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Exploring Time and Consciousness in Homeric
Epic: The Strange Encounter of Odysseus and
Herakles in the Nekyia

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Abstract – While the Homeric epics primarily focus on the Greek and Trojan heroes battling outside Troy's walls, they also hark back to earlier heroic eras. Among past heroes, Herakles is the most frequently mentioned. The Iliad often references Herakles' exploits, but the Odyssey only briefly evokes him in a few verses. The most extended mention occurs in the nekyia (Od. 11. 601-627), a passage presenting oddities that have been widely debated and interpreted. This paper considers the passage focusing on the diffuse confusion of temporal levels that it presents in the light of frameworks related to mind and consciousness. Inspired by the seminal works of Snell and Dodds and the controversial yet increasingly validated theories of Jaynes, supported by neuroscientific insights and Damasio's endorsement, it explores recent research on consciousness in perceiving and describing time. It investigates whether this Homeric passage may reflect a transitional phase from one stage of development of the human cognitive system to a subsequent one characterised by different functional traits.

Keywords – Odyssey; Nekyia; Herakles; Time; Neurosciences; Consciousness; Julian Jaynes; Bicameral Mind.

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Exploring Time and Consciousness in Homeric Epics: The Strange Encounter of Odysseus and Herakles in the Nekyia

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1. Background: Materials, Methods and Research Question

While the Homeric epics primarily focus on the Greek and Trojan heroes battling outside Troy's walls, they also hark back to earlier heroic eras. Among past heroes, Herakles is the most frequently mentioned. The Iliad often references Herakles' exploits, but the Odyssey only briefly evokes him in a few passages: the most extended and intriguing mention comes in the nekyia, near the conclusion of book 11 (601-627): in one of the final scenes of Odysseus' visit to Hades in the underworld, we find Odysseus' odd meeting with Herakles' εἴδωλον. Herakles comes to Odysseus in his heroic appearance, which reflects his human existence. However, Herakles, in his flesh and blood, has instead reached the joy of the gods of Olympus, with whom he feasts in the company of Hebe. Apart from this specific passage, references to him are presented mainly allusively, harkening back to the oral narratives that predate Homer. These narratives were widely familiar to the Homeric audience, obviating the need for detailed explication. Thus, Homer does not serve as the primary source but rather draws upon and repurposes the established tradition surrounding Herakles (Galinski).

In an interdisciplinary approach, close reading techniques, incorporating methodologies from classical philology, narrative theory, and neuroscience are employed to investigate Odyssey 11. 601-627; as for the Homeric text, reference was made to the Perseus Digital Library. The translation of the *Odyssey* is by A.T. Murray (1919), and the Greek text available on Perseus is likewise consistently that of Murray's edition.

The main objective of the present research is to answer to the following research question: while the passage has been extensively studied, with numerous interpretations offered to explain its logical incongruences, the question remains whether an additional explanation can be proposed. This explanation could pertain to the development of the human consciousness system, particularly focusing on the conception of time as one of its foundational mechanisms.

2. The Strange Encounter of Odysseus and Herakles

The strange encounter of Odysseus and Herakles occurs in the Od. 11. 601-627, a book known as the *nekyia* (Greek: νέκυια) which refers to a rite involving the summoning and interrogation of the spirits of the deceased to predict the future. In this passage, Odysseus conducts a ritual to evoke the spirit of the prophet Tiresias, seeking guidance for his journey home.

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To provide further context, a brief overview of the issues traditionally identified in Od. 11. 601-627 is presented: first, the text; then the translation; and, finally, an essential commentary.¹

τὸν δὲ μετ' εἰσενόησα βίην Ἡρακλείην,/εἴδωλον: αὐτὸς δὲ μετ' ἀθανάτοισι θεοῖσι/ τέρπεται ἐν θαλίης καὶ ἔχει καλλίσφυρον Ἡβῆν,/ παῖδα Διὸς μεγάλοιο καὶ Ἡρῆς χρυσοπεδίλου. (Od. 11. 601-604)

And after him I marked the mighty Heracles - his phantom; for he himself among the immortal gods takes his joy in the feast, and has to wife Hebe, of the fair ankles, daughter of great Zeus and of Hera, of the golden sandals.

In antiquity, verses Od. 11. 601-604 have been the subject of numerous attributive questions, which are rather undeniable due to their peculiarity: sudden change of perspective, bizarre and seemingly unnecessary clarification, and the abundance of details.

The scholiasts, always keen on incongruities and narrative disruptions, point out the following causes for perplexity: how is it possible for Herakles to be simultaneously in the Underworld and in the sky? In Homer, Hebe is indeed a virgin (*παρθένος*), as she performs duties befitting a maiden, such as serving as a cupbearer. Homer was unaware of Herakles' immortality and his marriage to Hebe; therefore, this passage is considered later (*νεωτερικός*). The poet was not acquainted with the tripartite nature of the human being: *εἴδωλον* (image), *σῶμα* (body), *ψυχή* (soul). Verse 604 was regarded as an ancient interpolation (D'Agostino), and is therefore considered spurious.

ἀμφὶ δέ μιν κλαγγὴ νεκύων ἦν οἰωνῶν ὥς,/ πάντος' ἀτυζομένων: ὁ δ' ἐρεμνὴ νυκτὶ ἐσικώς,/ γυμνὸν τόξον ἔχων καὶ ἐπὶ νευρῆφιν ὄιστόν,/ δεινὸν παπταίνων, αἱεὶ βαλέοντι ἐσικώς. (Od. 11. 605-608)

And about him rose a clamour from the dead, as of birds flying everywhere in terror; and he like dark night, with his bow bare and with arrow on the string, glared about him terribly, like one in act to shoot.

The verses 605-608 contain a valuable description of the hero, following the pattern that Eustathius (1825) referred to as *βιωτικός*, meaning he is depicted in a way that mirrors his actions and attributes during his earthly life: he stands amidst the fleeing crowd of souls, resembling a dark night, clutching his bow, an arrow ready to be loosed, and wearing a fierce, ominous expression. But why is he in act to shoot?

ἀμφὶ δέ σμερδαλέος δέ οἱ ἀμφὶ περὶ στήθεσσιν ἀορτὴρ/ χρύσεος ἦν τελαμών, ἵνα θέσκελα ἔργα τέτυκτο,/ ἄρκτοι τ' ἀγρότεροι τε σύες χαροποί τε λέοντες,/ ὑσμῖναι τε μάχαι τε φόνοι τ' ἀνδροκτασίαι τε./ μὴ τεχνησάμενος μηδ' ἄλλο τι τεχνήσαιτο,/ ὃς κεῖνον τελαμῶνα ἐῇ ἐγκάτθετο τέχνῃ. (Od. 11. 609-614)

Awful was the belt about his breast, a baldric of gold, whereon wondrous things were fashioned, bears and wild boars, and lions with flashing eyes, and conflicts, and battles, and murders, and slayings of men. May he never have designed, or hereafter design such another, even he who stored up in his craft the device of that belt.

This is a brief but comprehensive ekphrasis, which is a detailed description of the baldric of Herakles and the images represented therein. It helps identify the character in the least ambiguous manner possible. However, how can the details be seen by Odysseus despite the distance and the darkness?

¹ For a detailed analysis, see Gazis, 2018.

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ἔγνω δ' αὐτὸν ἔμ' ἐκεῖνος, ἐπεὶ ἴδεν ὀφθαλμοῖσιν, / καὶ μ' ὀλοφυρόμενος ἔπεια πτερόεντα προσηρύδα: / διογενὲς Λαερτιάδη, πολυμήχανος Ὀδυσσεῦν, / ὃ δεῖλ', ἡ τινὰ καὶ σὺ κακὸν μόρον ἡγηλάζεις, / ὃν περ ἐγὼν ὄχεεσκον ὑπὸ αὐγὰς ἡελίου. / Ζηνὸς μὲν πάτις ἡ Κρονίονος, αὐτὸς δίκυνος / εἰχον ἀπειρεσίην: μάλα γάρ πολὺ χείρονι φοτὶ δεδμήμητην, ὃ δέ μοι χαλεποὺς ἐπετέλλετ' ἀέθλους, / καὶ ποτέ μ' ἐνθάδ' ἔπειμψε κύνοντα: οὐ γάρ ἔτ' ἄλλον φράζετο τοῦδέ γέ μοι κρατερώτερον εἶναι ἄεθλον: / τὸν μὲν ἐγὼν ἀνένεικα καὶ ἡγαγον ἐξ Αἰδαοῦ: / Ἐρμείας δέ μ' ἔπειμψεν ιδὲ γλαυκῶπις Αθήνη. (Od. 11. 615-626)

He in turn knew me when his eyes beheld me, and weeping spoke to me winged words: “Son of Laertes, sprung from Zeus, Odysseus of many devices, ah, wretched man, dost thou, too, drag out an evil lot such as I once bore beneath the rays of the sun? I was the son of Zeus, son of Cronos, but I had woe beyond measure; for to a man far worse than I was I made subject, and he laid on me hard labours. Yea, he once sent me hither to fetch the hound of Hades, for he could devise for me no other task mightier than this. The hound I carried off and led forth from the house of Hades; and Hermes was my guide, and flashing-eyed Athena.”

Heracles recognizes Odysseus as soon as he spots him and addresses him briefly, to which no response follows. But how could he recognize him if he belonged to the previous heroic generation? And could he have had foresight? Why is he mourning?

The following paragraph will focus on the identified inconsistencies, specifically addressing issues related to the temporal dimension of the narrative.

2.1 The Forms of Time and Narration in Od. 11. 601-627

If we consider the forms of time and narration, we may observe that, as part of the nekyia, Od. 11. 601-627 serves as both a digression and a metanarrative: as such, it implies a suspension/crystallisation of time (Auerbach) that is also further emphasised by the description of Herakles' baldric. But what is surprising is the overlapping of temporal planes that are clearly incompatible according to the logic and experience we currently consider acceptable. First, it is noteworthy that Herakles recognises Odysseus immediately upon seeing him without having ever known him (in fact, Odysseus is later) and addresses him briefly, to which no response follows. This recognition raises intriguing questions: it invites us to consider how such recognition could occur if he were from a preceding heroic generation, and in turn, subtly introduces the nuanced debate concerning the potential foresight possessed by the Homeric gods. Additionally, it has to be considered why Herakles is depicted as weeping: given his divine status and the assumption that gods are eternally blissful, he should be joyful (*μετ' ἀθανάτοισι θεοῖσι τέρπεται*); however, he is weeping/mourning (*όλοφυρόμενος*). Odysseus, for his part, recognises him without knowing him (aided by Herakles' posture and objects) as Herakles is a predecessor. Only a non-existent contemporaneity, a timeless circumstance, between them would have allowed them to recognise each other, since Odysseus, who is alive, meets Herakles, who is dead while being eternally alive as a god.

Furthermore, it can be noted that the nekyia itself is essential for acquiring the protagonist's (Odysseus) future. From another perspective, it serves as a flashback providing information on the past life of the hero Herakles while also illustrating the present life of Herakles as a god.

According to Bakker's semiotic studies on epic narration in ancient Greek poetry, these elements just reveal that this form of storytelling, characterised by its performative nature, has a remarkable capacity to obscure the distinction between past and present in the minds of the audience. Bakker's position centres on the concept of *presentification*, which underscores how epic narratives seamlessly merge past events with the current moment of performance, creating a dynamic and immersive temporal flow. This quality highlights the unique temporal dynamics of epic storytelling in archaic Greek poetry. Bakker's studies demonstrate full con-

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vergence with historical-religious studies that recognise in ‘presentification’ the fundamental function of mythical narration (Brellich; Calame).

Nevertheless, these elements still do astonish the reader, who may wish to turn to two foundational works on the subject of the mind and rationality in the ancient world. On one hand, Dodds explored the relationship between Greek thought and mystical or irrational beliefs, suggesting that ancient Greek culture balanced rationality with elements of the irrational and mystical. He argued that the Greeks were not entirely rational and that their worldview incorporated these irrational aspects, which played a significant role in their intellectual and cultural development. On the other, Snell examined the development of self-awareness and introspection in ancient Greek thought and literature, emphasizing how Greek philosophy and poetry contributed to the emergence of individual consciousness and the exploration of the inner self. He also highlighted the profound impact of Greek culture on the evolution of human psychology and the understanding of the human mind. Among the classical texts on the subject, the contribution of Onians is also noteworthy. In the five chapters of the first part of his book, Onians explores the relationship between mind and body, highlighting how in ancient Greece, particularly in Homer, consciousness was linked to bodily organs such as the heart or diaphragm, with thought described as an internal dialogue or discourse.

Regarding the mind, it must be emphasised that research over the past few decades has progressed, but a consensus on its exact nature and location remains elusive. One frequently cited model was proposed by Mark Solms. The model, encompassing the integration of psychoanalytic theories and modern neuroscience, posits that consciousness is an integral component of the mind, with subjectivity, intentionality, and agency.

The cited foundational works provide valuable insights to explain the oddities found in Od. 11. 601-627, but they still do not resolve the temporal and narrative inconsistencies in the considered Homeric text. This raises questions about whether further explanations can be sought by exploring the development of the human consciousness system, where the concept of time is a fundamental device.

3. The Strong Connection Between Time and Consciousness Development

Research on consciousness has expanded significantly in the last decades. Nevertheless, there remains a lack of consensus regarding the dynamics of its origin, ontology, and specific location. Several research disciplines are involved, spanning philosophy, psychology, neurobiology, neuroscience, physics, linguistics, quantum theories, and integrated information, each bringing with them a substantial number of subdomains. Studies on consciousness mainly imply interdisciplinary approaches and frameworks, such as integrated information that aims to bridge gaps between neuroscience, philosophy, and information theory. An impressive and comprehensive review article on major theories of consciousness, is provided by Kuhn.²

To address the research question, this paper primarily focuses on just two main issues: the relationship between time and consciousness, and the evolution of consciousness. In this context, the development of consciousness in humans has been extensively studied through developmental psychology: Piaget highlighted how children’s cognitive development includes increasingly sophisticated concepts of time, reflecting an integral aspect of growing consciousness.

² A concise and informative visual summary is provided at <https://bit.ly/3yegGhu> (last access 28/07/2024).

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Friedman further contextualised this by exploring how the conceptualisation of time as a fourth dimension informs our cognitive development and consciousness.

Moving to temporal awareness and temporal processing, Eagleman's research into human time perception and its illusions provides an understanding of how our experience of time can be distorted, revealing the complexities behind temporal awareness.

Ivry and Schlerf's discussion on dedicated and intrinsic models of time perception underscores the role of distinct cognitive mechanisms in processing temporal information, which is crucial for the development of a coherent sense of time and consciousness.

Neuroscientific research has identified the neural correlates of time perception in specific brain regions involved in time perception and consciousness. The prefrontal cortex, basal ganglia, and parietal lobes are particularly important. These regions help process temporal information and are also involved in attention and working memory, which are crucial for conscious experience (Wittmann). Furthermore, the emergence of the concept of temporal binding in neuroscience refers to the brain's ability to integrate sensory inputs that occur at different times into a unified perception. This is essential for creating a continuous and coherent stream of consciousness (Pöppel).

4. An Evolutionary Perspective on Time Perception and Consciousness: Damasio

One of the most significant neuroscientists at work today, Antonio Damasio, offers a groundbreaking investigation into the development of consciousness.

In his work *Self Comes to Mind*, a pioneering exploration of the neurobiological foundations of mind and self, he introduces an evolutionary perspective to the study of the mind, grounded in extensive empirical research. Damasio posits that time perception is a biological process rooted in the brain's functions. The brain constructs our sense of time by integrating sensory inputs and cognitive processes, which are fundamental to the formation of consciousness.

He further argues that the ability to perceive time and sequence events is crucial for the construction of the self. The brain's capacity to link past experiences with present actions and future plans creates a continuous narrative essential for a cohesive sense of self.

According to Damasio, specific brain regions, such as the prefrontal cortex and the basal ganglia, play significant roles in processing temporal information. These regions help us understand the flow of time and maintain an awareness of temporal sequences, which are critical for decision-making and planning.

Damasio's evolutionary perspective suggests that the brain's ability to perceive and manipulate time has been a significant advantage in human evolution. This capability allows for more sophisticated behaviours and interactions, which are key components of cultural and social development.

In the same book, he writes: "Still, I sympathize with Julian Jaynes's claim that something of great import may have happened to the human mind during the relatively brief period of time between the events narrated in the Iliad and those that make up the Odyssey" (Damasio 307). It is precisely this assertion, which also serves as an endorsement, that prompts us to investigate Jaynes's studies with the aim of assessing their potential utility in explaining our text, Od. 11. 601-627.

4.1 Julian Jaynes' theory of the *bicameral mind* and its possible implications in Od. 11. 601-627

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Julian Jaynes was an American psychologist who conducted research at Yale and Princeton for nearly 25 years. He is best known for his influential work, *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*. Throughout his career, he focused on exploration of the nature of consciousness, integrating insights from a diverse array of fields, including neuroscience, linguistics, psychology, archaeology, history, religion, and the analysis of ancient texts.

Jaynes proposed a groundbreaking theory that precisely focuses on the evolutionary dimension, examining historical records to identify the emergence of consciousness. He argued that this pivotal moment occurred during the timeframe between the composition of the Iliad and the Odyssey, with the Iliad likely taking shape between 1230BC and 850BC, and the Odyssey emerging at least a century or more later. These two literary works serve as the primary evidence supporting Jaynes' theory, as their narratives contain elements that illuminate the evolution of human consciousness.

Jaynes' theory on the genesis of consciousness comprises three key components: the conceptualization of consciousness, the proposition of the *bicameral mind* concept, the argument regarding the emergence of consciousness subsequent to the *bicameral mind* disintegration.

In Jaynes' view, consciousness is a complex mental phenomenon involving self-awareness, introspection, and the ability to reflect on one's thoughts, emotions, and actions. He argued that consciousness is not a universally innate trait of human beings but rather emerged relatively recently in human history. Jaynes defined consciousness by contrasting it with what he believed was the previous mental state of early humans, which he calls the *bicameral mind*.

In the *bicameral mind*, individuals did not possess a sense of self-awareness or introspection as modern humans do. Instead, they experienced their thoughts and actions as coming from external sources, often attributed to gods or other supernatural entities. In this state, people lacked a subjective sense of self and personal agency.

The transition from a state of being directed by gods to becoming self-determined agents can be discerned through significant narrative distinctions between the Iliad and the Odyssey. In the Iliad, he noted the absence of the modern concept of will, and he asserted that individuals in this text lacked self-will and the notion of free will. Instead, their actions were guided by divine commands, and human will was essentially outsourced to the gods. In the world of the Iliad, gods were perceived as integral components of the natural order, lacking supernatural qualities. Their interaction with humans resembled the sensation of solving a complex problem, evoking amazement but not appearing supernatural. These gods were essentially human-made.

Jaynes also speculated about the neural basis of the bicameral mind, associating it with the two brain hemispheres. The right hemisphere stored commands that could be transmitted to the left hemisphere via the anterior commissure, mirroring the perceived divine commands experienced by bicameral individuals.

The concept of responsibility was also different in bicameral societies, with Jaynes suggesting that people were not conscious in the modern sense and thus not responsible for their actions during this era. The breakdown of the bicameral mind, which followed the time of the Iliad, led to a void in volition as humans no longer felt commanded by gods. Divination emerged as an intermediary solution, relying on external decision-making systems. These rituals acted as proxies for the lost divine commands.

Jaynes argued that the narrative of the Odyssey reflects the transition from god-driven agency to a more self-directed form. The role of gods diminishes, divination plays a larger role, and the conscious mind becomes more prominent in directing actions.

Overall, Jaynes equated the emergence of consciousness with the emergence of self-agency, and the Odyssey serves as a metaphor for this shift in human mentality, portraying the journey toward subjective identity and self-acknowledgment.

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Jaynes proposed that during the transition from the bicameral mind to modern consciousness, some individuals experienced a breakdown in the guidance system, leading to auditory hallucinations and a sense of receiving commands from external sources, which he saw as analogous to the way early humans experienced the *voices of the gods*. He argued that these experiences in some cases resembled the auditory hallucinations and disrupted thought processes seen in schizophrenia.

The debate surrounding Jaynes' research is ongoing, and there are scholars with varying degrees of support and criticism for his ideas, making it a complex and multifaceted discussion.³ However, it must be underlined that the theory draws upon evidence from a diverse array of disciplines.⁴ For instance, recent neuroimaging studies have largely validated Jaynes's early predictions regarding the neurology of auditory hallucinations, which are linked to the neurological model of the bicameral mind (Cavanna).

5. Discussion

Given the close relationship between the perception of temporal dimension and the development of consciousness as a foundational element of the mind, Jaynes' theory appears to be an underutilised tool to explain the passage in question. Notably, the metanarrative in Odyssey 11.601-627 appears to offer significant potential as additional evidence for the transition from the bicameral mind to its subsequent breakdown. The narrative and temporal inconsistencies observed in this text seem to be elucidated and justified by the evolutionary framework proposed by Jaynes.

This interpretation is further reinforced by the fact that, as discussed in earlier sections, the temporal dimension is a crucial aspect of consciousness and the mind. It is precisely this sensitive and critical element that appears most unstable during the shift from the bicameral mind depicted in the Iliad to the modern consciousness illustrated in the Odyssey.

Again, considering that this passage encounters interpretative challenges primarily on the temporal and perceptual planes, Jaynes theory can indeed elucidate narrative elements that have, for far too long, either been forcefully explained or hastily dismissed as incongruities or contradictions within the works of Homer.

Thus, it does not seem imprudent to assert that distinct neural mechanisms existed, leading to varied ways of experiencing, perceiving, and narrating events.

While Jaynes' model does not preclude other explanations, past or future, it presents a promising and relatively unexplored perspective for addressing the contradictions in epic narratives. This approach is increasingly supported by advances in neuroscientific research, which could further illuminate and resolve these issues.

6. Conclusion

This study explored the metanarrative within Od. 11.601-627, a passage in the *nekyia*, where Odysseus encounters Herakles.

³ A review of scholars supporting Jaynes's bicameral mind theory can be found at <https://bit.ly/3AdLteI> (last access 28/07/2024).

⁴ A review of primary areas of evidence and sources for further reading can be found at <https://bit.ly/3Ypa5LU> (last access 28/07/2024).

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The research, applying close reading techniques, incorporating classical philology, narrative theory, and neuroscience, aimed to address whether the passage's logical inconsistencies might be explained through the lens of consciousness development, particularly focusing on temporal mechanisms.

The encounter presents several narrative inconsistencies, including the simultaneous presence of Herakles in both the underworld and Olympus and the mutual recognition of the characters despite being from a different heroic generation. Traditional interpretations have struggled to reconcile these anomalies. According to Bakker's the concept of *presentification* underscores how epic narratives seamlessly merge past events with the current moment of performance, creating a dynamic and immersive temporal flow that obscures the distinction between past and present in the minds of the audience. Furthermore, insights from scholars like Dodds, Snell, and Onians offer perspectives on ancient Greek rationality and consciousness that could help explain these narrative anomalies. Despite this, the temporal and narrative inconsistencies remain challenging to resolve solely through historical and literary analysis.

Recent advancements in consciousness research underscore the significant relationship between time perception and cognitive development. Studies by Piaget, Friedman, Eagleman, Ivry, and others highlight how conceptualization of time evolves and influences human consciousness. Neuroscientific research on the neural correlates of time perception further supports the idea that understanding time is crucial for forming a coherent sense of self. These insights suggest that temporal and cognitive frameworks might have evolved, impacting how narratives were constructed and understood.

Antonio Damasio's evolutionary perspective on consciousness provides valuable insights into how time perception integrates with the development of self-awareness. Damasio endorsed Julian Jaynes's theory, which posits that consciousness emerged in the period between the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* redaction. Jaynes's theory, proposing a transition from a *bicameral mind* to modern consciousness, could offer a novel explanation for the narrative inconsistencies in Od. 11.601-627: the overlapping of temporal planes and the peculiar interaction between Odysseus and Herakles, can be interpreted as reflections of this transitional cognitive state that aligns with a shift from divine-driven actions to self-directed agency. Alongside this, the issue of why Herakles is mourning remains an open question.

Looking forward, while Jaynes' theory offers a valuable perspective, it is important to continue exploring other potential explanations and integrating new findings from neuroscience and cognitive science to deepen our understanding of how ancient Greek literature engaged with concepts of consciousness and temporal perception.

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