

Iliad of the shield forged by Vulcan, is a miniature pictorial encyclopædia of those wonders of the world with which the ancient Greeks were familiar.*

The Homeric cosmography as we see it engraved on the shield of Achilles,

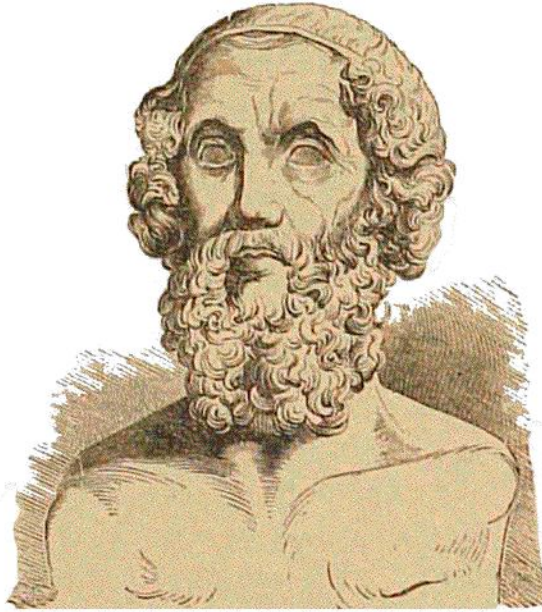


FIG. 2.—HOMER.

represents the Earth as a flattened disc, surrounded everywhere, and in a circular form, by the sea, or rather by the river of Ocean ('Ωκεανός †), which defines the limits of the known world. Above this terrestrial disc is outspread the solid sky, like a dome; a dome supported by two massive pillars, which rest on the shoulders of the god Atlas. Here let me remark that a similar absurdity prevails in the cosmography of several ancient peoples. The Scandinavians balance the earth on nine posts. The Brahmins figure it as propped upon four elephants. But on what foundation do these nine posts and four elephants repose? What Anak of a god can support on his brawny shoulders the burden of the terrestrial mass?

In his "Pluralité des Mondes," FONTENELLE ‡ has given the reins to his witty fancy on the subject of these ancient cosmographical absurdities. Without pausing over his facile caricatures, let us complete our outline of the Homeric geography:—

The solid vault of the heavens is traversed by the stars in chariots of silver, impelled by the rapid clouds. When the sun bursts upon human eyes, he emerges from the ocean on the side of the east; in the evening, he re-plunges, on the west, into the same great river. During the night, borne in a golden car, he re-ascends,

* ["And first a shield he fashioned, vast and strong,
With rich adornment; circled with a rim,
Three-fold, bright-gleaming, whence a silver belt
Depended; of five folds the shield was formed;
And on its surface many a rare design
Of curious art his practised skill had wrought.
Thereon were figured earth, and sky, and sea,
The ever-circling sun, and full-orbed moon,
And all the signs that crown the vault of heaven;
Pleiads and Hyads, and Orion's might,
And Arctos, called the Wain, who wheels on high
His circling course, and on Orion waits;
Sole star that never bathes in the ocean wave."]

Earl of Derby's Translation, vol. ii. pp. 109, 110].

† [There is reason to believe that 'Ωκεανός is not a Greek word, but allied to the Sanskrit roots "ogha" and "ogh."—HUMBOLDT, *Cosmos*, ii., Note 210.]

‡ [Bernard le Bovier de Fontenelle was born at Rouen, February 11, 1657, and died at Paris, 9th January 1757. His "Entretiens sur la Pluralité des Mondes" is now obsolete; but its playful wit renders it agreeable reading. It has been translated into English by Miss Gunning, under the title of "A Week's Conversation on the Plurality of Worlds."]