



About a perfect start for a world-wide web of song

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Editors: Angelia Hanhardt and Keith Stone

Consultant for Images: Jill Curry Robbins

Online Consultant: Noel Spencer

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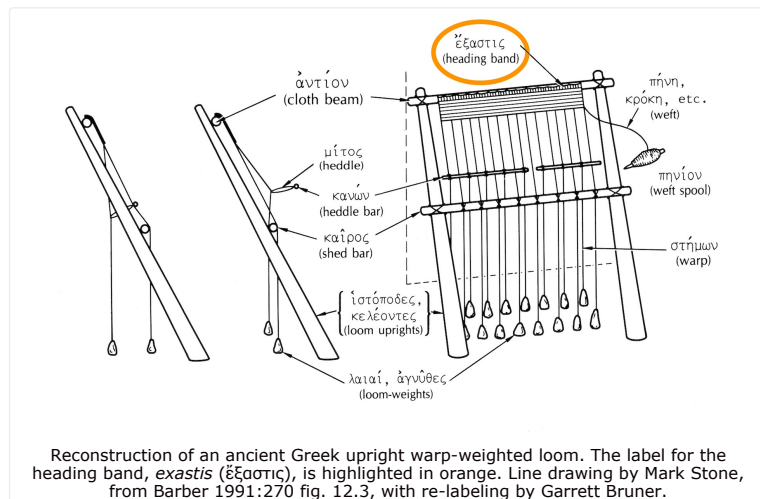
About a perfect start for a world-wide web of song

August 7, 2020 Posted By Gregory Nagy listed under [By Gregory Nagy](#)

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2020.08.07 | By Gregory Nagy

§0. Homeric poetry, at a pivotal moment where it represents the making of Homeric poetry itself, pictures a blind singer of tales in the act of starting his song. The singer is shown in the act of 'starting from a thread [*oimē*] that had at that time a fame [*kleos*] reaching all the way up to the wide sky'. That is how I translate line 74 in Rhapsody 8 of the Homeric *Odyssey*: οἴμησ, τῆς τὸτ' ἄρα κλέος οὐρανὸν εὐρὺν ἔκανε. The song that the singer of tales is singing here is pictured as a world-wide web of song, reaching all the way up to an unlimited celestial expanse. And the threading or *oimē* that becomes the song is being made by a master weaver who starts weaving his web with a heading band, as weavers call it. Ancient Greek weavers called it the *exastis* (ἔξαστις), and we see it pictured in the drawing that I show as the illustration for the cover of this essay. The drawing originates from Elizabeth Barber, who is not only a renowned expert in ancient textiles but also a deft weaver in her own right. And such a heading band, as pictured in this drawing, makes for a perfect start of Homeric song as sung by the singer of tales. There is a primal metaphor at work here. If a weaver makes a perfect start, then the web that is woven by the weaver can lead to a perfect finish. Comparably, a perfect start for Homeric singing leads to a perfect song, that is, to a marvel of unified poetry.



§1. In their post for *Classical Inquiries* 2020.08.07, guest-editors Rachele Pierini and Tom Palaima have published comments by Elizabeth Barber that I find relevant to the meaning of the word *oimē*, used in the genitive case ("genitive of origin"), at line 74 of Rhapsody 8 in the Homeric *Odyssey*. In this context, we find Demodokos, the blind singer of tales, 'starting from a thread [*oimē*] that had at that time a fame [*kleos*] reaching all the way up to the wide sky'. As I already indicated in my introduction to this brief essay, I argue that we see here a metaphor where the making of epic song is compared to the weaving of a web—and where the beginning of the song is compared to the making of a heading band for the web. I quote here the relevant comments of Barber in *Classical Inquiries* 2020.08.07 concerning the craft of weaving in the Mycenaean era:

For weaving, the Mycenaeans used the warp-weighted loom [here she shows the same line drawing that I showed for illustrating my essay], on which the warp-tension is produced by stretching the warp threads between a top beam of wood and heavy weights tied onto bunches of warp threads near the floor. [...] In order to be able to tie the weights on, the weaver must first attach each warp thread firmly to the top beam. The only efficient way to do this is to weave a band, called a heading band, in which the weft of the band is pulled out in very long loops to make what will be the warp threads of the future cloth [Figures 4 and 5 in Barber's commentary]. This firmly-woven band, with its cargo, is then lashed

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Keith DeStone
kdestone@chs.harvard.edu

Editor: Poetry Project

Natasha Bershadsky
nbershadsky@chs.harvard.edu

Assistant Editor

Angelia Hanhardt

Web Producer

Noel Spencer

Consultant for Images

Jill Curry Robbins

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firmly across the top beam so that the newly-made warp threads for the future cloth hang down. These are then separated—one forward, the next one back, etc.—to form the primary shed. The weights are then hung on. This whole long process can be called dressing the loom. Only then can the weaving begin.

§2. I argue, then, that the *oimē* in *Odyssey* 8.74 is metaphorically the web of song, and, as the singer of tales starts to weave his web, as it were, he has to make a heading band for the song.

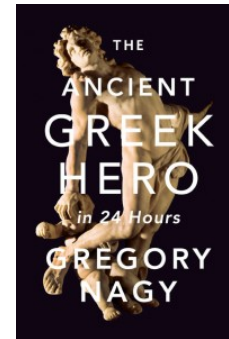
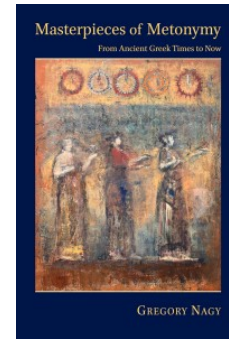
§3. I now go on to argue that such a heading band is what Greeks in the classical era called the *prooimion*, translated into Latin as the *prooemium*, 'proem'. I repeat here the basics of my argumentation as I present it in *Homer the Classic* (Nagy 2008|2009) 2§92:

In the case of the compound noun *prooimion* / προοίμιον, conventionally translated as 'proemium', the element *-oim-/οιμ-* is derived from a root that we find also attested in two simple nouns, *oimos/οἶμος* and *oimē/οἶμή*. The Attic by-form of *prooimion*/προοίμιον, which is *phroimion*/φροίμιον, elucidates the prehistory of the root: we must reconstruct it not as **oim-* but as **hoim-*, from **soim-*. This reconstruction helps elucidate the surviving contexts of both *oimos/οἶμος* and *oimē/οἶμή*, which do not always give a clear picture of the basic meaning of either form.[1] In some contexts, the meaning seems to be 'song',[2] while in others it seems to be 'way, pathway'.[3] With the help of comparative evidence, however, the primary meaning of *oimos* and *oimē* can be reconstructed as 'thread, threading', and the meanings 'song' or 'way, pathway' can be explained as secondary: that is, 'song' and 'way, pathway' are metaphorical generalizations derived from the meaning 'thread, threading'.[4] And it is such a primary meaning 'thread, threading' that we find in comparable forms attested in other Indo-European languages: for example, the form **soimos* that we reconstruct from Greek *oimos* is attested as Old Icelandic *seimr*, meaning 'thread'.[5] In terms of such a primary meaning, the etymology of the compound noun *prooimion* 'proemium' can be interpreted as a metaphor referring to the 'initial threading' of a song. A close semantic parallel to the etymology of Greek *prooimion* 'proemium' as an 'initial threading' of a song is the etymology of Latin *exordium*, which likewise means 'proemium' in poetic and rhetorical contexts: the meaning of this noun as well can be traced back to the basic idea of an 'initial threading'.[6] The poetic and rhetorical concepts of both Greek *prooimion* and Latin *exordium* in the sense of 'proemium' have a common Indo-European ancestry.

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Notes

[1] For a survey of contexts, see Chantraine *DELG* under the entries οἶμος and οἶμη.

[2] For example, *oimē* can be translated as 'song' in *Odyssey* 8.74 and 22.347.

[3] For example, *oimos* can be translated as 'way' in Hesiod *Works and Days* 290. In the case of the form δῦσοιμος in Aeschylus *Libation-Bearers* 945, it is explained in Hesychius (under the appropriate entry) as δῦσοδος.

[4] Nagy 2020:72, 81. See also Nagy 1996:63n20, with reference to Durante 1976:176–177, who disagrees with Chantraine *DELG* (again, under the entries οἶμος and οἶμη). Chantraine concludes that the basic meanings of *oimos* and *oimē* are distinct, but the contexts that he adduces point to an opposite conclusion, as noticed already by Pagliaro 1953:34–40.

[5] For this and other examples, see Durante 1976:176.

[6] See again Nagy 1996:63n20, with reference to Durante 1976:177 on Latin *ex-ordium* as a semantic equivalent of Greek *pro-oimion*. Also Nagy 2020:72, 81.

Tags: [heading band](#), [Homeric epic](#), [Homeric Odyssey](#), [proem](#), [weaving](#)

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