Living in Iron, Dressed in Bronze: Metal Formulas and the Chronology of Ages

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Abstract
Names of important metals such as gold, silver, iron, and bronze occur many times in the Homeric Epics. We intend to look at them within the framework of oral poetry, with the purpose to determine if they form a more or less coherent set of “formulas”, in the sense defined by Milman Parry and the Oral Poetry Theory, and to test a possible link with the stages of the evolution of humankind. Though several specialists criticized some excess in Parry’s and Lord’s definitions of the formula, we deem the theory still valuable in its great lines and feel no need to discuss it for the present study. The frequent use of bronze in epical formulas for arms, while the actual heroes fight their battles with iron equipment, and the emphasis of gold in the descriptions of wealth may reflect a deep-seated linguistic memory within the archaic mindset of the Ages of Mankind. With Homer’s language as our best witness, metal formulas testify to the importance of the tradition of the Ages of Mankind in understanding the thought patterns and value-systems, as well as some linguistic usages of the Homeric Epics.
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Iron tools were stronger than bronze tools. Weapons were more powerful. Iron weapons began in the Middle East and in southeastern Europe around 1200 BCE. They did not show up in China until around 600 BCE. The Stone Age, the Bronze Age, and the Iron Age are called the three-age system. The years assigned to each of these ages are ballparked, a guess - they are not accurate because different civilizations developed at different speeds. But looking back through time, each ancient civilization went through a Stone Age (stone tools and weapons), then a Bronze Age (bronze tools and weapons), then an