

Basileus and *Anax* in Homer and Mycenaean Greek Texts

The decipherment of the Mycenaean Linear B tablets made clear that the Homeric epics have astonishing parallels to Bronze Age material culture, but that, at the same time, vast worlds lie between, on the one hand, the highly complex Mycenaean palace economy with its strictly hierarchical system of officials and on the other, the holding of complete authority of innumerable small kings that Homer describes.

Hildebrandt 2007, 173 (trans. mine)

IMAGINE BEING asked to explain the differences in meaning of terms and titles in the English lexicon long associated with the exercise of power. Consider a limited assortment of masculine-gendered words that have designated top power figures: emperor, king, chief justice, president, dictator, director, chancellor, provost, prime minister, general, crown prince. Further imagine having to study collections of poems and songs and haphazardly preserved institutional accounting records from random years in the distant past in order to reconstruct exactly what these terms meant, how they were used, and what precise nuances each had in different periods over time.

This is something like what is facing us when we take up the two key terms for rulers in the Homeric poems βασιλεύς (*basileus*) and ἄναξ (Homeric *anax*, Mycenaean *wanax*) (Shear 2004, 77–80; Palaima 1995, 119–25; Hildebrandt 2007, 185–9).

During the Mycenaean palatial period (1500–1200 B.C.) *wanax* was the word for a high or paramount king of the palatial center in each geographical region. The term *g^wasileus* that evolved in historical times into *basileus* was used in the Linear B texts to refer to a local “big man” or “chief” (Ventris and Chadwick 1973, 576) who derived his authority, power, and social honor at the local level. The *g^wasileus* appears in the texts when the palatial centers conducted economic transactions with local centers in spheres where the *basileis* (plural form) had influence and control.

Both *wanax* and *g^wasileus* are non-Indo-European in origin (Palaima 1995, 2006, 2016; Beekes 2010, vol. 1, 98–9, 203). Beekes (2010, vol. 1, 203) himself points out astutely that a third-term *koiranos* (Heubeck 1978), not attested in this form in the Mycenaean Linear

B texts, but well attested in Homer as a title and as a derivative verb form, must complement the other two words in what we might term a lexical power triad.

The word *wanax* arguably has a root meaning, like the Hittite word for “king,” connected with “birth” and “regeneration” (Palaima 2006, 57–8, 62; 2016, 141–4). It may derive from the Minoan culture of Crete. In contrast, *basileus* is a “substrate” word of the local populations with which the Greek speakers merged when they entered the lower Balkan peninsula. When the palatial culture collapsed ca. 1200 B.C., the local *basileis* became by default the “highest” ruler figures (Palaima 2006, 68–9). *Koiranos*, etymologically and in Homeric usage, has close connections with the body of armed troops of a particular area. The root in Indo-European signifies just that: “Heer” = “army,” “male fighting force,” or “troops.”

In the Homeric poems, the title *anaks* is associated with gods (most often Apollo, Zeus, and Poseidon, but also Hades), whereas *basileus* is never applied to the gods. This seems to reflect the power differential in the real world.

In the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, the leaders of the contingents that came from different regions of Greece were mainly described each as a *basileus*. A region might have more than one *basileus*, as we see reflected in the description of Ithaca in Homer’s *Odyssey*. A *basileus* when encouraging, reprimanding, or disciplining his men is often said to be *koiranos*-izing them. This would suggest that the term in Homer has specific military implications, while *basileus* has other aspects to his power. We may think of the American president as commander-in-chief of the armed forces, but he is *not* a general and has many duties and sources of power outside the military sphere.

The title *wanax* is used in Homer’s *Iliad* forty-seven times in reference to Agamemnon, who is also known as the *poimēn lāōn* or “shepherd of the (plural) armies,” which he has brought together in a coalition under his overlordship in order to attack Troy. Priam, king of Troy and titular leader of the allied forces of Anatolia that form the “Trojan army,” is called *anax* eight times. Achilles comes next at six times. Among the Achaean (Hellēnes, the historical word for Greeks, is famously not found in the Homeric epics) forces, Idomeneus of Crete (four times), Nestor, Diomedes, and Menelaos (two times each), and Patroclus (once) round out the list. The Trojan ally from the region of Lycia, Sarpedon, the military commander and king most favored by Zeus of all those at Troy, bears the title *anax* three times, and other leaders like Aeneas and Rhesus are described as *anax* once.

It is important not to make too much of these numbers. They relate to some degree to how prominent a role these and other more minor figures who occasionally are called *anax* (e.g. Antilochus, son of Nestor, and Asios from Arisbe in the Troad, who is eventually killed by the Cretan commander Idomeneus) play in the storyline. They also relate to the practice of composing hexameter lines by using noun-and-epithet formulae. The set three-word phrase *anax andrōn Agamemnon* (e.g. *Il.* 9.163) assonantly closes out a line. Oral songsters could begin a line elegantly by referring to Agamemnon as “son of Atreus” and applying the same title as epithet: *Atreidēs te anax andrōn*. For the names Hektōr and Akhil(I)eus such an epithet would not work easily.

However, the title is applied to Achilles in critical situations. It reminds us and him of his obligations and his great power (see e.g. *Il.* 16.172, where Achilles is not called king, but where he is described with a verb derived from *wanax* as “wielding the king’s power” over his contingent of fifty ships, each with fifty men). It assigns him supreme authority over the troops in his own contingent: the Myrmidones make shelter for their *anakti* (*Il.* 24.449,

452). And it even fixes in Agamemnon's mind that Achilles is a powerful leader and key to any possibility that the Achaean forces have of taking Troy: *Akhilēi anakti* (*Il.* 9.164).

Basileus appears in the *Iliad* seventy-four times, twenty-six times in the plural. Each of the many contingent leaders at Troy can be called a *basileus*. And in a time of crisis, Odysseus (*Il.* 2.204–5) puts forward as a best practice: “Let there be one *koiranos*, one *basileus*,” essentially saying, “No matter whether we call him by a pure Greek or a foreign-flavored title, let's just have one big boss man.”

In the *Odyssey*, there are many *basileis*, yet it is clear that the *basileus* of Odysseus's residence and its property is deemed to be the *basileus tōn basileōn* “king of kings” on the island of Ithaca. This is made clear in *Odyssey* 1.388–404 in the famous exchanges between the arrogant suitors Antinous and Eurymachus and Telemachus, who is still fatherless and frustrated as heir apparent to Odysseus's authority and possessions. Telemachus asserts that there are many other *basilēes* (plural of *basileus*), young and old, throughout Ithaca; and he recognizes that whoever takes possession of Odysseus's household and land (and wife) will have more *timē*, publicly conferred honor, than the others. As compensation, Telemachus claims that he will still be *anaks* of his own household. Eurymachus then throws that claim in his face sarcastically, “Go ahead then and be *anaks* in your own halls,” i.e. be a big fish in a once well-stocked royal pond now depleted by the suitors.

There are other titles and terms for power figures used in the Homeric epics that are not found in Linear B. They are either regionally specialized or have to do with commanding subgroups of armies in the field, so do not find a place in the Linear B texts. But they do help us to see what *anax* and *basileus* and *koiranos* are not, or are not exclusively. Among these other words, those for leadership positions are *hēgemōn* “leader,” and lesser used terms (van Wees 1992, 31, and n. 20) like *kosmētōr* (“agent of setting in order”); *orkhamos* (“senior officer of a military command unit,” attested in Mycenaean as an *o-ka* = *orkhā*; Ventris and Chadwick 1973, 564); *sēmantōr* (literally “an agent of giving a *sēma* = sign or signal” and therefore “a commander”); *tagos* (later a Thessalian title for a military leader or “commander”). There are still other status words marking out individuals as elites that are not titles per se: *aristos*, “best, bravest, finest”; *prōtos*, “first, foremost”; *kreiōn*, “wielding power”; and the metaphorical *poimēn lāōn*, conventionally “shepherd of the male fighting forces” (for the meaning of *lāos*, however, see Nikoloudis 2008), but oddly never *poimēn lāou*, “shepherd of his particular male fighting force.”

In later Greek, *anax* fell out of common use except as a divine title in cult and poetry and as a title within the households of the *basileis* on Cyprus. *Basileus* came to be the main word to designate the title and office of “king” in later Greece (Drews 1983, 98–132; Carlier 1984, 485–514). However, in the historical period (800 B.C.) few Greek *poleis*, communities, or regions had functioning kings. The term *basileus* was still in use, fossilized in political or cultic titles (e.g. the *arkhōn* designated as *basileus* or “king archon” in Athens). The term was also used in a special and singularly privileged application to designate the supreme ruler of a great neighboring foreign power (the Persian Empire): *Xšāyathiya Xšāyathiyānām* rendered as *basileus tōn basileōn* (“king of kings”).

Thomas G. Palaima