

Why Odysseus Had to Go to Scheria —Memories, Flashbacks, and the End of the Bronze Age

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Homer's Odyssey pivots on an enigmatic episode that has received remarkably little sustained attention: Odysseus' stay in Scheria, the land of the Phaeacians. Reconsidering this episode suggests that the Odyssey is not primarily about movement through space, but about memory, loss, and the collapse of a world at the end of the Bronze Age.

On July 17, 2026, Christopher Nolan will release a large-scale film adaptation of the *Odyssey*, produced with a budget usually reserved for superhero franchises or global disaster spectacles. The film will inevitably return Homer's epic to the center of public attention. That renewed visibility is welcome – and it invites a fundamental question: what is the *Odyssey* actually about?

Not a Travel Epic: Rethinking the Structure of the Odyssey

The title of the epic has become synonymous with wandering – with aimless journeys in which heroes battle Cyclopes, Sirens, and monsters. Yet a sober reading of Homer's text reveals that surprisingly little travel takes place. Telemachus journeys from Ithaca to Pylos and Sparta and back home; Odysseus sails from Calypso's island to Ithaca. That is essentially all. The famous "wanderings" of Odysseus neither constitute the structural backbone of the work nor bear any direct consequence for its main action. They are narrated within a clearly delimited setting, lack transition into the surrounding plot, and leave no trace on what follows.

The dramatic center of the *Odyssey* lies elsewhere — in an enigmatic and often overlooked episode: Odysseus' stay in the land of the Phaeacians, in Scheria (beginning at the end of Book 5 and ending at the beginning of Book 13). It is precisely this large section that raises questions scholarship has rarely pursued in sustained fashion. Why do both Zeus and Poseidon insist that Odysseus must stop there? Why is Scheria described with a degree of detail otherwise reserved for historically tangible places? And why is this prosperous society permeated by an unmistakable sense of impending doom?

In what follows, I would like to reopen an interpretation I first proposed more than three decades ago and which has since attracted little sustained discussion: that Scheria is not meant to be understood as a geographical location at all, but as a deliberate flashback to a vanished world. In this reading, Homer directs his audience's gaze back to the lost heroic age of the Bronze Age in order to reflect on the profound social and political collapse that followed the Trojan War — a collapse in which Odysseus himself plays a decisive causal role. His stratagem of the Trojan Horse (8.492–520) did not merely end the war; it sealed the destruction of an entire order.



*Nausicaa, daughter of the Phaeacian king, stands with her companions at the mouth of a river when the shipwrecked Odysseus emerges naked from beneath a pile of leaves after collapsing from exhaustion (Homer, *Odyssey* 6.127–141, produced with OpenAI image-generation tools based on prompts prepared by the author, edited by Atelier Guido Köhler & Co., Luwian Studies #6414).*

At first glance, the *Odyssey* narrates Odysseus' return home after the Trojan War. Ten years after the fall of Troy, almost all Greek commanders have reached their homelands; only Odysseus remains missing. Significantly, however, the epic does not begin with his adventures. It opens instead with the tense situation on Ithaca: a power vacuum has emerged, the king has been absent for twenty years, and his household is besieged by an ever-growing number of ambitious suitors determined to force Penelope into marriage and claim royal authority. Only then — in Book 5.150 — does the narrative turn to Odysseus himself, detained for seven years on the island of Ogygia by the nymph Calypso, unable to return home although the war has long since ended.

Zeus himself finally decides that the time has come to permit Odysseus' return. Hermes is dispatched to instruct Calypso to release him. After one final night together, Odysseus builds a raft and sets sail. Eighteen days later, as he approaches the land of Scheria, Poseidon deliberately unleashes a devastating storm. For two days Odysseus struggles against wind and current, suffers shipwreck, and nearly perishes against the coastal cliffs before finding refuge at the mouth of a river. Exhausted and naked, Odysseus is discovered by the princess Nausicaa and ultimately escorted into the city and the royal palace. Books 6–8 recount his experiences in Scheria.

The Narrative Isolation of the Wanderings

Everything commonly described as the "wanderings of Odysseus" — encounters with Cyclopes, sorceresses, Sirens, and the dead — does not unfold within the primary action of the epic. These episodes appear exclusively as retrospective narrative, recounted by Odysseus at the court of the Phaeacians (Books 9–12). Structurally, they stand apart. They have little narrative lead-in and no narrative echo. Odysseus begins his account in Scheria on the invitation of his host, king Alcinous, and ends it abruptly four books later without any transition. What he recounts exerts no influence on the subsequent course of events — nor do the Phaeacians so much as comment on his elaborate tales. Once Odysseus reaches Ithaca, these experiences disappear from the narrative horizon. They are neither recalled nor taken up again, neither by Odysseus nor by any other character. Dramaturgically, they remain without effect.

The magical Phaeacians will respect him like a god, and send him in a ship to his dear homeland, with gifts of bronze and heaps of gold and clothing, more than he would have brought with him from Troy if he had come directly, with his share of plunder.

(5.35–41)

This striking decoupling is all the more remarkable because the *Odyssey* otherwise exhibits careful internal coherence. Motifs are prepared, tensions are developed and resolved, and actions mirror one another between the worlds of gods and humans. Against this background, the position of the travel narratives appears anomalous – not in content, but in structure. They function as a self-contained narrative unit embedded within a specific storytelling situation, without being organically integrated into the epic's overall design.

Anyone who takes this structural observation seriously must at least consider the possibility that the wanderings do not form the center of the *Odyssey* but belong to its frame rather than to its supporting structure. The travel episodes read less like reports of lived events than like deliberately deployed narrative material drawn from older mythic traditions. Parallels are found not only within Greek literature — for example in the *Argonautica* — but also in ancient Near Eastern epics such as the *Gilgamesh* cycle.



*Odysseus asks the bard Demodocus to sing of the wooden horse through which Troy was taken. As the bard recounts the destruction of the city, Odysseus quietly weeps—observed only by King Alcinous (Homer, *Odyssey* 8.487–535, produced with OpenAI image-generation tools based on prompts prepared by the author, edited by Atelier Guido Köhler & Co., Luwian Studies #6415).*

Odysseus recounts these stories himself, in a setting defined by hospitality, competitive storytelling, and courtly entertainment. At the same time, the poem repeatedly brings into question his credibility. The result is a carefully constructed ambiguity. The wanderings need not be dismissed; rather, they appear as narrative condensation — as mythic sailors' tales that rework inherited material into a new composition. Their literary strength lies precisely here. They broaden the imaginative horizon of the epic and lend depth and ambivalence to the figure of Odysseus, without determining the actual course of events.

Why Scheria? Divine Necessity and Narrative Design

At this point Scheria inevitably moves to the center of attention. Unlike all other stations in the *Odyssey*, Odysseus' stay among the Phaeacians is not the result of accident, misdirection, or individual choice. It is explicitly decreed by the gods. Zeus himself determines that Odysseus must pause in Scheria before returning home – in order, as the proem states, to “save his life” (1.5). Poseidon, though openly hostile to Odysseus, ensures that this decision is carried out. The convergence of these otherwise opposed divine forces is striking. Poseidon could have killed Odysseus at sea; instead, he drives him with deliberate force toward the very place designated by Zeus. Scheria is thus marked from the outset as a necessary and unavoidable destination. The narrative strongly suggests that Odysseus must experience, witness, or recognize something there before he may return to Ithaca.

Then we will reach the lofty city wall, which has a scenic port on either side, and one slim gate, where curved ships are drawn up along the road: a special spot for each.

(6.262–265)

Scheria's distinctive status is further underscored by a set of striking parallels to another, even more famous site of cultural memory in ancient literature: Plato's Atlantis (Timaeus 20d–25d, Critias 108e–121c). Since the seventeenth century, scholars have repeatedly noted these correspondences, though rarely drawing broader conclusions for the interpretation of the *Odyssey*. Both the Phaeacians and the Atlanteans trace their ancestry to Poseidon. Both inhabit a remote realm “at the edge of the world.” Both societies are marked by exceptional seafaring skill, technical sophistication, and material abundance. In each case, political order rests not with an absolute monarch but with a circle of noble rulers who govern collectively. The topographical details are equally suggestive: a fertile plain framed by steep coastal cliffs, protected harbors with a narrow artificial entrance, a palatial center adjacent to a sanctuary of Poseidon, and extensive gardens, springs, and cultivated landscapes. Finally, both places are shadowed by catastrophe. Atlantis is destroyed in a sudden disaster; Scheria stands under an explicit prophecy announcing its downfall.

There are two springs: one flows all through the garden, the other gushes from the courtyard threshold, towards the palace.

(7.130–132)

These convergences are too numerous and too specific to be dismissed as mere coincidence. The usual explanation holds that Plato modeled Atlantis on Homer's Scheria. Yet this solution merely shifts the problem rather than resolving it. The more consequential question is not who imitated whom, but why two fundamentally different texts evoke such a closely related image of a lost, highly developed society. Here an alternative interpretation suggests itself: that both Scheria and Atlantis draw on the same older reservoir of memory – the idea of a Bronze Age world order remembered as prosperous, technically accomplished, and ultimately doomed.

Troy Remembered: Scheria as a Transformed Past

If one pursues this line of thought, an obvious — if uncomfortable — implication emerges. If Plato's account of Atlantis indeed rests on an Egyptian memory of the Trojan War, as I continue to consider plausible — refracted through temporal distance, cultural translation, and philosophical reformulation — then Atlantis would represent nothing other than Troy, seen through the filter of later tradition. Read back into the *Odyssey*, this possibility lends the parallels between Atlantis and Scheria a new coherence. Scheria would no longer appear as a purely poetic fantasy, but as part of the same shared horizon of memory: a literary setting in which Homer allows Troy to reappear — not as a battlefield, but as a flourishing and well-ordered society at the height of its development.

You are wonderful, Demodocus! You tell so accurately what the Greeks achieved, and what they suffered, there at Troy, as if you had been there, or heard about it from somebody who was.

(8.497–493)

The notion that Odysseus is compelled to encounter Troy in this transformed guise fits remarkably well with the internal logic of the epic. The man who, through cunning and violence, contributed decisively to the city's destruction — and thereby to the end of the heroic age — must confront it once more before he is permitted to return home. Nowhere does Homer suggest that Odysseus ever experienced Troy as a functioning city from within. He did not visit Troy; he besieged and burned it. That absence is now, in narrative terms, corrected. Scheria thus emerges as a moral space of remembrance: an image of what was lost before war irreversibly shattered the established order of the world. The fact that this society is simultaneously permeated by a quiet, yet unmistakable premonition of its own destruction reinforces the point. Scheria is not timeless but past; not utopian but retrospective.

Between Life and Death: The Liminal Framing of Scheria

This reading is reinforced by a series of striking narrative signals that Homer deploys with notable consistency. Particularly revealing are the two episodes of unconsciousness that frame Odysseus' stay in Scheria. The first occurs after the shipwreck, when he is washed ashore exhausted, weakened, and close to death (5.450–493). He buries himself beneath a heap of leaves and sinks into a deep, sleep-like state repeatedly likened in the text to death itself. When he awakens, he is transformed. Athena causes him to appear taller, more handsome, and more youthful. He encounters the young princess Nausicaa not as an aging returnee from war, but in the guise of a young man (6. 297–238 and 8.19–22). This rejuvenation has long been noted in scholarship and is usually interpreted symbolically — as rebirth or renewal. Yet it serves a more specific narrative function: it marks entry into a different temporal horizon, a world that precedes the catastrophe of war.



*At dawn, the Phaeacians' ship carrying the sleeping Odysseus reaches a sheltered bay on Ithaca. The sailors leave him ashore, still asleep and surrounded by the gifts bestowed upon him at the court of Scheria (Homer, *Odyssey* 13.95–125, produced with OpenAI image-generation tools based on prompts prepared by the author, edited by Atelier Guido Köhler & Co., Luvian Studies #6416).*

The second episode of unconsciousness occurs at Odysseus' departure from Scheria: "A sound sweet sleep fell on his eyes, like death" (13.80) The Phaeacians convey him to Ithaca while he sleeps; he remains unaware of the crossing, awakens only after reaching the shore of his homeland, and at first fails to recognize it. Only after passing once more through a state suspended between life and death does he return fully to the present. This symmetrical framing is unlikely to be accidental. It sharply distinguishes Scheria from the rest of the narrative and marks the stay there as an exceptional condition — a liminal experience. Homer employs a familiar mythic device: transitions between worlds, whether spatial or temporal, do not occur in full consciousness.

Their swift ship carried him across the ocean, and they have set him down in Ithaca with a magnificent array of gifts: bronze, heaps of gold and fine-spun clothes, far more spoils than he ever would have won at Troy if he had got out safely.

(13.136–141)

Prophecy and Retrospective Catastrophe

Another often underestimated indication of Scheria's retrospective character lies in the repeated allusions to the fate awaiting the Phaeacians. Even amid the festive reception of Odysseus, the episode is accompanied by a quiet but persistent sense of foreboding. King Alcinous recounts an ancient prophecy according to which Poseidon will one day destroy a Phaeacian ship and overshadow the city itself with a massive mountain (8.564–571 and 13.172–187). The announcement stands in striking tension with the exuberant prosperity Homer simultaneously describes.



*After delivering Odysseus to Ithaca, the Phaeacian ship is turned to stone by Poseidon before it can re-enter the harbor of Scheria, thus fulfilling the prophecy foretelling the city's doom (Homer, *Odyssey* 13.160–167, produced with OpenAI image-generation tools based on prompts prepared by the author, edited by Atelier Guido Köhler & Co., *Luwian Studies* #6417).*

Prophecies of this kind rarely precede events; more often, they crystallize after the fact, serving as narrative devices that retrospectively frame a known catastrophe within a divine order. Homer's explicit anticipation of Scheria's future therefore suggests that, from his perspective, that future already belongs to the past. The Phaeacians appear as a society unaware of its own demise, while the narrator presupposes it.

Significantly, the prophecy is directly linked to Odysseus. The very ship that carries him safely to Ithaca becomes the trigger of disaster. With his departure, Scheria is released from the sphere of the present. The petrification of the returning vessel off the coast is not staged as spectacular divine vengeance, but as symbolic closure. Phaeacian seafaring comes to an end, contact with the wider world is severed, and the place recedes into memory. Homer does not present Scheria as a timeless utopia, but as the remembered image of an order that once existed and is irretrievably lost.

From Bronze Age Order to Post-Collapse Reality

Ithaca is not an idyllic counter-world but a close-up of social disintegration in the aftermath of the Trojan War. Where once a single legitimate ruler governed, 107 suitors have been lording in the palace for three years (13.378) competing for power, property, and influence. The royal household has been hollowed out, political assemblies have not convened for years, and norms of justice and restraint have eroded. Nor is this condition confined to Ithaca. Through the conversations woven into the poem, the audience learns that instability affects other centers of the Mycenaean world as well: some palaces still stand, others have already fallen, and still others are controlled by usurpers.

In Scheria, Odysseus encountered a society that still functions – with clearly defined institutions, ritualized hospitality, public order, and social equilibrium. In Ithaca, he faces the opposite: a post-collapse world in which power has been privatized, violence has become unrestrained, and loyalty is the exception rather than the rule. It is precisely this contrast that gives the Scheria episode its full significance. It is neither escapism nor sentimental interlude, but the necessary retrospective that renders the loss intelligible. Homer juxtaposes two experiential horizons: the memory of a

The stay in Scheria is therefore a dramaturgical necessity. Without it, the *Odyssey* would amount to a conventional homecoming tale: a hero overcomes adversity, returns, and restores the former order. It is only through Scheria that the poem acquires its deeper dimension. Homer compels his hero to pause before returning and to confront the world as it existed before the great rupture. Odysseus cannot pass directly from his isolation with Calypso into the fractured reality of Ithaca. He must first see, experience, and inevitably lose the vanished order. In the most straightforward reading, that order was destroyed in large part through his own stratagem – the ruse of the Trojan Horse.

The *Odyssey* thus tells not only of an individual's return, but of the impossibility of returning to a past world. The restoration of order in Ithaca is necessary, yet it does not reconstitute the heroic age embodied by Scheria. It establishes a fragile equilibrium within a fundamentally altered reality. This insight gives the epic its distinctive undertone of melancholy and explains why, despite its ostensibly happy ending, the *Odyssey* remains permeated by loss and ambivalence.

Your faces, heads, and bodies are wrapped up in night; your screams are blazing out like fire. The ornate palace ceilings and the walls are spattered with your blood. The porch is full of ghosts, as is the courtyard – ghosts descending into the dark of Erebus. The sun has vanished from the sky, and gloomy mist is all around.

(20.353–360)

The epic thus appears as a remarkably precise literary reflection on the collapse of a complex society. Homer offers a sober and penetrating observation of historical processes: how political order erodes, how power vacuums and violence emerge, how institutions disappear and are replaced by improvised and unstable forms of rule. That Homer chose to render this transition not in the form of a chronicle but through a highly complex narrative construction testifies to a striking degree of historical awareness. The *Odyssey*, read in this way, becomes less a poem about wandering than a book about memory — about the necessity of looking back in order to comprehend the present at all. This is the source of its enduring resonance. In moments when societies again reflect on stability, disintegration, and renewal, Homer's epic appears unexpectedly modern. It suggests that retrospection need not be escapism but can serve as a precondition for engaging with the present in a sober and responsible way.

The interpretation proposed here does not claim to offer a definitive explanation. Rather, it is an invitation to take seriously a connection that has often gone unnoticed. Those who follow this line of thought and reread the *Odyssey* from a shifted perspective may begin to discern a series of carefully calibrated effects that accentuate Odysseus' responsibility for the end of the heroic age: why, in Scheria, he is overcome by "great anguish of heart" while the Phaeacians revel; why athletic competition is presented as a more appropriate measure of excellence than warfare between armies; why forgiveness — particularly in cases of adultery — emerges as the wiser alternative to vengeance; why it is Odysseus himself who asks the bard Demodocus to sing of the

wooden horse; and why he ultimately breaks down in uncontrollable tears. — I wish the readers an inspiring read – goosebumps are almost guaranteed.

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All quotations of *The Odyssey* are from Emily Wilson's 2020 translation, published by W.W. Norton.

Further reading:

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