In the early books of the *Iliad* the Olympian gods tamper, albeit infrequently and inconspicuously, in human affairs, but they generally follow Zeus’ directive in the council of gods in Book 8 to give assistance neither to the Achaeans nor the Trojans; not until the beginning of Book 20 do the gods openly declare their allegiances and fight undisguised on the battlefield in the so-called Theomachia (‘Battle of the Gods’). Athena bellows out in exhortation on the Achaean side, Ares is her counterpart on the Trojan side: the goddess of disciplined warfare against the god of frenzied violence, the berserker. Poseidon squares off against Apollo: the two most powerful male deities on each side. Hephaestus squares off against the river Xanthus: the primordial elements of fire and water. Less explicably, Hera squares off against Artemis, much to the humiliation of the inferior goddess, who is boxed on the ears with her own bow and arrows. Odder yet, Hermes, who has not previously revealed his allegiance, squares off against Leto, an unlikely combatant in any event (*Iliad* 20.72):

\[ \Lambda \eta \tau \delta \ ' \ \alpha \nu \tau \tau \varepsilon \tau \sigma \wedge \kappa \circ \zeta \ \varepsilon \rho \iota \iota \circ \iota \circ \iota \circ \zeta \ ' \varepsilon \rho \mu \frac{\mu}{\varepsilon} \zeta \]

This pairing is remarkable, to be sure; Hermes is embarrassed by it and throws in the towel even before they have a chance to begin: “I will not come to blows with a bride of Zeus; go ahead and boast to the other gods that you were the victor (*Iliad* 21.498–501 [paraphrase]).” But even more remarkable than the context is the formulaic phrase used here to describe Hermes: σῶκος ἕριούνιος Ἑρμῆς. It is difficult in several respects:

1) This combination of words—the two epithets and the name Hermes—occurs only here in epic verse, and even the combination ἕριούνιος Ἑρμῆς occurs in but one other passage in this order and in this metrical position: *H.Herm.* 145 Διὸς δ’ ἕριούνιος Ἑρμῆς, which is equally remarkable for its improvisational appearance.¹

¹ In *H.Herm.* 145 Διὸς δ’ ἕριούνιος Ἑρμῆς, which is apparently modeled on the more
2) σῶκος is etymologically obscure; in this adjectival form it is a hapax legomenon, not only in Homer but in all of Greek, save in passages imitating Homer. Hence there is no satisfactory etymology in Greek itself, and there are no convincing cognates in the other Indo-European languages.

3) ἑριούνιος is almost as difficult and has been variously understood since antiquity—and also today.

4) Ἑρμῆς is a very rare modernization of the traditional form Ἐρμεῖος. It occurs only here in the Iliad and only four times in the Odyssey, once at verse end; in the later Hymns it is the regular form.

5) Finally, and most remarkable of all, this verse does not scan properly; the lengthening of the second syllable of σῶκος is metrically inexplicable.

In short, this phrase looks like a relatively late modification of a traditional formula, composed in a new arrangement from bits and pieces of inherited phrases. By ‘relatively late’ I do not mean that the phrase is a post-Homeric textual interpolation; I mean rather that it is ‘late’ in terms of the productive and fluid period of the living oral epic tradition that preceded the fossilization of the Homeric epics into textual form, probably in the late 8th century. I would like to propose some possible models and a possible line of evolution for the phrase. Ideally the hypothetical model for σῶκος ἑριούνιος Ἑρμῆς should:

1) Scan properly. As it is, the second syllable of σῶκος is metrically long, and there is no historical linguistic reason for the anomaly (e.g., ἑριούνιος did not ever have an initial digamma or sigma that would enable the preceding syllable to ‘make position’). Nor does this fall under the category of metrical anomalies generally referred to as ‘poetic license’; such ‘poetic license’ is understandable, and can be tolerated, under certain conditions—as the outcome of the juxtaposition of two separate traditional formulas, for example—but it is extremely rare within a formulaic phrase, as here between two epithets of a deity.2

natural formulaic expression in H.Herm. 28 Διός δ’ ἑριούνιος υἱός, either the adjective is functioning as a noun, or the word υἱός is to be understood, as it is in but one other formula in Homer: ὤλλης ταχὺς Ἀιάς (7x Homer), which similarly appears to be an improvisation of ὤλλης ταχὺς υἱός (II. 13.701; 14.520).

2 On the relatively frequent ‘metrical irregularities’ of hiatus and brevis in longo found at the juxtaposition of separate formulaic phrases, see MHV 191–239.