (*Il.* 18.503), as well as in the Army of the Achaeans (*Il.* 2.53) (note also *Il.* 9.574-575: “*γέροντες Αἰτωλῶν*” – “the elders of the Aetolians” mentioned in association with the mythic city of Kalydon).

The institution of the *elders*, as that of *βασιλῆες*, seems to have had its origins in the Mycenaean system of local self-administration: *e.g.*, in the Pylian tablet PY 40, *ke-ro-si-ja = γερουσία* occurs as a common designation of a group of men subordinate to four other, probably *basilewes = βασιλῆες* - the local chieftains, which gave grounds to interpret the former as counselors of the latter (Ventris and Chadwick 1973, 172-173). The genetic links of the institution of the *elders* with self-administration of local communities, as *da-mo - δῆμος*, may have been reflected in the designation “*δημογέροντες*” – literally “the elders of the *δῆμος*” occurring in the earlier of the poems – the *Iliad* in relation to the *elders* of Troy (*Il.* 3.149; 11.372).

3.1. Number

There are no mentions of the exact number of *γέροντες* in the states described in the poems; neither is known whether their number was steady, as, *e.g.*, twenty-eight in Sparta and Crete in the historic time (Arist. *Politics*, 2.7.3), or could vary according to the situation or the case needed to be discussed. For instance, in the Pylian tablet PY 40 mentioned above, twenty-two men were recorded as belonging to the *ke-ro-si-ja = γερουσία* of the particular village (Ventris and Chadwick 1973, 172-173). Eight *δημογέροντες* – seven distinguished old men and the king Priamos - are mentioned in Troy, in the scene of observation of the army of the Achaeans from a tower (*Il.* 3.146-149), but it is not certain whether this was the number of the *elders* in that state or only eight *elders* were present in the particular scene. It should be emphasized that in the states described in poems, the *elders* when they are concerned in public matters do not act or appear individually, but are always referred to as a *group* or *body*.

3.2. Social base and position

There is no clarity concerning the social base of the body of the *elders* in that period – whether they could have been from any social group, including ordinary people, or comprised the noblest and richest and, therefore, the most influential members of their states (*e.g.*, in the Army of the Achaeans, *γέροντες* seem to be the most aged *βασιλῆες* from all the Greek states participating in the war against Troy, with Nestor, the *βασιλεύς* of Pylos, to be the most distinguished one). Likewise, it is not known how did the *elders* enter the body – whether they were chosen from / elected by the people and thus were a kind of people’s representatives or were chosen (appointed) by the *βασιλῆες*. In this regard, it should be mentioned that in later time, according to Aristoteles, the *elders* of Sparta were chosen based on virtue they had shown and from all the citizens of the state (Arist. *Politics*, 2.6.15), while in Crete the election of the *elders* was made from certain clans and only from those who have held the office of the *kosmoi* (Arist. *Politics*, 2.7.5-6).

Undoubtedly, in the states as described in the Homeric poems, the *elders* because of their quite the close position to the *βασιλῆες* formed a privileged social group.

3.3. Social roles / functions

In the states described in the poems, the *elders* had two major roles: *to advise the βασιλῆες* and *to perform trials*.

3.3.1. Βουλή γερόντων

The *γέροντες* / *elders*, likewise the *βασιλῆες*, appear to have formed a council – *βουλή γερόντων* (“*council of the elders*”), note “*βουλή γερόντων*” (in Acc.) in the Army of the Achaeans (*Il.* 2.53, 84), and “*γέροντες βουλευταί*” (in Dat. - “*γέρουσιν βουλευτήισι*”, which is remarkably the first attested mention of the office of *βουλευτής* in the Greek sources) – “the elders who are counselors / members of *βουλή*” in Troy (*Il.* 6.113-114). However, it seems that the *βουλή γερόντων* was not supposed to assemble by itself, but had to be called up by the *βασιλῆες* (as in the *Il.* 2.53-55, see above) or invited by the *βασιλῆες* to join them (as in the *Od.* 7.189-203, see above; note *Od.* 7.189 – “*γέροντας... καλέσαντες*”) when those faced a complicated situation and needed to be advised

concerning possible solutions of a problem. Even in cases when the *βασιλῆες* seemed to be in a deadlock, the *elders* could only propose to the *βασιλῆες* to summon them in a session, but did not assemble themselves as a separate from the *βασιλῆες* council, note, e.g., Nestor's suggestion to troubled Agamemnon: "Make a feast for the *elders* / *γέρουσιν*... And when many are gathered together, you will follow whoever *devises the wisest counsel* / *ἀρίστην βουλήν βουλευέσῃ*" (*Il.* 9.70-75). "...The son of Atreus led the *elders of the Achaeans* / *γέροντας Ἀχαιῶν* all together to his hut, and set before them a feast to satisfy the heart... But when they had put from them the desire of food and drink, first of all the old man began to weave the web of counsel for them, Nestor... (*Il.* 9.89-94).

Generally, from the evidence of the poems, it is not really certain whether in the matters of state the *βουλή γερόντων* had the authority to act on its own initiative, that is, to assemble independently of the *βουλή βασιλέων*, to interfere in the *βασιλῆες'* decision-making, and to conflict with the *βασιλῆες*, because no such cases are mentioned. However, joining the *βασιλῆες* in ruling a state, *γέροντες* likewise appeared as "ἡγήτορες" – "leaders" (*Il.* 3.153) of their people.

It has been observed that documentary "evidence for the existence of a Council of Elders in a Greek state in the 8th century [BC] is somewhat scanty" (Sale 1994, 91), which gave grounds for doubting the actual existence of such councils during the early historic time. This doubt may, however, be solved by admitting the fragmentariness of the available documents preserved from the early historic period. Moreover, the fact is that *councils of the elders* were maintained and even received the official status of a governmental authority - *ἀρχή* in the city-states of Sparta and Crete, having also retained there the designations occurring in the Homeric poems - the *Γέροντες* or the *Γερούσια* and the *Βουλή* consisting of *γέροντες*, respectively (Arist. *Politics*, 2.7.3).

3.3.2. Judgeship of the elders

Perhaps, the most important duty of the *elders* was connected with justice. As the scene of a trial taken place in one of the cities depicted on the Shield of Ahilleus (*Il.* 18.497-509) suggests, the *elders* formed a judicial body, which performed trials in public, in the place of assembly (note *Il.* 11.807 for a "place of assembly" as a "place of judgment"), and passed judgments on the considered cases based on the customs and laws (*θέμιστες*) established in their state (note the term *θεμιστεύων* (in Acc.) describing the judicial function in the *Od.* 11.569). A special knower of such customs and laws - *ἴστωρ* could supervise court sessions in order to avoid misjudgments (*Il.* 18.501). In certain cases, an appeal to the *assembly of demos* could be made by either a plaintiff or a defendant (as in the scene described in the *Il.* 18.497-509; also in the *Od.* 2.40-79), which means that the judgments made by the *elders* could have been questioned not only by an *ἴστωρ*, but also by the *δῆμος* assembled in the *agora*.

The activity of the *elders* as that of judges was, probably, considered sacred: in the court scene depicted on the Shield of Ahilleus, the *elders* sit on polished stones forming a *sacred circle* – "ἱερωί ἐνὶ κύκλῳ" (*Il.* 18.504), while each of the *elders* expressed his opinion in turn, standing up with the staff of a *κῆρυξ* / herald (*Il.* 18.505-506). The procedure as described in the particular verses must have been more or less typical for that time, based on old traditions of community trials.

Remarkably, the verb *δίκαζον* (past ind. of *δικάζειν* - "to give judgment") used for the procedure of judgment making performed by the *elders* in the *Il.* 18.506 was an official term for the activity of judges in the Greek city-states as attested from the Archaic time, e.g., in the Law Code of Gortyna (Willetts 1967, 33).

In the states as described in the Homeric poems, the *elders*, thus, formed the state court - *δικαστήριον*, and as such, probably, had to assemble in certain days, but, perhaps, also in cases of urgency. As a *δικαστήριον*, the *elders* would have had a fixed number of members, but it is not necessary. Perhaps, it was customary to reward the elder who had proposed the best dispute settling solution with some amount of gold (as in the *Il.* 18.507-508, where two talents of gold are mentioned as such a reward). Other information concerning possible salary of the *elders* for their services as judges is lacking; the main remuneration of the *elders* would have been regular feasting organized for them by the *βασιλῆες* at the latter's houses. That could have been a precedent for providing feasting on the state's expense to the members of the *Βουλή* while *prytaneis* (counselors on duty) practiced at Athens in the Classical time onward.

Remarkably, judgeship was one of the major functions of the *Elders* in Sparta in the historic time (Arist. *Politics*, 2.6.17).

3.3.3. Control over the communal lands (?)

One more duty of the *elders* may have been implied in the passage of the *Iliad* recalling the myth of Meleagros: the *elders of the Aetolians*, begging the great warrior reluctant to participate in the defense of his city from an invading enemy, promised to give him quite the large portions of land (“where the plain of lovely Kalydon was fattest, there he was to choose a beautiful tract of fifty acres, the half of it vineland, and the half clear plough land, to be cut out of the plain”) if he would aid his people in the war (*Il.* 9.574-580). From this case, it may be inferred that the *elders* traditionally controlled and had the authority to distribute the communal lands.

In general, the *elders* in the states as described in the Homeric poems appear rather as an *institution* of traditional importance, which was inherited from the earlier stages of social organization, than an actual authority body with fixed number of members, organized and empowered to act on its own behalf.

4. Άγορά – assembly

4.1. Membership (eligible participants)

The terms referring to the participants in “*άγοραι*” are the following ones: “*άγοραι άνδρων*” (*Od.* 2.69) - “assemblies of men”; “*λαός*” (*Od.* 2.81) / “*λαοί*” (*Il.* 18.497, 502) – “people” (note the customary Athenian proclamation “*ακούετε λεών*” / “hear, ye people,” shouted by heralds when the people had to be called at the assembly, Plut. *Thes.* 13.3; also the 6th century BC Law Code lines from Gortyna: “*κατ’άγοράν... τών λαών...*” – to announce smth. “to the people at the place of assembly”, Willetts 1967, 10.34-36; 11.12); and “*δημος*” (*Il.* 18.500) - “demos”, “mass of common people”. The term “*δήμου άνήρ*” / “a man of the people” is attested (in the Accusative form) for an individual participant in an *άγορά* of a humble origin (*Il.* 2.198); this may be compared with the designation “*δημότες άνδρες*” applied to the body of citizens of Sparta ranked below the *βασιλείς* and the *γέροντες* in the Tyrtaean poem supposedly reproducing the *Megale Rhetra* (Tyrtaeus, *Frg.* 4, 5-6). However, the *βασιλῆες* and the *γέροντες*, too, were necessarily, as it seems, present at the assemblies in the Homeric states (*Od.* 2.6; 8.4-8; note *Od.* 3.127 – the *βασιλείς* Nestor and Odysseus referred to as regular participants in both *άγορη* and *βουλή*; also, *Il.* 2.788-808: the *βασιλεύς* Priamos and the prince Hector participate in the *agora* of the Trojans). Thus, assemblies / “*άγοραι*” appear to have been open to all free men born and dwelling in a given state, including *βασιλῆες* and the *elders*.

Although there are no particular mentions regarding the minimum age limit for participation in the *άγορά*, the *Od.* 2.29 indicates that in Ithaka, “the young men and those who are older” / “*νέοι άνδρες*” and “*προγενέστεροι*” participated, side by side, at the assembly of the Ithakians. Similarly, in Troy, “the young men with the elders” / “*νέοι ήδὲ γέροντες*” gathered in the assembly to discuss how to confront the invasion of the Achaeans (*Il.* 2.788-808). Telemachos, who, by the time of the events described in the *Odyssey*, would have reached the age of 20 years old, even though he is considered young and inexperienced, participates in the assembly of the Ithakians in place of his father, the *βασιλεύς* Odysseus. Perhaps, as it is attested for Classical Athens, young men could participate in the assemblies of the people of their state from 20 years of age.

4.2. Mode of functioning / procedure

In a town / *άστυ* (*Od.* 2.77; 8.7), a certain space was delimited for assemblies; such a place, too, was called *agora* (Haubold 2005, 33). *E.g.*, the Agora of the Pheakians was, supposedly, *built* at the city harbour, around the sanctuary of Poseidon and was defined with a peribolos of huge stones (*Od.* 6.262-267; 8.5-6). A special place would have been allocated for the assemblies of the Ithakians, given that there were stone seats for the chief *βασιλεύς* and the *elders* (*Od.* 2.14). Likewise, the Agora in one of the cities depicted by Hephaistos on the Shield of Ahilleus was provided with polished stone seats for the *elders* (*Il.* 18.503-504) and, therefore, should have had a fixed location. The Agora of the Trojans was imagined as located nearby the house of the *βασιλεύς* Priamos (*Il.* 2.788). Thus, the cities (urban centers) of states contemporary with the Homeric poems appear to have had two specifically organized public spaces – a place for assemblies of all the people, which was also a place of a public court, and a special building for the “*βουλή* of the first ones” (see above). Significantly, this architectural pattern is traced archaeologically from as early as the late 8th century BC, *e.g.*, at Dreros (Crete), where a large building with apparently public functions (conventionally called *Prytaneion*) and an *agora* have been excavated (Μαζαρακῆς-Αινιάν 2000, 335, fig.111; note also *agora* as a place of assembly of the citizens at Gortyna in the 6th century BC, Willetts 1967, 11.12-14).

In the poems, the *agora-assembly* is usually summoned on an initiative of a βασιλεύς by κήρυκες / heralds (*Od.* 2.6-7; 8.4-14; *Il.* 2.50-52).

The typical part of the assemblies began with the pompous entry of the chief βασιλεύς, of the rests of the ἡγήτορες ἠδὲ μέδοντες, and of the elders, who after that took their seats in a ceremonial way (*Od.* 2.14; 8.6). Then, the initiator of the summoned assembly, usually the chief βασιλεύς of a state, announced the reason of gathering the people, and those who wished to express their opinion regarding the discussed subject made speeches. Anybody, as it seems, could be allowed to talk (note *Od.* 2.150: “ἀγορά πολύφημος” - “many-voiced assembly”); an orator permitted to speak had to take the scepter of a κῆρυξ in his hands and to stand at the middle of the place of assembly (*Od.* 2.36-38). Debates, sometimes intense and even rude, between orators were normal (e.g., *Od.* 2.177-179). However, the assembly could be dismissed at any point of discussion either by the chief βασιλεύς (*Od.* 8.46-47) or by someone minor from ἡγήτορες ἠδὲ μέδοντες (note *Od.* 2.257; also *Il.* 2.807-808 – the *agora* of the Trojans broken up by Hector, the first prince of Troy). Exactly this circumstance is used by most of the scholars as an indication of weakness and passivity of the *assembly* in the states of the Homeric time (e.g., van der Vliet 2000, 141-142), but such an opinion may be questioned.

There are no clear statements concerning the mode of expressing a collective opinion by the *agora* – whether the participants shouted loudly their “yes” / “no” (the procedure of “voting by acclamation”, as it was practiced in the historic time, e.g., in Sparta) or raised their hands. However, the descriptive phrase “ἀγορά πολύφημος” - “many-voiced assembly” (*Od.* 2.150) mentioned above and the remark in the *Il.* 2.395-396 that the Achaeans, assembled by Agamemnon, “shouted aloud” responding positively to his speech, make the former way more likely.

4.3. Power / authority / responsibilities

The epic tradition presents the *agora* as an ancient institution, the existence of which is sacralized by means of the religious beliefs: supposedly, the goddess *Themis*, personifying the divine laws and established customs - *Θέμις*, herself calls and dissolves the “assemblies of men” (*Od.* 2.68-69). Virtually, this would have meant that the *agora* as an element of the organization of a state could not be eliminated without violating the will of the gods.

The concerns of the *agora* mainly relate to public matters – *δήμιον* (in sing.) (*Od.* 2.32). In the context of the Homeric poems, *agorai* are summoned in cases if:

- there is a threat of invasion into a state (*Od.* 2.30),
- the people of a state must be informed about something that is important to all of them (as, e.g., a visit of an extraordinary guest; note also, that, according to the myth of Theseus as narrated by Plutarchos (2nd century AD), the mythic king of Athens Aegeus, having recognized Theseus as his son, had to present him as such to the assembly and to inform the people about having a son and an heir, Plut. *Thes.* 13.3),
- there is a need of a joint action in common interests (e.g., a war against another state – the subject discussed in the *agora of the Achaeans* in the *Il.* 2.110-395; a defense of a state from an enemy – the subject discussed in the *agora of the Trojans* in the *Il.* 2.788-808; a collection of expensive gifts to guests on behalf of a state – the subject discussed in the *agora of the Phaeacians* in the *Od.* 8.26-39),
- a king (or the body of kings) of a state needs support (backing) of the people regarding the solutions of common problems, which he or they suggest(s) (e.g., the intention of Agamemnon to continue the siege of Troy, in support of which he assembles the *agora of the Achaeans* in the *Il.* 2.110-395).
- a king (or the body of kings) needs an advise concerning the problem, which he or they face(s) (e.g., deeply troubled by the durable and unsuccessful siege of Troy, as well as by heavy loses in his army, Agamemnon calls once again the *agora* of the Achaeans asking them whether they believe that he must end the war and return home, *Il.* 9.9-79).

In fact, the Homeric poems do not mention such situations, which could indicate that the assemblies exercised any key functions in their states. However, the very idea of necessity to assemble all the people of a state in certain cases, pertaining to the epics, indicates that in the states existing during the historic period contemporary with the composition of the poems the collective opinion of people played an important role and could not be disregarded. Moreover, it appears that in those states it was *quite customary* to solve certain problems by decisions made in common (note *Od.* 9.112: “ἀγοραὶ βουλευφόροι” – “assemblies which decide”). The βασιλῆες who had neither a regular army in their disposal to organize a war or a defense of their state nor enough private

wealth to meet their state's needs, needed the people assemblies, which could provide them with necessary human resources and financial assistance in cases when common interests required that. This means that in the states as described in the Homeric poems, the *βασιλῆες* did not have the real power to impose their will on the *δῆμος* and preferred or needed to collaborate with the people for their state's sake. Such a situation could last as long as in the states the majority of the people - *δῆμος / λαός* remained to be economically independent of the rich landlords and could, therefore, appear as a more or less solid social force.

Serious private disputes could be brought at the *agora* as well. Thus, Telemachos appeals to the *ἀγορά* of the Ithakians to solve his dispute with the suitors of Penelope (*Od.* 2.40-79). An analogous situation is presented in the *Il.* 18.497-508: a difficult argument between two striving parts, taking place in one of the cities depicted by Hephaistos on the Shield of Ahilleus, is to be solved in the *assembly of the people* / "*εἰν ἀγορῆι*" (note *Il.* 18.497 "*λαοί*" and 18.500 "*δῆμος*" (in Dat.) as the participants of that *agora*). These cases seem to indicate that in the states reflected in the Homeric poems the *assembly of the δῆμος*, that is, the *δῆμος in its whole* could in fact exercise the authority as that supposed for a "body of justice" – a state court. The ultimate judicial authority of the *agora* of the Homeric states may be compared with the power given by Solon (the early 6th century BC) to the Athenian *demoi* when it assembled at the popular assembly – *Ἐκκλησία του Δήμου* to be the "sovereign over the verdict" / "*τῆς κρίσεως ὁ δῆμος κύριος*" (Aristot. *Ath.Pol.* 9), that is, to have the authority to make final decisions in the matters of justice. Thus, based on the Homeric poems, it may be claimed that Solon in fact did not invent something new and extraordinary democratic for his days, but used **the old customary right of the δῆμος to be the supreme judge in his own state.**

Overall, the institution of the *ἀγορά-assembly* seems to have been the most explicit expression of the *communal principal*, which determined the existence and functioning of the states of the early historic period in the form they were and predetermined their evolution into the states of the *polis*-type.

5. Officials

Remarkably, the Homeric poems contain indications of that within the framework of the state organization, apart from the three main elements, minor, but necessary, institutions had already begun to develop.

5.1. Αἰσυμνήται

Thus, in *Sheria*, supposedly, there was an institution of **the nine supervisors** - "*αἰσυμνήται*" responsible for the proper organization of the public athletic festivals ("*ἀγῶνες*"); significantly, they were *chosen* – "*κριτοί*" either *by* or *from* the people / *δῆμος*: "*αἰσυμνήται δὲ κριτοὶ ἑννέα... δήμιοι*" (*Od.* 8.258-259). An actual historic parallel to these "*nine δήμοι*" may be the institution of the "*δάμοι*" (from the Doric form *δάμος* = Ionic *δῆμος*) – possibly, "public supervisors" (the number is unknown) in *Dreros* in the 7th century BC, who are mentioned in a law of c.650 BC as one of the authority bodies, together with the collegium of *kosmoi* – the principal officials in the *polis* and *the twenty of the polis* (Meiggs and Lewis 1969, nu.2, pp. 2-3). Moreover, a "council of *αἰσυμνήται*" (whose number is not established) is known to have existed in *Megara* and its colony, probably, as early as from the 8th century BC (Legon 1984, 56; Sale 1994, 92; see more for the institution of *aesymnetae* in the Ancient Greek states in the article by Κοντογιώργης 2006, esp. p.150). Finally, the early Greek practice to choose (elect) *nine officials* who had charge of public matters seems to have survived in the institution of *nine archons* at Athens.

5.2. Κήρυκες

Κήρυκες / "**heralds**" are abundantly referred to throughout the two poems as officials responsible for summoning up the *ἀγορά* (e.g., *Od.* 2.6; 8.4-14; *Il.* 2.50-52) and keeping the order among the gathered (*Il.* 18.503-504). There are no mentions concerning the way of their appointment and their number in the states described in the poems (those of the Ithakians, Pheakians, Pylians, and Trojans); however, it is noteworthy the number *nine* of *κήρυκες* in the Army of the Achaeans at Troy (as that of *αἰσυμνήται* in *Sheria*), who had to restrain the people - "*λαοί*" assembled in the *ἀγορά* (*Il.* 2.96-98).

The duties of *κήρυκες* seem to have been broader than the supervision of the assembly procedure. At the scene of the oaths given by the Trojans and the Achaeans before the battle between Paris and Menelaos, "lordly heralds" / "*κήρυκες ἀγαυοί*" assist the leaders of both the sides in the ritual: they bring the oath offerings, pour water over the hands of the kings, and portion the victims to the Trojans and Achaeans (*Il.* 3.268-270, 273-274).

κήρυκες had special staffs – *σκήπτρον* (sing.), which symbolized their post and duties and which they temporarily passed to orators at the assemblies, as well as to judges (the *elders*) during court sessions (note *Il.* 18.503-505: “οἱ δὲ γέροντες ... σκήπτρα δὲ κηρύκων ἐν χέρσ’ ἔχον ἡεροφώνων” / “the elders... holding in their hands the staffs of the loud-voiced heralds”).

In the Homeric poems, the term *κῆρυξ* / *κήρυκες* is also applied to certain persons from the kings’ environment. Thus, a *βασιλεύς*, as it seems, could have his personal *κῆρυξ* / herald, who was under his direct orders (*Od.* 8.8 – a personal *κῆρυξ* of Alkinoos; *Od.* 4.301 – a *κῆρυξ* in the palace of Menelaos, who escorts the king’s guests in their chambers; *Od.* 4.677 and 1.153 – a *κῆρυξ* in the house of Odysseus announcing news to the *βασίλεια* Penelope and serving the suitors during their banquet in Odysseus’ house). However, it is not clear whether such a *κῆρυξ* was provided to a *βασιλεύς* by a state or was employed by a king to be at his service. Moreover, a sort of a king’s personal retinue, which surrounded, followed and assisted him, likewise appears as *κήρυκες*, note *Il.* 18.556-559: *κήρυκες*, having sacrificed a bull, prepare a feast for a *βασιλεύς* who inspects harvest gathering at his estate – “τέμενος βασιλῆιον” (*Il.* 18.550); also *Od.* 3.338: *κήρυκες* serving a banquet in the palace of Nestor at Pylos. If the *κήρυκες* responsible for gathering the people in assemblies and the *κήρυκες* surrounding and following a *βασιλεύς* represent not two different categories of officials, but the same one, hence, it could be supposed that the *βασιλῆες* had a duty to maintain at their expense the body of state *κήρυκες*, and those, in return, offered to the *βασιλῆες* their services. Perhaps, the memory of the Mycenaean *ἐπέται* (< ἔπομαι - “to follow”, “to serve”) - the Linear B *e-qe-ta*, who are thought to have been a kind of privileged officers of *wanakes* during the time of the Mycenaean palaces (note the KN Ld 571 mentioning 25 white vestments of the best quality delivered to the palace at Knossos for *ἐπέται*, Προμπονάς 1990, 265), was still strong in the beginning of the historic times, and the *βασιλῆες* could not resist temptation to have something similar.

5.3. Ἰστωρ

As it has been mentioned above, trials organized in public required not only the participation of the *elders*, but also the presence of **a special expert (knower) of customs and laws – ἰστωρ** (literally “that who knows what is right” < *Fiδ-τωρ < οἶδα – “to know”; *Il.* 18.501) who judged whether the decision proposed or taken by the *elders* corresponded to the customary practices - *θέμιστες* of the given state (Edwards 1991, 216-217). It is not known whether an *ἰστωρ* was chosen by / from the people-*δῆμος* (as the *αἰσυμνήται* at Sheria) or by / from the *elders* or was appointed by the *βασιλῆες*, but his *judgment* - (το) *πεῖραρ* (Bergen 1975, 43-44) could undoubtedly be a counterbalance to the decisions of the *elders* and, therefore, could play a social role expressing interests of various social groups. This helps to suggest that the institution of *ἰστωρ* was introduced in order to limit the judicial authorities of the *elders*, whether in the interests of the *βασιλῆες* or in the interests of the *δῆμος*. A natural evolvement of the institution of *ἰστωρ* of the early historic states would have been the institution of the *six θεσμοθέται* – “the guardians of the laws” at Athens, which existed probably from the Early Archaic period (Arist. *Ath. Pol.* 3.4).

6. A state of the early historic period – the frame

To summarize, the organization of states as described in the Homeric poems appears to have had the following structure:

- **the body of *βασιλῆες*** – a collectively ruling / governing body – “*ἄρχοι*” forming a council – “*βουλή των πρώτων*” (or “*βουλή βασιλέων*”); non-elective, while the membership in it is permanent and hereditary;
- **the body of *γέροντες*** – an auxiliary council of the *βασιλῆες* – “*βουλή γερόντων*” and a *state court*; possibly, exercised control of communal lands; consisted of some number of men who had reached a certain age; uncertain whether it was elective or not; uncertain whether the membership in it was limited to a certain period of time or the members were granted tenure; uncertain whether it was open to all the social groups of a state;
- **the assembly of the *δῆμος* = *ἀγορά*** – the whole body of free adult male population gathered together, which approved the decisions proposed or made by the *βασιλῆες*, decided concerning the practical side of (= each one’s contribution to) the accomplishment of the decisions suggested or made by the *βασιλῆες*, and was necessarily informed about all the events of public and even private character taking place in a state; in matters of justice, probably had the authority to re-consider decisions made by the court of *γέροντες*.

- **officials with minor duties** – bodies or individuals charged by the people-*δημος* with responsibilities for some specific matters, as supervision of public athletic festivals; also, state heralds-*κήρυκες* and specialists in the customs-*θέμιστες* who were supposed to control court sessions.

As it may be observed, a state as presented in the Homeric poems was formed not of *offices* or *organs* (Ancient Greek *ἀρχαί*), which would have had certainly defined authorities assigned to each of them by recorded laws and constitutional regulations, but rather of *institutions* (Ancient Greek *θεσμοί*), each of which *played its own social role* based on the ancestral traditions and customs.

Concerning the question whether a state as described in the Homeric poems may be considered a *polis*, it should be pointed out that such a state functioned as a *self-governed autonomous community*, which had as its primary goal *the common good*, and therefore, typologically, it might approximate Ancient Greek states of the *polis*-type. However, such a state was not yet a *polis*: in terms of differentiation and structure of powers, it was too underdeveloped to be compared with states of the *polis*-type, while the participation of masses in the exercise of powers was in no way comparable with that characterizing a city-state, that is, a *polis*. The legal system of a state as described in the Homeric poems was still unwritten, based on the oral tradition, which allowed misinterpretations, misuse, and even abuse of the established customs and rules. A state as appears in the Homeric poems was only the germ, an initial element, which had served as the basis for the growth of states of the *polis*-type.

7. Conclusion

The states, which had existed in the Greek territory during the period roughly from the late 11th century BC to the late 8th century BC, had inevitably been reflected to a certain degree in the epic diction and, undoubtedly, had been the source of the states, which started to develop in Greece from the 7th century BC in the form of a city-state, *i.e.*, *polis*.

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