

# ON TWO PASSAGES IN THE ILIAD

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Translation from the French by Gordon Creighton

AMONG so much else of mysterious beauty in Homer's *Iliad*, there are two passages that might well set us Ufologues to dreaming dreams. And dreaming, let it be said, is a fruitful activity, so long as you don't start confusing it with reality. Notwithstanding which, certain dreams do indeed turn out in the end to *be* reality. But it has to be proved, and this is the hardest part of it. For a long time forsooth Schliemann's Troy was but a dream. And then that dream, so faithfully pursued, led at last to the real Troy and the Homeric legends came alive again.

Victor Hugo once said that the Epic is: "*History evesdropped at the Portals of Legend.*" May I be forgiven if I too love to listen at those sacred Portals.

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The first of the two passages in question begins at verse 367 of Book XVIII. To understand it properly, one would need to recall all the tangled intrigue in which, before the walls of Troy as on the heights of Olympus, men and Gods stand pitted against each other, each camp having its own supporters in the other world.

But let us disregard the intrigues which, so far as I can see have no bearing on the subject with which we are concerned in this Journal. Let us turn then to Book 18. There, after certain mishaps and adventures in a war that has already lasted many a long year, Achilles finds himself in an unfortunate situation. There is a risk that things may not turn out well for him in his next fight. His mother, the divine Thetis, thereupon runs to Hephaestus, the lame craftsman, the Smith-God, whose clever ideas on metallurgical matters never fail. And she implores Hephaestus thus:

"Wilt be minded to give my son, that is doomed to a speedy death, shield and helmet, and goodly greaves fitted with ankle-pieces, and corselet?"

Hephaestus consents, and sets to work.

Well now, it is the details of this particular scene which seem to be disconcerting.

But first let us hear the description of the dwelling-place of Hephaestus, the Divine Smith.

"On this wise spake they one to the other; then silver-footed Thetis came unto the house of Hephaestus, *imperishable, decked with stars*,<sup>1</sup> pre-eminent among the house of immortals, wrought all of bronze,<sup>2</sup> which the crook-foot god himself had built him."

(The "crook-foot", or the "lame one", is Hephaestus, who however is not truly lame. It is that his legs are so weak that, in order to support the eight of his body, in the situation where he is he, they require an artificial muscular aid, and in a minute we shall see what this is.)

Before we go any further, one comment is essential: namely that nowhere, either in the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*, or in any other poem of that same period (such as Hesiod, for example) are there any *technological marvels*. The "marvellous" in Homer is essentially poetic, and unrealistic, or at the most, symbolic. The Gods travel around in aerial chariots drawn by magnificent horses, and the miracles the Gods perform are the sort of miracles that you find in fairy tales and that are still invented today, in the 20th century, by little children. But Hephaestus alone *performs no miracles*. What on the other hand, he does do seems extremely familiar to us: he builds machines, and machines such as our 20th century, now closing, is only just beginning to see: fundamentally, *robots*.

Let us continue now with our reading of the arrival of Thetis at that dwelling "decked with stars," about which I shall also have more to say later.

"Him (i.e. Hephaestus) she found sweating with toil as he moved to and fro about his bellows in eager haste (*bellows*, i.e.: *machines*). For he was fashioning tripods, twenty in all, to stand around the wall of his well-built hall (*walls of bronze, let us remember*). And golden wheels had he set beneath the base of each, that of themselves they might enter the gathering of the Gods at his wish and again return to his house, a wonder to behold. Thus much were they fully wrought: only not yet were the cunningly fashioned ears set thereon; these was he now making ready, and was forging the rivets."

This is the point at which Hephaestus is when his wife, Charis, interrupts the work by entering to announce the arrival of Thetis.

(Why, it's enough to turn one into an anti-feminist! Devil take these pert hussies whose vapid chatter now halts the Poet's descriptive flow!)

Now, what is it that Hephaestus is so intent on making? Twenty tripods, robots capable, "of themselves," of moving around on wheels among the Gods. Two of the details that we are given are maddeningly terse: firstly: these tripods *move of themselves*. But watch! These words "*of themselves*," innocent enough in French (and in English too) must be read in the Greek! For the Greek term is none other than the word that we render as *automaton*<sup>3</sup> which makes its very debut here, in this line of Homer, into the universal vocabulary of our world and into the history of ideas. (In fact only once previously has Homer employed this word, and then in an equally disconcerting way too. But more of that anon.)

So these tripods are *automata*.<sup>4</sup> But — and this is the second detail that I want to mention — let us reflect a while upon this point. If the tripods move "of themselves" then why does Homer have Hephaestus attaching "ears" (i.e. the *handles*)<sup>5</sup> and

rivets on to them? What on earth could have been the purpose of handles that are not handles, if the automaton, which moves around by itself, has no need of being picked up or held by handles or attachments?

But, alas, the empty chatter of Charis and Thetis, obsessed with their own petty problems and in any case having, as we all know, contempt for mechanical matters, deprive us of ever learning these thrilling details. And so we are simply left face to face with superstructures, 20 servo-tripods: what can they have been? Radar? Or Sonar? Or Zeus knows what!

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But fortunately that is not the end of it.

Thetis, then, explains her problem to Hephaestus who, good fellow that he is, hears her attentively and then, in recognition of a service previously rendered by her, he decides to stop work there and then on the assembly of his 20 servo-tripods, in order to make the incomparable corselet for Achilles for which he has been asked. Merely from the point of view of Ufology alone this corselet would merit a long article, but I shall have to leave that for another occasion.

Let us then watch what Hephaestus is doing (Verse 410).

"He spake, and from the anvil rose a huge, panting bulk, halting the while, but beneath him his slender legs moved nimbly. The bellows he set away from the fire, and he gathered all the tools wherewith he wrought, into a silver chest; and with a sponge wiped he his face and his two hands withal, and his mighty neck and shaggy breast, and put upon him a tunic, and grasped a stout staff, and went forth halting; *but there moved swiftly to support their lord two handmaidens wrought of gold in the semblance of living maids. In them is understanding in their hearts,<sup>6</sup> and in them speech and strength, and they know cunning handiwork by gift of the immortal Gods. They busily moved to support their lord.*"

More robots, but rather more charming ones! Made of gold, and having the appearance of pretty girls,<sup>7</sup> and with understanding in their hearts. I know of nothing similar to this that can be quoted from anywhere in Greek poetry right down until the period, much later, when machines (which did not exist in the days of Homer, having become familiar, began to be able to inspire the poets.

But there is still more to it than this. As we read this episode from Homer, we have the impression that the latter is reporting a fact which for him was assuredly miraculous but to which he attaches no special importance. Hence nothing in his story suggests that he sees any difference whatever between, say, automatic mechanisms reproducing the effects of human intelligence, and Apollo's horses drawing the chariot of the Sun. The unusualness of the technically marvellous does not strike him, because he does not know that unusualness exists, *he does not know that this strange thing, the marvellous, is different.* For him, it is all magic. It is only to the

eyes of the 20th century reader that the difference appears, that, as I would put it, the abyss is formed. In a word, *it is clear that Homer does not understand what it is that he is relating, and furthermore that it is scarcely of any interest to him. He is repeating, magnificently, it is true, but without understanding it, a story which is far older than he is, and the meaning of which is lost.*

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To what, then, does this story refer? What in reality are these automatic tripods, these robots endowed with intelligence? Whence can tradition — or imagination — of such things possibly have come to men living earlier than the VIIIth Century B.C.?

As I have said, we can but dream about it. Daedalus..., Icarus..., Atlantis...? So far as I myself am concerned, I admit that I do not like such dreams as these, they are too easy. I prefer to search for indications, and to stick to those.

I have mentioned that the Greek word *automation*<sup>8</sup> is not found, so far as I am aware, anywhere in the literature prior to the date of this Homeric account of Thetis' journey to see Hephasteus, except in one solitary passage. And that passage too is in the *Iliad*, but at the beginning, in verse 748 of Book V, when the poet is explaining how the gates of Olympus, "Home of the Gods," function: "Those gates, which are kept by the Hours, open and close *of their own accord* with a roaring noise and emitting a dense cloud. To the Hours is entrusted the task of being the Wardens over the entrance to Olympus and over the vast expanse of the skies."

In other words, these gates open and close at fixed times, that is to say: at an astronomical command.

And this dwelling-place of the Gods, which opens and shuts at the command of the Hours, that is to say by means of an astronomical sight or bearing, is automatically operated. The gates<sup>9</sup> are automata.<sup>10</sup> Their operation is associated with a cloud.

And all this is proceeding in a starry sky. Numerous other passages, with which I will not however tire the reader, show clearly that *the Olympus of the Gods has nothing whatsoever to do with the mountain which bears the same name.* For example, it is stated in the *Iliad* (verse 750 and following) that Chronus is seated on the highest summit of Olympus, *apart, outside the gates of his celestial dwelling.*

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What then are we to think, if we stick strictly to the written text — i.e., if we put ourselves in the place of the Greeks of Homeric times, who were totally ignorant of any correct cosmogony, and likewise of any geography, and who took the stories of the *Iliad* quite literally?

In this case we would believe that a certain being named Hephaestus, (whose description, incidentally, is well worth bearing in mind) dwelt in a cavern "of bronze decked with stars," far from Earth, and that, among other things, he manufactured automata and robots there!

We would believe, furthermore, that there was, somewhere up in the sky, a "Dwelling-place of the Gods," with immense doors that "roared" when they opened, and that their opening and closure were controlled by the Hours, that is to say by the taking of an astronomical bearing — just like the way in which our space-craft are guided. And all this accompanied by the emission of clouds.

Everyone is at liberty to explain it all after his own fashion.

#### Notes

1. ἀστερόεντα
2. χάλκεον
3. αὐτόματος, plural αὐτόματοι
4. αὐτοματοί τρίποδες
5. anse in French. (Rendered as *handle* in case of a jug or a basket, and sometimes as *ear* in the case of a pitcher or a jug—G.C.)
6. τῆς ἐν μὲν νοοῦ ἐδίττα μετὰ φρεοῖν
7. νεήμιον
8. αὐτόματος (masc.), αὐτόματον (neuter.)
9. Πύλαι
10. αὐτόματα

#### ANNOUNCEMENT

Introducing

## SOBEPS

A new bulletin has been launched by the Société Belge d'Etude des Phénomènes Spatiaux as an accompaniment to their journal INFORESpace, which is recognised as one of the best in the field. SOBEPS NEWS, a mimeographed production, consists of a selection of articles from the journal, translated into English for the benefit of foreign students of the UFO subject who have difficulty with French.

SOBEPS hopes that the NEWS will help towards the attainment of a stronger link with groups scattered across the globe, to whom they extend an invitation to exchange correspondence, articles and ideas for publication in INFORESpace (and thereby afford the French-speaking groups an opportunity to become better acquainted with the rest of the world's UFO activities.

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# KEYHOE: THE CIA EXPOSED

*Jonathan Caplan*

MAJOR KEYHOE'S latest book, *Aliens from Space* (Panther paperback 1975), is a minor classic. Classic because it contains an important and detailed analysis of an old suspicion. Minor because it fails to take account of new trends in the subject and the alternative possibilities.

The great merit of the book is its painstaking treatment of the censorship campaign that has been mounted against public recognition of the UFO phenomenon by the USAF and then the CIA. Keyhoe traces the whole story with such fresh detail that the calculated development of a censorship programme seems finally to have been pinned down and exposed. In this respect, the book updates Captain Ruppelt's *The Report on Unidentified Flying Objects* which is now twenty years old.

Most interesting perhaps, is Keyhoe's explanation of CIA involvement. It seems that, in April 1952, the then Secretary of the Navy, Dan Kimball, sighted two discs from his executive plane en route to Hawaii, and, after filing a report, received an unsatisfactory reply from the Air Force. He consequently issued instructions that the Navy was to set up its own investigation programme which was to be independent of the one run by the USAF. To make matters worse, a Navy aviation photographer filmed a UFO formation near Tremonton, Utah, in July 1952, and, after agreeing to hand over only a copy of the film to the Air Force, Navy experts examined the original and pronounced that it showed no unknown objects under intelligent control.

By this time, the CIA was determined to stop

Kimball and their opportunity came when he was replaced by a Republican after Eisenhower's victory in November 1952. But, fearing another showdown with the Navy and suspecting the inefficiency of the Air Force, the CIA decided that the time had come for them to take over and to administer a ruthless censorship programme. Since that time, many, who have honestly reported a UFO experience, have paid with their reputations if the publicity suddenly got out of hand.

The pity about Keyhoe's work is his unflinching certainty that UFOs are extraterrestrial hardware and that the UFO phenomenon is wholly explicable as a physical one. Although his book contains an interesting chapter on "Giant Spaceships" which might tend to support his views, Keyhoe's unwavering conviction that this is what UFOs are, his implied reluctance to contemplate the more bizarre contactee cases, and his failure even to consider recent theories which offer alternatives to the simple explanation of extraterrestrial surveillance, detract from the overall merit of the book. Moreover, Keyhoe's suggestion for a "Project Lure" — "an isolated base with unusual structures and novel displays, designed to attract the UFO aliens' attention" — seems unfortunately fanciful, especially since Keyhoe optimistically states that "it may take a few days" for a UFO to land.

His invaluable account of the censorship programme should nevertheless make this book compulsory reading for those interested in the subject.