

## CHS Open House Discussion with Professor Gregory Nagy

**CLAUDIA FILOS:** Hi, this is Claudia Filos, I'm with the Center for Hellenic Studies, and I'm dialing in remotely from Massachusetts, and we're having a few technical difficulties today, so until Professor Nagy joins us we're going to actually begin with a few very cherished members of our community, and we're going to start talking about one of the main themes of the *Odyssey*, which is *nostos*, which is one of the key words in the HeroesX project. And our discussion topic for today, and for this month, has really been the *Odyssey* and those first four Scrolls, and one of those key concepts is the idea of *nostos*, this return to light and life, is one of the ways we've been thinking about that. So I'm just wondering about the ways that the reading that you've done for Anna Bonafazi's visit maybe, or that our discussions with Greg, Lenny, and Doug [last week](#) — or over the last few weeks — has that changed your view of *nostos* at all? Or what kind of new things are coming up for you as you're re-reading now again and again?

**JACK VAUGHAN:** Well, from my perspective — I've read the *Odyssey* before — and this part of the *Odyssey* I had read, I thought, rather carefully forty years ago. But I got a lot more out of it after doing the — after going through the HeroesX programme, and understanding so many more of the connections between the heroes and Greek — I call it “spirituality”, or you might say Greek religion —

**CLAUDIA FILOS:** Well how about “cult”, Jack? Can we say “cult”? Hero cult?

**JACK VAUGHAN:** Well, yeah, sure. There's the connections of the epic hero to cult hero worship in Greece. The ritual, and the song culture, too. The more you're with this, and you understand something of the song culture, the more you see of the — as Bonafazi calls it — the “versi-colored fabric”. Anyway, reading these

first four books, I see it as a type — you know, as we use the word “type” as something that presages something else — as a **type** of *nostos* for the main *nostos* story, which is Odysseus’s *nostos*. But Telemakhos is being set up here for a *nostos* too: the *nostos* from Pylos and Sparta, and from being a young, clueless, *nephios* person that Athena has to take under her wing for the least little thing, to being king material. That’s how I read it, anyway. I do think we need to get to all of that, you need to also at least fast-read what’s in between, but go forward to Scrolls xv and xvi, to get where Telemakhos gets back to Ithaka, and is rejoined with his father. I think we had a really magnificent conversation that illuminated the characters, and the characterization, and the development of the plot of the *Odyssey*, last week, talking about how the son really carries those significant qualities of the father. Telemakhos “fighting from the distance”, you know, either in the sense of fighting with missiles from a bow, or fighting faraway wars. And I think, you know, there’s another son of Odysseus, Telegenos, who has something of the same quality, because he is — you could say he is — that means “born far away” or maybe “generating far away”, but Telegenos was the subject of his own epic, in the Epic Cycle. And unfortunately, the *Telegeny* is lost, so we don’t have all of that, but we know from Proclus’s Summary that the death of Odysseus comes into play in that lost epic. But yes — I apologize for talking at such length — but it is a set-up for the *nostos* of Odysseus: they’re like parallel *nostoi*, returns to light and life in different ways. Odysseus from the darkness of war, and the darkness of the sea that threatens his life so many times, the darkness of Calypso hiding him out for a year, the darkness of a lot of adventures that are described in the books between Book v and Book xiv. So, Telemakhos’s *nostos* is a *nostos* from the confusion of a childhood in which he grew up without a loving, caring, doting, father, and where he gets substitutes, you know, kind of like Hillary Clinton saying about “it takes a village to raise the child”. So he gets

Athena, goddess Athena, putting *noos* into his mind, intelligence, *menos*, into his mind. In Scroll iii you have Nestor giving him wisdom of the old man, and then in Book iv you have Helen and Menelaos getting him up to speed on the sort of things that he needs to know to be king material. ... Hi, Greg!

...

**CLAUDIA FILOS:** Thanks so much for joining us, Greg. ... We've been talking about *nostos*, and thinking about how our ideas about it may have been changing over the last couple of weeks, during the conversations that we've been having with you, and Doug, and Lenny, and with everyone in the community. ...

*[Claudia and Prof. Nagy exchange a few words about the technical difficulties, and how Rob had helped with the connection]*

**CLAUDIA FILOS:** So you have returned! Returned to life and light — and Rob has been helping you, which is an important concept, right? Do you want to say anything about that active sense, that transitive sense of “to bring back”?

**GREGORY NAGY:** Yes. This is very important in the [*inaudible*] argumentation of Doug, that Nestor doesn't just mean “he who comes back”: “he who **brings** back to light and life”, so it's an active usage, an active use of the root *\*nes-*. In other situations it's not active; it's just what grammarians call medio-passive, which can mean “come back” rather than “bring back”.

**CLAUDIA FILOS:** Thank you. So maybe we can present some of the [questions that we had in the Forum](#). I think we had some good ones!

**GREGORY NAGY:** Yes, there are very good ones. I was studying them, and I really like them.

**CLAUDIA FILOS:** And we did have some questions in our Q&A that were related to what we were discussing just before you came in. First, Jessica has written in. We were just talking about Telemakhos, so she was wondering if the name of Telemakhos can also be ironic.

**GREGORY NAGY:** That's not the word that would occur to me, because although irony can happen I suppose in situations where somebody is pretending to be not with-it, but they are really with it. Could we say they're being ironic? That's certainly what Socrates does, and if any of you ever watched that TV series called *Columbo*, that's what Columbo does all the time, when Columbo appears not as smart as he is. I think the only way I would like to see the word "ironic" used in a situation like this is where Telemakhos himself is pretending to be as with-it as he is. I wouldn't want to say it about the Master Storyteller. I don't think the Master Storyteller would be ironic. There it's just a matter of many, many different facets coming together, and the smart listener will get it, and those who are not so smart won't get it, I guess. But when the Master Narrative does it, I don't think that's irony.

**CLAUDIA FILOS:** Thank you. Maybe we can start discussing another question that Jennifer Cole has submitted. And she's actually pointing us toward a question that Jessica has put into our Forums, and she's saying that Jessica is asking us about whether Odysseus really did have a *nostos*?

**GREGORY NAGY:** Well, the problem there is if you look at these characters as people like you and me, who have lives that are out of control, that's one way of thinking about what happens to you, but in a traditional narrative where it's all programmed from A to Z, the narration does have an outcome: Odysseus does have a *nostos*, it's just that you can't always see it. Sometimes the view is blocked when you reach the letter X. You go all the way from A to Z, but you can't make it

to Z: you stop at X. And there's some kind of curtain, there's some kind of blocking, and then you deal with it, but that doesn't mean that Odysseus doesn't have a *nostos*. And in the case of our *Odyssey*, the way the twenty-four Scrolls add up, he does have one, because he gets back from Troy, he gets out of the cave, he comes up from Hades, he rebuilds himself from zero to king, when he's on Ithaka, he kills the suitors, he is reunited with his wife, he's reunited with his father: that's pretty good! I think that is about a *nostos* extravaganza! You remember I was kind of debating with Doug by bringing up that passage from Theognis which I dredge up in the book, *The Ancient Greek Hero in 24 Hours*, and there you make do without some of these *nostos* themes, like in the description of the *Odyssey* there, that mini-*Odyssey* as retold in the Theognis poem, all you have is Odysseus went to Hades and came back, and killed the suitors. End of story. And even there I'd say it's still a *nostos*.

**CLAUDIA FILOS:** But it's just very compressed, right?

**GREGORY NAGY:** Yes. And then if some of you are worried about "uh-oh: we've gone from A to Z, but then — wait a minute! — we keep going" and so what do we do? Do we start having new numbers, like *alpha*, *beta*, *gamma*, when Odysseus decides to leave Ithaka and go on other adventures? Well, I would say that's not really our *Odyssey*: that's another *Odyssey*". And it's a looping back, and a re-telling from a different point of view, but since we don't really have that, and all we have is an embedded narrative, an embedded narrative can predict anything it wants, but it's still a prediction. And that's my only excuse for saying Homeric poetry doesn't really tell any stories about the immortalization of a hero. You say: "wait, wait, wait: there's Menelaos, and there's how Menelaos will, after he dies, go to Elysium." I say that's find, but there's a prediction: it's a prediction of

Proteus, and it's a window out of our story; it's a window that takes a look, while the story is being told, that says this is what happens beyond the story.

**CLAUDIA FILOS:** That's interesting, because it makes me think of that moment in the *Iliad* where we get the destruction of the Achaean wall, where we have one of these moments.

**GREGORY NAGY:** And I love to say about that, dear Claudia, that that particular moment, which is again a prediction, it's in the future, and it uses vocabulary that you don't find in the action of the *Iliad*. Heroes are actually called *hemi-theoi*, which means demi-gods, or half-gods, you see that nowhere else in the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*, that's the one place where you see that word. So there's one. Then just the way that prediction talks about the pathetic sight of the armor of these great heroes of the past being swept away by these flooding rivers. It's definitely not Iliadic. It's post-Iliadic. It's inviting the "audience" of the *Iliad* to look at the action from their point of view, but nowhere else do you see that. It's always from the point of view of the Muses, who were there, who saw everything, who heard everything, and they're telling the action as it is. So this is your exception: your window — your escape pod!

**CLAUDIA FILOS:** OK, interesting....! It's so beautiful, because it gives you these moments where you get this outside view of epic, almost.

**GREGORY NAGY:** So now, there's a question from Janet that I really like, about what it is to be a *xenos*.

**JANET OZSOLAK:** About Odysseus, being misunderstood.

**GREGORY NAGY:** There are so many good ones: this is like going through a candy shop!

**CLAUDIA FILOS:** Yes, there really were. So Greg, while you're taking a look at those, does anyone here in this room have a question that we might start a discussion?

**SARAH SCOTT:** It actually relates to one of the questions that was on that list, because — if I may jump in — I was going to ask a similar question as Kimie's question, and it picks up from what you were talking about last week, and you mentioned this character Autolykos, this 'lone wolf', and that word *lykos* being related to *lyssa*. So he's got those kind of negative connotations. And then he's the one that actually gives Odysseus his name. You know: "Here's a baby grandson: you've always wanted one of those — give him a name." and he says "I'm going to call him 'Hateful' because I'm in a bad mood!" So it sets up Odysseus himself with those associations. So is there a negative association with the whole narrative about Odysseus? Does his name bring, as it were, that baggage with him?

**GREGORY NAGY:** Oh, yes. I think a wolf is not a positive — or not 100% positive — mark of a hero. A wolf, especially if it's a lone wolf, somebody who's outside of society, who is in danger of getting killed without accountability — in other words, getting bushwhacked (I think that's the term that's used in westerns if you're an outlaw!) — you can be killed, because you're not within the law. And that's what wolves are all about, and when you're acting like a wolf, that means you're not an army man, so to speak. You're not part of a fighting community, you're doing things on your own, and you're elemental, and in corresponding passages in Indic traditions you're like a wild thunderstorm that can't be controlled. Or, going back to wolves, you're a wolf who just doesn't play by the rules, but you're a very effective killer, and a very effective fighter, because maybe you're not what you used to be but you're desperate, and you're ready to

do anything. And if you don't have the strength you used to have, you use your cunning, and so all of those things are in there. And then I think I didn't emphasize enough when Doug, and Lenny, and I, all three of us, joined you, when Hector has his worst moments as a fighter who's out of control, and when Achilles has his worst moments as a fighter out of control, they may be real killing machines, but they have rabies: they're called *lyssētēr* — they're foaming at the mouth, as it were. And so wolfish rage is not exactly positive, because in terms of a warrior's ethic — a warrior's supposed to be loyal to other warriors, there's a comradeship, there's all of that — and when you're like this, when you're *berserk*, to give the Old Norse equivalent of this, you're out of control. And the other thing is, who's your god? Your god is Arēs. And Arēs is not a military man: he's just a raw, fighting force. The military gods are Athena, and various other gods for various other cities when they specialize as protectors or protectresses of other cities. Does that make sense?

**SARAH SCOTT:** Yes, thank you. I think we've also had a question in the Q&A about an association with Hermes, because we were talking in the Book Club discussion again about Autolykos, and one tradition says that Hermes was his father, and Jacqui in the Q&A has talked about how in Calypso's cave Odysseus is sitting in the chair that Hermes had just vacated. And all those associations of Hermes leading the souls into Hades. So should we be looking for an association there?

**GREGORY NAGY:** Oh, yes! And my favorite example is the fact that in the very first verse of the *Odyssey* where Odysseus gets his first epithet, it's *polutropos*, which means "the one who can turn into many different things". I think that would be the most accurate translation of *polutropos*: it doesn't sound pretty, but "the one who can turn into many things". And the only time you see that epithet is right there at the beginning, and then one other time. But then you switch to

the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes*, and he gets it lots of times. So it's a Hermetic epithet, because Hermes is the shapeshifter, he is — may I say it in Latin? — Mercurial, like the medieval substance mercury, he can morph into anything. If any of you saw that Arnold Schwarzenegger film — it had three parts to it, and the third part had a kind of Mercury man who could turn into Mercury, shift into anything — and that's what medieval alchemy is saying when mercury is the substance of mercurial personalities, of these mercurial substances, etc. OK, so that is *polutropos* for Hermes; he can morph into anything, he's the shapeshifter, he's the trickster. And then remember I said Odysseus gets that epithet one other time in the *Odyssey*? And that one other time is when he has outsmarted the beautiful, clever witch, Circe, and Circe says, "My, ." — and she's starting to fall in love with this stranger, "You aren't by any chance," she asks, "Odysseus?" and there she says "*polutropos*", (the one who can turn into many different things), "the one that Hermes has told me so much about." So there is that little signature that it's a Hermetic theme for Odysseus to be *polutropos* in the *Odyssey*. But it is interesting, in that it only occurs twice in the entire narrative of the *Odyssey*., and it's because you don't want to overdo this Hermetic principle. Hermes again is somebody who you don't exactly want to emulate as a human. After all, look at the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes*: what does he do? He lies, he cheats, he rustles cattle, he never says what he really is, etc., so he's a trickster.

**CLAUDIA FILOS:** You know, that's really interesting. One of the things that our community has been thinking about over the last few months is really that we've been focusing on this negative side of the hero, and so I'm wondering if people had any thoughts about that, about how they're coming to terms with that with their readings over the last few months, whether it's been through their re-reading of the *Odyssey* now, or through some of the readings they've been doing

since they've left the HeroesX project: has that negativity been coming forward for them in new ways?

KM: I don't see it as negative, in a sense, because that's what Odysseus had to do to survive, and to achieve *nostos*. So it's a survival tool that he has to have, but at the same time I wonder how much of that is ingrained in him, and therefore true *nostos* in a psychological sense might be hard for him to achieve, because [inaudible] after killing all the suitors he could say "I can always get more cattle by forcing other people to give them." So there's an outlaw-ness all the time, in him. So that's what I wonder about: the balance.

**GREGORY NAGY:** Well I like the idea of survival instinct, and I think of the fact that at the end of *Scroll v*, just as he's about to drown and he's hanging onto coral reefs and part of his skin is even ripped off, he's compared to an octopus. And to be compared to an octopus is to be compared to a shape-shifter in the animal world, and I had a friend who pointed me to a wonderful experiment that biologists do, that if you have let's say some clear water, and you can look ten feet down in the clear sea water, and you see an octopus down there, if you put a checkerboard underneath that octopus and then you go back and look down, the octopus actually develops a surface pattern of a checkerboard on its exterior within minutes! Chameleons are not as good — they take a long time to adapt environments. And so if you are a shape-shifter, if you're going to be what anybody wants you to be so that you can survive, you're not the kind of moral person that you want to be with in your community. So this is an aspect of the hero which again in terms of ritual correctness in the here-and-now is just not to be, at least 100%, embraced. There's always a balance. I also wanted to tell you all that my old professor, John Finley, used to remind us that Odysseus in all of Greek literature has bad press, as he put it, everywhere. The only place where it's

sort of cleaned up is in the *Odyssey*, because the *Odyssey* has to be the twin of the *Iliad*, and so you're emphasizing as much as possible the positive sides of heroes that fit the epic model. But you still see a lot of violations of etiquette, and even morality, on the part of Odysseus, and in fact of any hero. And this goes back to something that I've been more and more aware of, which is that if you want to see correctness in the universe, don't go to the heroic age. Not only heroes, but even gods, in a sense, can make big mistakes, moral ones included. The only place where you can look for equilibrium is in the present. And the only way to do that in the present is if our rituals and our codes of behaviour are able to make up for all of those larger than life disequilibria of the heroic past.

Jack, I'd love to pick up on what you were saying when I "parachuted in", *and I'd also love to hear what you have in mind when you raised your hand five minutes ago.*

**JACK VAUGHAN:** When you came in, I was trying to answer how did my reading of the *Odyssey* change over the last couple of weeks, and reading the 'Telemachy' again impressed upon me a lot of things, and the conversation last Friday I thought was very stimulating. I had some questions about Telemachus's generation, and to what extent are we just not seeing the full version of all the Epic Cycle presentation of Telemachus and his half-brother Telegonus, and those marriages to Odysseus's girlfriend, and I just wondered if maybe we're giving Telemachus's generation a little bit less than a full consideration?

**GREGORY NAGY:** Yes, and Jack, you had actually written about that in one of the write-up questions, and I'm so glad that you recapped this now, because I did want to address it. So here's my take, which is: you're absolutely right, a lot of heroes whose genealogies do have an agenda in the world that happens after the heroic age because everybody is busy tracing themselves back to these heroes of the heroic age, and some of them we see how they make it, so to speak,

genealogically into the historical present. And I gave as “exhibit A” the side-kick of Telemachus in the chariot ride from Pylos to Sparta — this is Peisistratos, since Peisistratos is the notional ancestor of the regime in the 6<sup>th</sup> century that fostered the *Iliad* tradition into the shape that we have, pretty much. So there’s an example where you do have a kind of clear line of descent from the heroic age into the realities of the political present of the so-called Homeric audience. In the case of Telemachus we don’t, and you say, well, why not? and that’s because, I would say, he doesn’t fit very well into an Athenian agenda — and Athens tends to trump all other city states when it comes to what kind of heritage survives from the heroic age. Somebody who does make it pretty well is Orestes, although in various different flavors. There’s the Orestes in Arcadia, and Sparta, but there’s also Orestes on the island of Lesbos, and you’re not going to be able to make them — shall we say — synchronized with each other. It’s because so much of this has to do with the way people in the historical present lay claim to the heroes of the past by way of whatever genealogies they manage to make stick within the societies that they control. And what I’ve just said about Telemachus, where I say, “OK, Jack, I agree we don’t get a very satisfactory picture of what happens to his line”, but there are countless others where you wonder whether, if they were so important back then, how come there isn’t some clearer claim to such-and-such a person in the historical present, or — working backwards — by historical present, let’s say 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE, if I work backwards I could say, well, why isn’t somebody claiming Telemachus? And maybe somebody is, but we don’t have all the information. Let’s face it, Jack, by the time of the 6<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> century, we have a very Atheno-centric view of everything, like it or not. Athens, this two-bit place that didn’t amount to much in earlier centuries, really gloms onto everything in especially the 6<sup>th</sup> century and thereafter.

**JACK VAUGHAN:** But it looks like the Romans kind of took up where the Athenians left off!

**GREGORY NAGY:** Oh, yes, oh yes! It's not that I want to hawk my books, but the University of California Press book called *Homer the Preclassic* has a lot of things that I think you might enjoy about how not just the Romans, but before the Romans, a whole bunch of other very enterprising people were trying to glom onto Aeneas. Aeneas is this hot property: after all, if he is the son of Aphrodite, Aphrodite is the goddess of regeneration. So of course, if you're the son of Aphrodite, your genes will never run out! They will last for ever., so wouldn't you want to be in a dynasty that traces itself back to the goddess of eternal regeneration?

**JACK VAUGHAN:** Absolutely!

**GREGORY NAGY:** And Jack, one other thing: you know we still use the cliché "Rome, the eternal city"? Well, guess why it's eternal! OK, not from the point of view of its later history, but from the point of view of the Roman appropriation — which, by the way, can be dated as far back as the 7<sup>th</sup> or even 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE, so it's as old as the hills. But there are lots of other rivals, but there you are!

**JACK VAUGHAN:** Thank you very much, Greg.

**GREGORY NAGY:** Thank you very much: that was a question I *really* wanted to get to, so I'm so glad we addressed it.

**JACK VAUGHAN:** There's so much reading of the record in the fragments, that if we look at it carefully, and try to piece it together, I think we come up with a rich picture that is surviving in these refractions.

**GREGORY NAGY:** You know, here's a real shocker, Jack, that I just learned last year — and after all these years of living with the Homeric tradition — there is one myth about the Cyclopes, not just one Cyclops but all the Cyclopes, that really shocks all of us, and it's reported only in one text which is why most of the world never looked at it, and then this smart junior professor from Florida discovered it. And get this: there's a myth that says that the Cyclopes were not stupid, they were not uncivilized. They were just the opposite. They were super-sophisticated, and they were the best sailors in the world! Get that — the best sailors in the world, so that when Odysseus blinds the one Cyclops the rest of them go chasing after him and chase him all over the Mediterranean. Now how's that for a different view of Cyclopes? I mean, we think of them as sub-humans, right? The only thing they can do is herd sheep.

**JACK VAUGHAN:** Oh, no, but they built the Cyclopean walls of Mycenae.

**GREGORY NAGY:** Bravo! Well, so you see, there are other little traces of smart Cyclopes. And here's another trace of smart Cyclopes, which is, if you look at the Hesiodic *Theogony*, there are these Cyclopes who are these super smiths that make the thunderbolt of Zeus, which is the greatest achievement of smithing. I think there is a verb "I smith, you smith, he/she/it smiths....." !

**CLAUDIA FILOS:** Beautiful! This is a really interesting stopping-point for us, because what we're thinking about now is really the multiform nature of myth, and poetics within this system. And so next time, we're really going to be thinking about multiformity, and multitextuality, as we start to think about *Iliad* X.

**GREGORY NAGY:** Oh, boy, let's go for it! And you guys are in for a treat with Mary and Casey. They are just fabulous Homerists.

**CLAUDIA FILOS:** Thank you so much, Greg, for joining us.

**GREGORY NAGY:** This has been so fun. I loved all your questions.