The interpretive key that unlocks the ambiguities of the Malta episode and makes possible a coherent interpretation of all its elements is found in a reconstruction of the ancient practice of hospitality to strangers. The socio-cultural gap between ancient Mediterranean hospitality and contemporary notions of hospitality (where the latter is often seen as little more than the provision of entertainment for insiders) is great. The significance of Luke's description of the barbarians' hospitality, as well as his many other descriptions of the practice throughout his two volumes, depends on the reader knowing something about this central cultural practice. Given that the text of Luke-Acts is deeply embedded within its particular ancient Mediterranean culture, I assume that Luke's model readers are familiar with ancient conceptions of hospitality. Therefore, chapters three and four establish the "cultural encyclopedia" of Luke's model readers with respect to the practice of hospitality to strangers. The primary questions, then, which will drive this investigation include: What are the basic elements involved in welcoming strangers? What is the specific language used to describe the practice? Is there religious significance to the practice? How is hospitality corrupted?

---

1 Susan Ford Wiltshire, *Public and Private in Vergil's Aeneid* (Amherst, MA: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1989), 83, puts it well: "Modern hospitality is typically a transaction among friends. Ancient hospitality is a transaction among strangers. Modern hospitality reinforces our familiarities. Ancient hospitality alters us by exposing us to outsiders."


I. CONSTRUCTING THE CULTURAL SCRIPT

A. Homer’s Odyssey as Foundational

Homer’s *Odyssey* commands attention in the construction of the cultural script for two reasons. First, Homer’s poems exerted enormous influence, especially with respect to ethics. As Werner Jaeger notes, Homer is “the first and the greatest creator and shaper of Greek life and the Greek character.” The veracity of Plato’s famous claim regarding Homer, namely, that “this poet educated Hellas” (῾Ελλάδα πεπαιδεύκεν οὗτος ὁ ποιητής, Republic 10.606e), has been demonstrated in numerous ways, but perhaps none so clearly as by the ubiquity with which the Homeric epics are used in school exercises for young students. Numerous historians have demonstrated the use of Homer within primary, secondary, and tertiary curricula. Whether it was learning to write through the copying of the names of Homeric heroes and deities, the writing of interpretative essays on Homeric scenes and motifs, practicing grammatical analysis upon difficult themes and lines from the *Iliad*, or the memorization of Homeric quotations for rhetorical use, Homer’s place in the shaping of Greek and Roman *paideia* was profound.

Dio Chrysostom was right that as an author Homer was “the

---


5 Jaeger, *Paideia*, 1.36.


7 Common school exercises for those studying rhetoric was to produce comparisons which would compare Homeric heroes (such as Ajax and Odysseus) and prove one superior to the other. See the many examples listed by Stanley F. Bonner, *Education in Ancient Rome: From the elder Cato to the younger Pliny* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1977), 267–276.

