

## **Text, Orality, Literacy, Tradition, Dictation, Education, and Other Paradigms of Explication in Greek Literary Studies**

**Barry B. Powell**

By now we might hope for some kind of consensus on the genesis of the Homeric poems, but the plot seems as muddled as ever. In the history of Homeric studies we find our truest exemplum of cultural myopia. We don't know what to do with Homer because we think he is just like us. As we change, he changes too. Our present myopia is, in my experience, bound up with a set of terms that mean too many things, or contradictory things, to too many people, creating the illusion that we have grasped something when we haven't. From a longer list of similar terms, I have selected six to discuss in this article: *text*, *orality*, *literacy*, *tradition*, *dictation*, and *education*. I do not hope to present a universal or historical description of how such terms have been used, but to show how they have come to be mixed up with each other in a perplexing chaos, presenting a distorted description of the nature and origin of early Greek literature.

### **Text**

Let us begin by thinking about Homer, who, whatever else, is a text and always has been a text (Fig. 1). Homer is a physical object first, with look and texture and graphemes capable of interpretation. One sometimes hears phrases like "oral text" or similar metaphors, but these I reject out of hand. The Homeric Question is directed to the problem of how this physical object, this text, came into being.

One way of making a text is to take a pen in your hand and inscribe marks on a flexible substance, arranging them into rows according to complex rules of orthography and formal grammar, in expression following classical models that we can expect our socially equal readers to understand and enjoy. The creation of the text lies in the hands of a master of literature, of artistic expression in "words." Alexandrians made literature in



this way, and so did the Romans who copied them. Shakespeare did something similar. In general, people have wanted Homer's texts to have come into being in the same way and at the hands of a similar master. But the oral origins of Homer's verse, now rather well defined, make that conclusion unlikely. How then did *our* text come into being?

Our own conceptual world consists more and more of sounds and images than of abstract markings on a flexible substance, and the word-processor mocks the theory of a fixed, original text. It is not surprising that today some scholars claim a similar model for Homer's text, also said to be ever shifting, refined, drifting in and out of the darkness of cyberspace on the tides of orality. *Text* and *poetry* are supposed to be the same thing. *Writing* and *language* are the same thing too. There never was a Homer, a historical personality, but only a tradition, or there were many "oral texts" of "Homer" taken down repeatedly, whenever someone felt like it.

Facts are meager. Milman Parry died before the computer age, but he pioneered the use of modern technology to discover historical truth. He discovered a new way to make a text. He carried to Yugoslavia the best electronic recording equipment he could, when electronic recording was so primitive that some songs were taken down on aluminum discs, and some even on aluminum wire.<sup>1</sup> In the Milman Parry Collection at Harvard University, Albert Lord once showed me in a drawer several rolls of this wire, hopelessly tangled—I wonder what lost songs this tangled text preserves.

Parry's aluminum discs and wire are just as much a text as a papyrus with graphemes. Each has a material basis—obviously liable to corruption—and a code impressed upon it. In either case the text depends on technological innovation: on the one hand the Greek alphabet inscribed on papyrus, electronic magnetization on the other. All texts are useless without the technology to decode their symbols: the rules of Greek alphabetic writing in the one case and the tape-player on the other.

Parry's field methods were an important part of his argument because he showed how it was possible to make a text out of oral poetry, evidently a contradiction in terms. The singer sings and the scribe records, whether on aluminum discs or wire or by means of graphemes on a flexible substance. Parry experimented with both methods and noticed that the slower, more plodding grapheme method produced a longer and more complex text (except for Stolac songs). It was possible to record a song more than once, and Parry and Lord made deliberate experiments along these lines, including recording the same song after an interval of many years (e.g.,

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<sup>1</sup> See Foley 1988 for the history of oral-formulaic theory.

Lord 1960:115ff.). But Parry's repeated recording of the same song was done for experimental purposes, and cannot be thought to have occurred in the ancient world. Many have wondered what an improbable production the recording of the Homeric texts must have been—the time, the expense, the specific circumstances now lost to us. The recording can have happened but a single time.

Parry combined stylistic evidence from the Homeric poems, the subject of most of his publications, to prove the accuracy of his model for text-making. In Homer's text he isolated features of language inexplicable according to ordinary theories of literary style, like the fixed epithet. Homer's verse was composed in a curious rhythmical language whose units of meaning could be phrases, not words (as if an illiterate might have a concept of "phrase" or "word"). Homer's style is inappropriate to written composition and unknown in written composition. Neither Milman Parry nor Albert Lord was interested, however, in the nature or history of the technology that had made the text of Homer possible, any more than Milman Parry looked into the history of the recording machine. The technology was there and somebody brought it to bear.

Here is the paradox, the conundrum. The very technology of writing that made our text, which may or may not bear any relation to an actual song that Homer sang, is not found in Homer's poetic world, an observation already pressed in ancient times and emphasized by F. A. Wolf in his epoch-making *Prolegomena ad Homerum* of 1795. We cannot believe that Homer has suppressed all reference to writing in order to create "epic distance," a literary ploy making his poetic world seem long ago and far away, in the way that his warriors use bronze weapons exclusively. Bronze weapons are obviously old-fashioned, but no illiterate bard could have understood the historical importance of writing. If Homer had seen writing, the technology that made his *text* possible, he would have talked about it, as he almost does in his story of Bellerophon (*Iliad* 6.157-211) that tells how the king of Corinth sent Bellerophon to his father-in-law bearing a folding tablet with "baneful signs" (*sêmata lugra*). The exception proves the rule: Homer does not understand the reference, which must have come to him with the Eastern story.<sup>2</sup>

The absence of writing from Homer's world is extraordinary and contrary to everything we know about the importance of written documents, especially letters, to advance a narrative in the literature of literate societies. In the pre-Hellenic societies of Egypt and the Near East, written documents and writers of documents appear constantly and play key roles in narrative.

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<sup>2</sup> On Bellephron's tablet, cf. Foley 1999:1-5.

Even Enlil's power over the universe depended on his possession of the mysterious Tablets of Destiny, stolen by the demonic Anzû bird (Dalley 1989:205-7). How could writing and written documents not play a key role, when writing served such a central function in their society? Later details of the saga are happy to refer to writing: the words on the Apple of Discord, the false message by which Palamedes was taken.

The curious ignorance of writing everywhere in the Homeric poems, except in the special case of Bellerophon's tablet, was Wolf's strongest argument that Homer's world was illiterate. Parry, through stylistic analysis and field experimentation, proved Wolf's point, but the two men drew opposite conclusions: Wolf, that Homer was not a historical personality; Parry, that he was. Like Parry's tape-recorder, a new technology came to Greece from outside, in the hands of outsiders—*Phoinikeia grammata*, "Phoenician scratchings"—and accomplished its purpose, the recording of Homer. This technology came to Greece before there was time for news of it to enter the tradition of oral song. Here is one of the strongest reasons for thinking that the adapter, the man who invented the Greek alphabet on the model of Phoenician writing, himself recorded the songs of Homer. There are no tape-recorders in the songs of the *guslar* Avdo Medjedović either.

## Orality

Parry's demonstration that the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were orally composed refocused Homeric studies in a dramatic way, at least in the Anglophone world, and challenged our understanding of archaic Greece. Instead of being a free artist like Vergil (strange thought!), Homer was now considered a *traditional* poet, whose songs are traditional too, passed down orally from time immemorial, continually recomposed in the special rhythmical language whose units of meaning were phrases and not words. Homer, or whoever he was, even knew about the Trojan War fought at the end of the Bronze Age around 1200 BC, just as in this century South Slavic *guslars* knew about the Battle of Kosovo, fought in 1389 CE between the Moslem Turks and the Christian Serbs. Tradition, and its congener the inelegant traditionality, rode in the bosom of orality and could accomplish such feats.

We are speaking of a new dogma. Archaic Greek civilization was an oral, traditional culture, evidently, where poems were *composed*, not *written*, and writing played a limited and auxiliary role. Sometimes poetry was written down, of course, but many oral songs were always transmitted

orally and never written down. On the one hand there is *orality*, Homer's world, which offers certain qualities, and on the other there is the *textual* world of *literacy*, our own world, which offers other qualities that are not necessarily superior. Literacy replaced orality in history, but orality always remains effective. Orality is not a lack or an inferior mode, an absence of something found in literate societies, but a *Ding an sich* with influence by no means primitive. Although *writing* undoubtedly separates modern, civilized, literate societies from primitive, uncivilized, illiterate ones, and may even be the basis for different versions of reality (as some have thought), Parry's demonstration of Homer's orality was the best possible illustration that oral cultures are not inferior to literate ones. What literate poet ever surpassed Homer?

Oral theory agreed, then, with postmodernist hostility to Western civilization's prideful colonialist claim to ascendancy over illiterate, native cultures. Oral theory agreed with anthropological arguments, going back to the German-American anthropologist Franz Boas (1858-1942), that cultures do not evolve and become better (for if they did, some would be better than others). Three thousand years of Greco-Roman literacy enabled complex thought, but did not make the English morally superior to the Zulu. All cultures, oral and literate, stand on an equal moral plane, and oral theory has proved it.

Such points of view are nicely illustrated in the following complaint by Walter Ong, a prominent theorist in oral studies, in a recent issue of *The Times Literary Supplement*. Ong refers to an earlier review in which he was mentioned (1997:17):

Suzanne Reynolds's otherwise highly informative review attributes to me (without any quotations) an interpretation of the relationship between the oral and the textual world which I have never proposed, namely, that "the emergence of literacy necessarily entails the extinction ... of an inferior mode (orality)."

I have never stated that orality is "inferior." In [my book] *Orality and Literacy* [1982] I decry the tendency to identify orality with the "primitive" or "savage" and state that "orality is not despicable. It can produce creations beyond the reach of literates, for example, the *Odyssey*."

... [A]lthough writing does make available thought structures and processes which were unavailable to our purely oral ancestors, writing was long dominated by orality, and it never eliminated orality or made orality "primitive" or inoperable.

The view that Suzanne Reynolds mistakenly attributes to Ong goes back, if unconsciously, to the very experiments launched by Parry and Lord in the central Balkans. Not only did literacy—that is, alphabetic literacy—appear to harm, or destroy, a *guslar's* ability to compose in performance by means of a learned, rhythmical, traditional language, Lord observed, but in such highly literate societies as our own, or even in modern Slavic lands, oral singers do not seem to exist. Literacy, whether a superior mode or not, has killed them off.<sup>3</sup>

Ong's notion that orality continues to be effective after the introduction of writing—he means alphabetic writing—is on the surface set against the Parry-Lord theory, which placed orality on one side of the divide and literacy on the other. Ong is interested in defending the moral equality of illiterate societies, while Lord is thinking about the origin of texts. To Lord, focused on the origin of the Homeric text, the incompatibility of oral and literate modes meant that there can be no *transitional text*, a text that was somehow oral and literate at the same time, because, in the experience of Parry and Lord, texts are created out of the oral tradition by means of dictation. Parry and Lord could not put a pen in the hands of South Slavic *guslari* and expect to get “oral poetry,” so we should not put a pen in Homer's hand either.<sup>4</sup>

In *The Singer Resumes the Tale* (1995), Lord reversed his earlier orthodoxy about the transitional text and agreed that in some conditions true transitional texts can be found. An oral poet learns how to write (alphabetically), and by means of pen and ink fashions a poem that looks like one that was composed in performance and taken down by dictation. Yet such conditions, Lord emphasized (1995:212-37), are unimaginable for the age of Homer. According to Parry and Lord, Homer's poems are dictated texts, taken down a single time at a single place. There was an Ur-text, from which our own texts descend through undoubtedly interesting but mostly invisible peregrinations. Parry and Lord are therefore placed in explicit contradiction to Wolf, who thought that there had been many texts, that there never was an original, and that our texts are the redactions of editors. Wolf thought that Homer's poems had origins similar to those of the Hebrew pentateuch, which certainly is a redacted text, but Parry and Lord rejected that model *in toto*.

Some have thought it unlikely that Homer was recorded by dictation in the early days of the alphabet, although evidence points to it, as if the

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<sup>3</sup> See further Lord 1960:124-38.

<sup>4</sup> On Parry and Lord's theory of the dictated text, see Janko 1990 and 1998.

alphabet required maturation before being put to such ambitious use. But already in the fourteenth century BCE a certain Ilimilku of Shubbani reports that he recorded various myths as they were dictated by the chief priest Attanu-Purliani, both men subsidized by Niqmaddu II, king of Ugarit from c. 1375-1345 BCE (from Coogan 1978:10, 115):

The scribe was Ilimilku from Shubbani;  
the reciter was Attanu-Purliani, the chief priest,  
the chief herdsman;  
the sponsor was Niqmaddu, king of Ugarit, master of Yargub,  
lord of Tharumani.

Jeremiah, of the seventh to sixth centuries BCE, presents a second example of dictation to a scribe writing in archaic Hebrew script, identical in structure to the Ugaritic script of Ilimilku. After Jehoiakim, king of Judah, burned the scroll of Jeremiah because it prophesied the fall of Jerusalem, Jeremiah “took another scroll and gave it to Baruch the scribe, the son of Neriah, who wrote on it at the dictation of Jeremiah all the words of the scroll which Jehoiakim the king of Judah had burned in the fire; and many similar words were added to them” (Jeremiah 36:32). The words of Jeremiah are not what we think of as myths, but the relation between the composer who dictates and the scribe who records is clearly drawn.

## Literacy

Although anxious to defend orality, Ong does concede that *writing* makes possible “thought structures and processes which were unavailable to our purely oral ancestors,” as if writing were a single thing, a monolithic force always bringing the same effects when laid upon a substratum of orality. The bonds between literacy and complex forms of thought were emphasized in well-known studies from the 1960s by Ian Watt and Jack Goody, Eric Havelock, and Marshall McLuhan.<sup>5</sup> Alphabetic literacy, according to these studies, had especially dire effects on orality, making possible rationality, democracy, philosophy, historiography, law, and other dangerous tools of modern civilization. I was a student when these books appeared and remember how many then searched for social and personal

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<sup>5</sup> Goody 1963; Goody and Watt 1963-64; Havelock 1963; McLuhan 1966. See also Street 1984:19-43, 44-65; Robb 1994.

renewal in the preliterate human past: complex thought had brought to the world Marxism and the atomic bomb.

Eric Havelock did not take writing as a monolith, but understood that it was a technology with a complex history. His voice was strong in advocating the alphabet as underlying a new form of rational cognition that had gradually replaced the earlier, fundamentally different orality of Greek culture whence Homer had emerged. But he was also concerned to show how such prealphabetic systems of writing as Mesopotamian logosyllabic cuneiform and the West Semitic writings, including Phoenician, Hebrew, and Aramaic, encouraged different psychological effects and social practices from those among the alphabet-using, reason-loving Greeks. Unfortunately, it is never easy to say just what these different effects are or how one can measure them.

None of these scholars was able to read nonalphabetic writings, and some could not read Greek. Being dependent on secondhand accounts, they were open to exaggeration or understatement. The trouble with tying rationality and science to Greek alphabetic writing is that such a bond, if real, might imply ethical superiority on the premise that science is good for humans whereas magic is not. Still, alphabetic writing does seem to have made possible the refinements of philosophical thought from which modern science grew. No earlier writing did or could have served similar ends. The inventors of the atomic theory of matter were the first possessors of a system of writing whose graphemes have given rise to the theory of the phoneme, the smallest unit of speech that makes a difference in meaning (Fig. 2).

POT  
ROT  
ROOT  
ROOF

Fig. 2. Miracles of the phoneme

The restricted number of atoms, as it were, of spoken language, when recombined create the dazzling variety of the molecules of speech. This is the Greek alphabet, that's how it works. The Greeks even used the same word for an alphabetic sign as for an atomic element: *stoicheion* "something in a row," because the alphabet was learned as a row of graphemes and a row of names, an abecedary (Fig. 3). They imagined that the structure of their writing paralleled the structure of the phenomenal world, according to an unobvious theory that matter consists of a limited

number of discrete particles, invisible but real, which act in combination to produce predictable visible effects, just as phonemes recombine to make different words, which in turn recombine to make units of thought. Although even modern atomic theories do not explain how highly volatile oxygen and highly volatile hydrogen produce highly unvolatile water in combination, neither do the rules of the alphabet explain why “cough” is spelled c-o-u-g-h. Such things just happen and are not taken to vitiate the theory (although they should).



Fig. 3. A miniature amuletic ivory writing board from a tomb in Marsigliana d'Albegna in northern Etruria. The series of letters are identical in form to the alphabet used in Euboea, whence came the earliest Greek settlers in Italy.

I have been interested in evidence that speech is not in fact made up of phonemes, if by speech we mean the stream of intelligible sound proceeding from our mouths. Voice spectographs show how speech is a wave, an undulating continuum (Fig. 4), expanding and contracting but not made of discrete units. If speech is a wave, *the alphabet does not represent it*. Hence, too, linguists have been unable to define a word, except that it is something found in dictionaries with space on either side. The alphabet is a kind of structure that determines the illusion that writing, whose effects so interested Ong and Havelock, does represent speech. The Greek alphabet

did not reveal the secret structure of speech, but defined our illusions about it. The so-called science of linguistics has all along been studying writing, not speech.

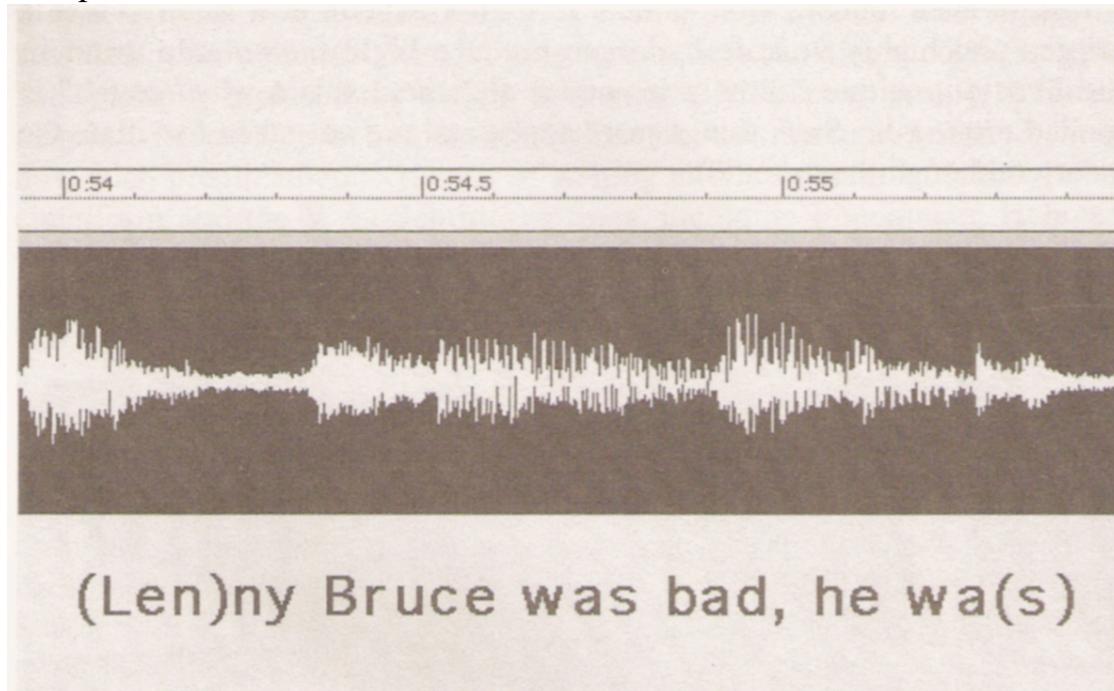


Fig. 4. Snippet from a Bob Dylan song, projected as a voice spectrograph.

Speech is, of course, a form of language, but the distinction between speech and language can be elusive. Let us trace the cause of confusion to Saussure's famous dictum (1983:24), "A language and its written form constitute two separate systems of signs. The sole reason for the existence of the latter is to represent the former." First comes *parole*, then *écriture*. But the human faculty to use and invent language, in spite of its origin in *lingua*, "tongue," is not limited to a modulated stream of symbolic sound issuing from the human throat and its reception by other sense organs. Gestural language among the Indians of the North American plains and sign languages of the deaf prove that language must be a broader category than speech. Language, let us say, is symbolization, an innate human faculty not found in the animal or vegetable kingdoms. Speech, which (until modern tape-recorders) is never material and always ephemeral, is one tool for the expression of this symbol-making faculty. Writing, which is always material and potentially eternal, is another expression. Both tools serve the same human faculty, but one does not represent the other. That is why writing can express forms of thought quite impossible to speech, and why the structure of writing may well be tied to forms of thought. That is why

writing originated independently of speech and to a greater or lesser degree has always remained independent of it.

Clarity about the relation between speech, one form of language, and writing, another form, has been slow to emerge because the entire discussion has been carried on in the Greek alphabet, whose idiosyncratic attention to phonetic verisimilitude, although much exaggerated, has so skewed our notion of the nature of writing and inspired Saussure's influential description in the first place (Pettersson 1996). After all, speech consists of gesture, intonation, facial expression, bodily movement, and other deictic behavior that contributes to the meaning of the utterance. It is only alphabetic writing, which we mistake for speech, that makes us think that such aspects, although semantic, are secondary to speech's phonic aspects. The *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, which we know only through alphabetic versions, do not therefore even theoretically resemble the living experience of Homer's speech, his oral song. They are *texts*—cold, material, abstract graphemes that support a phonic approximation of what was once an oral poem, although not one that anyone ever heard in a traditional context. Orally composed perhaps, the Homeric poems are not oral poems. It is amazing that anyone ever thought so. The dichotomy of literacy versus orality can obscure more than it reveals when we ignore the need to approach writing, alphabetic and otherwise, theoretically and historically. To say that literacy disappeared from Greece around 1200 BCE, then returned around four centuries later, innocently assumes that Linear B was in some important way the same technology as the Greek alphabet, which it certainly was not.

## Tradition

In a recent remarkable book, *The East Face of Helicon* (1998), Martin West has made thoroughgoing, massive, in-depth comparisons between the cuneiform, logosyllabic, literary cultures of Mesopotamia, the syllable- or consonant-writing Western Semites, and Greek alphabetic literary culture. Thirty years earlier, in his edition of Hesiod's *Theogony* (1966), he claimed that Greek literature was a Near Eastern literature, and here he sets out to prove it. Such comparisons between Greek and Semitic intellectual culture go back to the nineteenth century, but have received increased attention in recent times, notably at the hands of the polymathic German scholar Walter Burkert (espec. 1992). Yet West's presentation is uniquely persuasive.

While reading the book, I kept disagreeing with his examples. Just because the ground “drinks” the blood of warriors in Homer and in the Bible does not prove very much.<sup>6</sup> But even if one-half of the hundreds of examples West cites of continuity between Near Eastern and Greek literatures admit of other explanations, so much remains that we cannot doubt his amazing conclusions that during the Greek Archaic Period, from 800-500 BCE, there was an international *koinê* in literary expression with Near Eastern, especially Semitic, literature on the one end and Greek on the other.

Why shouldn't we be shocked that essential elements in the story of Achilles, and even in the story of Odysseus, are not Greek in origin, as West maintains? Their deep values do not appear to be Greek in origin either—the destructive power of anger and the quest for eternal life. Why shouldn't we be shocked to realize that the celebrated Greek pantheon with its high jinks is not Greek either, but Mesopotamian, even in such details as the love-goddess's complaint to the storm-god about how she's treated? Even the names turn out to be the same: the Greek healing god Asclepius, thought once to have been a real man, appears to be a corruption of the Semitic Azugallatu, “great physician,” epithet of the Babylonian healing goddess Gula.

In his classic *The Mycenaean Origin of Greek Mythology* (1932), Martin Nilsson argued that the monarchic Greek pantheon reflected the social world of the monarchic Mycenaean palaces, one of those many details about life in the Bronze Age passed down by oral poets through a vigorous oral tradition until fixed in writing after the eighth century BCE. That argument, too, now looks wrong, because the divine machinery Nilsson wished to explain is a Mesopotamian import, a tradition one thousand years old in the days of Agamemnon and completely non-Greek in origin. The more we impute to the evidently overwhelming cultural power of literate Mesopotamia, Anatolia, and the Levant, the more we wonder what was the Greeks' distinctive contribution, and even who were the Greeks whom we thought we knew so well. The dogma that Greek myth was primary and original, whereas Roman myth was secondary and derivative, appears ill-founded, when the Greeks, like the Romans, stole everything root and branch from elsewhere.<sup>7</sup>

The theory of traditional Greek culture has become something of a problem. We thought that tradition was the burden of oral song, the

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<sup>6</sup> West 1998:236, 575, 578.

<sup>7</sup> For the falseness of this version from the Roman side, see Feeney 1998:47-75.

backbone of orality, leading back through the dangerous Iron Age to the ramparts of Troy and the bard in the fresco of the throne room at Pylos (Fig. 5), or, as some have thought, even to primordial Indo-European rhythmical composition in performance. Such Indo-European survivals now appear exiguous, or imaginary, and irrelevant to the flood of poetic creativity flowing down the Orontes toward the barbarian West.



Fig. 5. Fresco from the throne room at the palace of Pylos. The horseshoe-shaped, goose-headed lyre is similar to the Minoan type, but normally had eight strings. The restored flying dove in front of the singer may in fact be a griffin, according to a suggestion by J. Bennet (personal communication).

Everything we thought was from Greece turns out to be from somewhere else. The way Homer organizes his tale, his elaborate descriptions of objects and scenes, various kinds of scenes, organization through ring composition and chiasmus, even rhetorical tropes like anaphora, West argues, come directly from the East. Somehow such elements became part of the special language of the Greek *aoidos*, the “singer” of tales, passed on and elaborated when these elements proved to

enhance the power of performance. But how did such elements cross from East to West? How did they cross the barriers of language and custom?

Tradition is a complex problem, because our evidence for tradition depends on written documents, but tradition cannot have been restricted to such documents. Homer was an *aoidos*, an oral bard, heir to an ancient tradition of oral verse-making and not beholden to the scribal schools, which in the East were transcendent. In comparing Western literature with Eastern, we are mostly comparing alphabetic, aoidic, dictated documents with nonalphabetic exercises produced in the scribal schools by learned professionals of high social status to impress and educate their students and peers. The Ugaritic Attanu-Purliani, the chief priest who dictated mythic texts to Ilimilku from Shubanni, is unlikely to have been an oral poet. Greek alphabetic texts, by contrast, were made by amateurs unconnected to centers of monarchic empire. Scribal bilingual competence in Sumerian and Akkadian had assured the transmission of non-Semitic Sumerian tales to the Semitic Akkadians—the tales of Gilgamesh are the best-known example (Fig. 6)—but Homer’s stories of Achilles and Odysseus and



Fig. 6. Two eunuchs, on the right, make a record of spoil taken in Chaldea. The eunuch on the far left seems to be dictating the items to be recorded. The eunuch in the middle holds a clay tablet on which he impresses signs, no doubt cuneiform signs adapted to the Akkadian language. The man on the right appears to write on papyrus or leather, presumably West Semitic writing in Aramaic, the lingua franca of the Assyrian empire. Such biliteracy was typical of Near Eastern literacy from the third millennium, when Semitic-speakers adopted Sumerian writing to Akkadian, but continued to learn and use Sumerian lexemes and to study Sumerian documents (author’s photo).

Hesiod's story of the storm-god's war against the dragon of chaos can only have taken place through oral means. We do not think of Homer and Hesiod as reading Ugaritic epic in their studies (Fig. 7).



Fig. 7. A three-fingered bronze lyre-player from Crete, c. 750-700 BCE, who must represent an *aoidos* like Homer. The figure's pierced ears and oversized head are characteristic of Levantine bronze figurines, and some have thought that the figurine may be an import. Epic song, too, seems to have crossed from East to West along the north Syrian coast and in Cyprus. In myth, the musician-king Kinyras, whose name is derived from Semitic *kinnor*, "harp," lived on Cyprus (author's photo).

It is easy to speak of bilingual speakers, not being sure if we mean *biliterate* as well, or instead. But we must place Semitic singer and Greek singer on a continuum to explain the continuity of tradition, and probably the only way to do that is to have a Semitic singer learn the technique of Greek *aoidic* song: composition in performance. I'm not sure how that could have happened, but I do not see how else to explain the overwhelming Semitic or Eastern character and content of Homeric and Hesiodic oral song. The flow of tradition is altogether in one direction.

A thorough bilingualism in an oral milieu, which we desire, must depend on intermarriage and bilingual households, including households whose members were oral singers (cf. West 1997:590-606). Homer tells how Taphians, whoever exactly they were, snatched away the Phoenician mother of Odysseus' faithful servant and swineherd Eumaios (*Odyssey* 15.425-29), who came to live near the court in Ithaca where a singer named Phemios entertained the suitors, and Herodotus begins his history with a tongue-in-cheek report of Greek and Levantine households stealing each other's women. In just such bilingual households, not in any public forum, and certainly not in the scribal schools, tradition passed from East to West.

In the polyglot, racially mixed world of the north Syrian coast with its connections in mainland Greece and Italy, an heir to the tradition of notating dictated mythic texts applied this already ancient method to Greek oral verse. This worked very badly because of such formations as ἀάατος "inviolable," (e.g. *Il.* 15.271), which cried out for graphic notation and inspired the inventor to restructure his model in a way that enabled him to preserve the rhythm of the verse. In this way the alphabet came into being. The need to preserve the powerful rhythm drove the invention of signs for vowels and the revolutionary spelling rule that one group of signs, what we now call consonants, must always be accompanied by a representative from the second group, what we now call vowels. This simple rule drew the divide between East and West and created the illusion that speech is made up of phonemes and that the purpose of writing is to record speech.

In the beginning Greek alphabetic writing was a dedicated technology, designed and used to create, through dictation, texts out of *aidic* song. Within a hundred years of its invention around 800 BCE, the alphabet was turned to other literary—but not practical—purposes. The earliest Greek "law code," from the temple of Apollo at Dreros on Crete, c. 650 BCE, is a stumble-bum chaos of clumsy uncertainties, when compared with the elegance of the oldest Greek inscriptions, orally composed, on pots from the eighth century BCE (Fig. 8).

## Education

We have a tradition, then, which is old and Semitic/Eastern, and it is Greek too, somehow. But oral tradition is never separable from the oral poet. As alphabetic graphemes are a way of talking about speech, tradition is a way of speaking about the past and does not produce anything by itself. Poems are the products of poets who stand within a tradition.  
Albert Lord

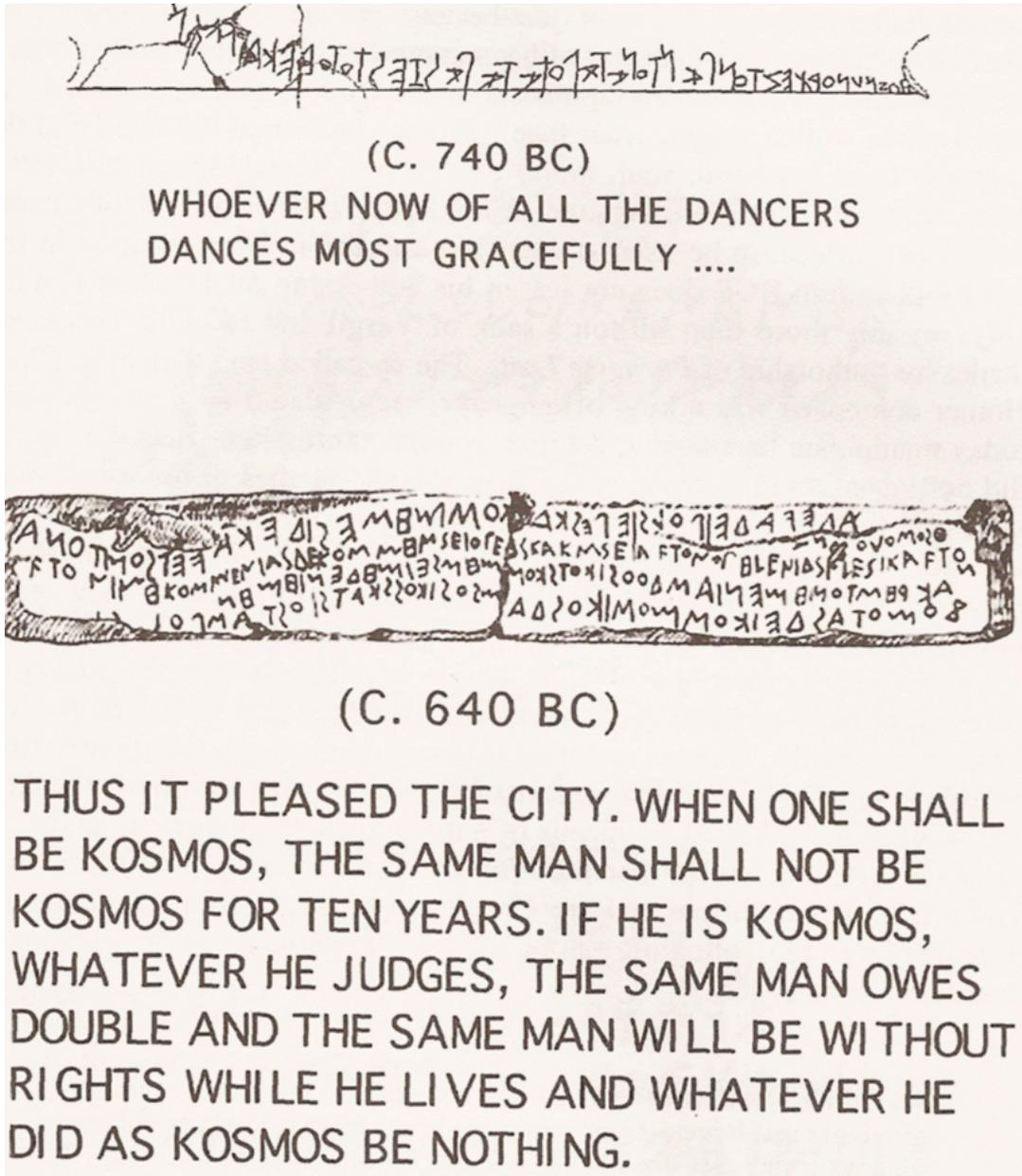


Fig. 8. The Dipylon Oinochoe inscription (c. 740 BCE) and a law from the temple of Apollo at Dreros on Crete (c. 640 BCE). A *kosmos* was a high official in the Cretan state.

liked to say that the poet *was* the tradition (1995:3). Homer was no symbol, as some think, but one of the world's great makers (*poiêtai*) of song. He does not come at the end of an oral tradition, any more than a stone falls into the end of a river, just because phonic aspects of artificially swollen performances of several of his songs were idiosyncratically notated in alphabetic writing in the eighth century BCE. If Homer was not the actual name of that singer, what then? Homer fashioned the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* from his mind, soul, moral genius, and knowledge of humanity, using an inherited poetic language and inherited poetic themes, like every entertainer. Because he used stories first attested in Mesopotamia in the third millennium BCE does not lessen his authorship of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* any more than Milton's sack of Vergil and the Old Testament denies his authorship of *Paradise Lost*. The so-called epic dialect in which Homer composed was a kind of language, manipulated by poets, as poets today manipulate language to achieve original expression. Because Homer did not invent this language, or the structure and themes of his songs, does not mean that the Homeric poems are essentially the product of more than one poet any more than poets in English today are denied originality because they did not invent the English language or because they recast older themes.

Although traditions of song begin who knows when, and go on forever so long as there are singers and listeners, the songs themselves change constantly. Singers and their listeners preserve the tradition; scribes wielding alphabetic technology, or modern recording equipment, take a snapshot of the tradition by means of a disruptive technology. The picture is never the thing itself. The motives of the recorders of tradition do not come from the tradition, and are even opposed to it. The Africanist Jan Vansina says the following about his own experience as a recorder of traditional tales (1985:3):

As a professional fieldworker I was in a class of my own because my activities made it impossible to place me in any existing category. Indeed, for a while this very observation was used to suspect me of witchcraft. It took quite a while before it was accepted that I was collecting traditions because I was interested in the past history of the country and because that was my job, although it was hard to imagine why anyone should invent such a job. I ended up by being regarded as a harmless, friendly lunatic from whom one could hope for some unexpected windfall.

The collectors Parry and Lord were in a similar position, and so were the makers of the texts of early Greek epic poetry, wandering through a

traditional society armed with a newfangled technology. Remarkably, someone in the infancy of alphabetic literacy, in the eighth century BCE, wrote down 26,000 verses of Homer’s song on papyrus in a script that went back and forth across the page without punctuation, word division, capitalization, or diacritical marks, column after column, roll after roll, unintelligible to the eye or the mind until sounded out and heard aloud (Fig. 9).

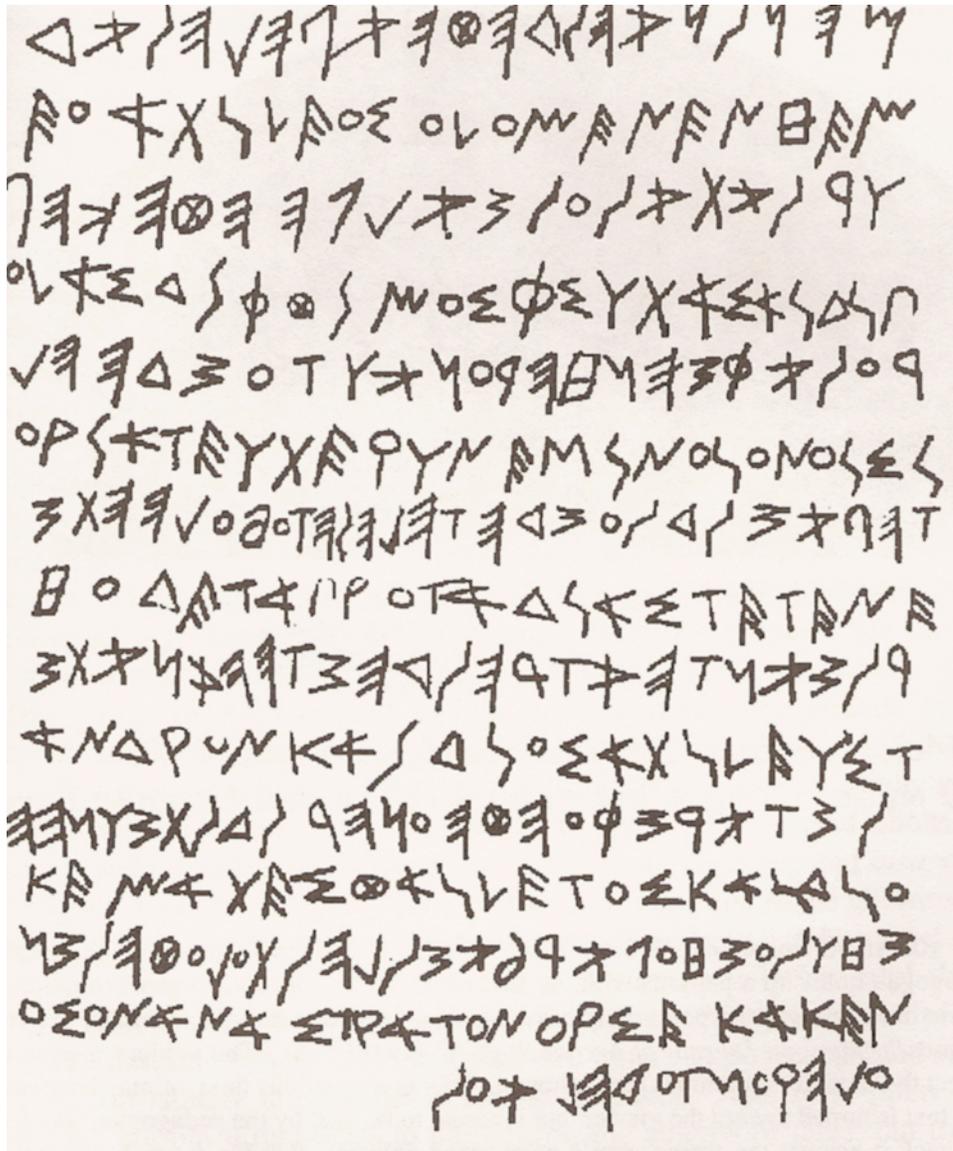


Fig. 9. The first ten lines of the *Iliad* as they might have appeared when recorded in the eighth century BCE.

The arts of writing are not transmitted inadvertently, but through education. An older man teaches a younger one the abecedary, its names and sounds, then gives him a text based on aoidic song to puzzle out and commit to memory. Such was still the basis for Athenian education in the fifth century BCE (Fig. 10), and to some extent such was the basis of my

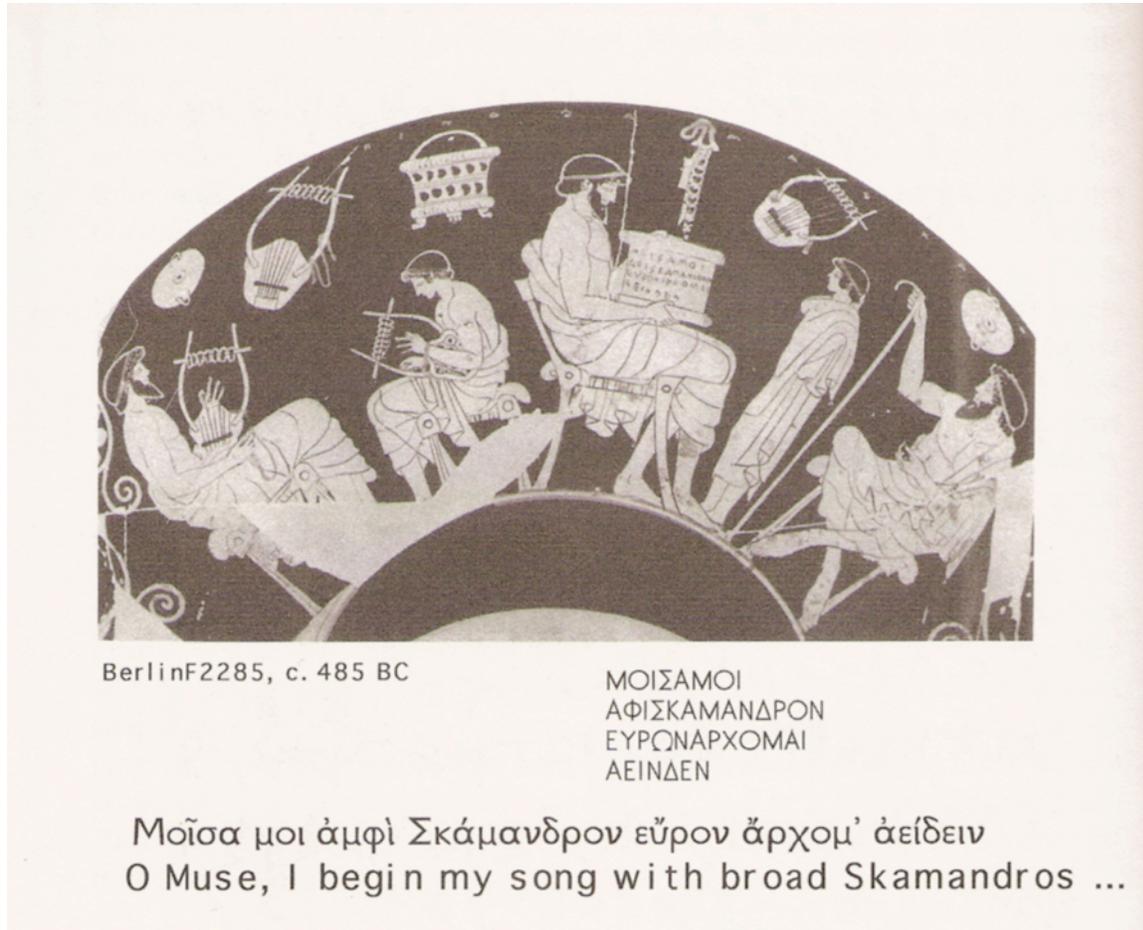


Fig. 10. An Athenian school, c. 485 BCE (Berlin F2285, by Douris). In the center, a pedagogue holds up a papyrus with the first words of an epic song about Troy, now lost (some have thought the poem may have been by Stesichorus: J. D. Beazley, "Hymn to Hermes," *American Journal of Archaeology* 52 [1948]:338). The evident misspellings reflect the flexible, sometimes hyperphonic orthography of this time, or may be mistakes. The text is turned toward the viewer, but is meant to be read by the pedagogue, who seems to check it against the young man's memorized delivery. On the far right, an old man watches. In the lefthand scene, the same boy practices his lyre before the pedagogue. Hanging from the wall are kylixes, lyres, a basket for papyri, and a flute-case. Along the top edge is inscribed **ΗΙΠΠΟΔΑΜΑΣ ΚΑΛΟΣ**, "Hip[p]odamas is beautiful."

own education. We do not know when the Greek tradition of composition-in-performance by means of the special epic language ended, but perhaps as late as the fifth century BCE.<sup>8</sup> The ending of aoidic composition does seem to accompany the profound cultural changes brought about by the revolutionary alphabetic writing.

Education created a class of literati probably not distinguishable from what we think of as the Greek aristocracy. By Eastern standards, such aristocrats were pathetic amateurs in the game of class distinction; the impoverished and ill-organized Greeks could not afford the luxury of their own scribal class. By the seventh century BCE, by the times of Archilochus, the literati had turned away from creating poetic texts by notating the phonic aspects of aoidic song and begun to create poetry in writing, just as had their Near Eastern predecessors more than one thousand years before. But the Greek literati, the amorphous ruling class who had time and motive for idle pursuits, did not serve the political and religious needs of the state, nor did they wish to inform, admonish, or amuse other scribes. They served themselves and their own class interests and sought to gain status by entertaining successfully in the all-male symposium, a principal context for Greek intellectual culture in the archaic period.

When in the backward conditions of archaic Greece an *aristos* deciphered such a text, he could recover, and recite, the wisdom and beauty of Homer or Hesiod or Archilochus. Homer parodies this context for song in his description of the suitors who feast, whore, and hear song in the house of Odysseus; there, of course, it is genuine aoidic song, not memorized reperformance of aoidic song. But the symposia are natural settings for political conspiracy, and so were the suitors conspirators. The written songs of Alcaeus and similar *poiêtai* made their rounds in the symposia, and some lines have even come down to us.

The unique ability of alphabetic writing to inform its interpreter of the approximate sounds of human speech through the fiction of phonemic analysis made possible the outrageous locutions, neologisms, and *bizarrerie* that characterize Greek archaic song and are still vigorous in the choruses of Greek tragedy. With its bewildering rhythms wedded to unknown dance steps, choral lyric cannot have existed as we know it before alphabetic writing. Such baroque expression directly reflects the exuberance of the discovery that one can recombine alphabetic letters in unprecedented ways to create previously unimaginable forms of speech. The lyric poets and tragedians are not direct heirs to the *aoidoi*, the singers of tales, but to the

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<sup>8</sup> Janko (1982:133) thinks the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes* was created in writing, although it has an “oral foundation” (149).

men who made texts on the basis of aoidic songs. The lyric poets echo Homer not because they are “oral-derived,” but because their makers, *poiêtai*, the high-born literati, have been educated in the texts of Homer and other hexametric poets. The first thing such an education teaches is that poetic expression is distant from vernacular speech, and so Greek poetry always was.

### Summary and Conclusions

All Greek festivals honored gods and spirits. There animals were killed and eaten and wine was drunk. Song summoned the god and entertained the people—at first aoidic song, then memorized performances of dictated aoidic texts (for example the Homeric hymns) and memorized performances of new kinds of texts, created in writing (for example, choral song). Men called *rhapsodes* specialized in the memorized reperformance of such dictated aoidic texts. Famed for the power of their voice, histrionic behavior, and willingness to expound on texts they had memorized, rhapsodes were the first actors and the first literary critics. Philosophy owed a great deal to the rhapsodes and carried forth speculation about the meaning of aoidic texts by means of the same technology that made aoidic texts possible.

The rhapsodes were always schoolboys, without connection to the ancient *aoidoi*, to Homer or Hesiod. Rhapsodes were never musicians, whereas *aoidoi* were always musicians. Rhapsodes chanted with a stick, as shown in Fig. 11, their name, properly derived from *rhabdos*, “staff”: they were the “staff-singers.” In Greek festivals, notably the Panathenaea that holds such importance for the history of the Homeric texts, the *rhapsoidos* (“staff-singer”) (Hdt. 1.23), *kitharoidos* (“cithara-singer”), and performer of *auloidia* (“flute-singing”) competed for awards, each named from the implement with which he accompanied song. Playfully derived from *rhapto*, “sewn,” as early as Pindar’s *rhapton epeon aoidoi* (N. 2.2), “singers of stitched words,”<sup>9</sup> the false etymology encouraged F. A. Wolf and later Homeric analysts in the view that Homer was only a symbol, his poems “stitched” together by editors from separate preexisting lays. Even

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<sup>9</sup> The scholia to this passage, of uncertain origin and date (Hes. Fr. 357 MW), employs the same metaphor in reference to the legendary contest between Homer and Hesiod: ἐν Δήλῳ τότε πρῶτον ἐγὼ καὶ Ὅμηρος ἀοιδοῖ, μέλομεν, ἐν νεαροῖς ὕμνοις ῥάψαντες ἀοιδίην; “On Delos then I and Homer sang, *aoidoi* both, stitching song in fresh hymns.”

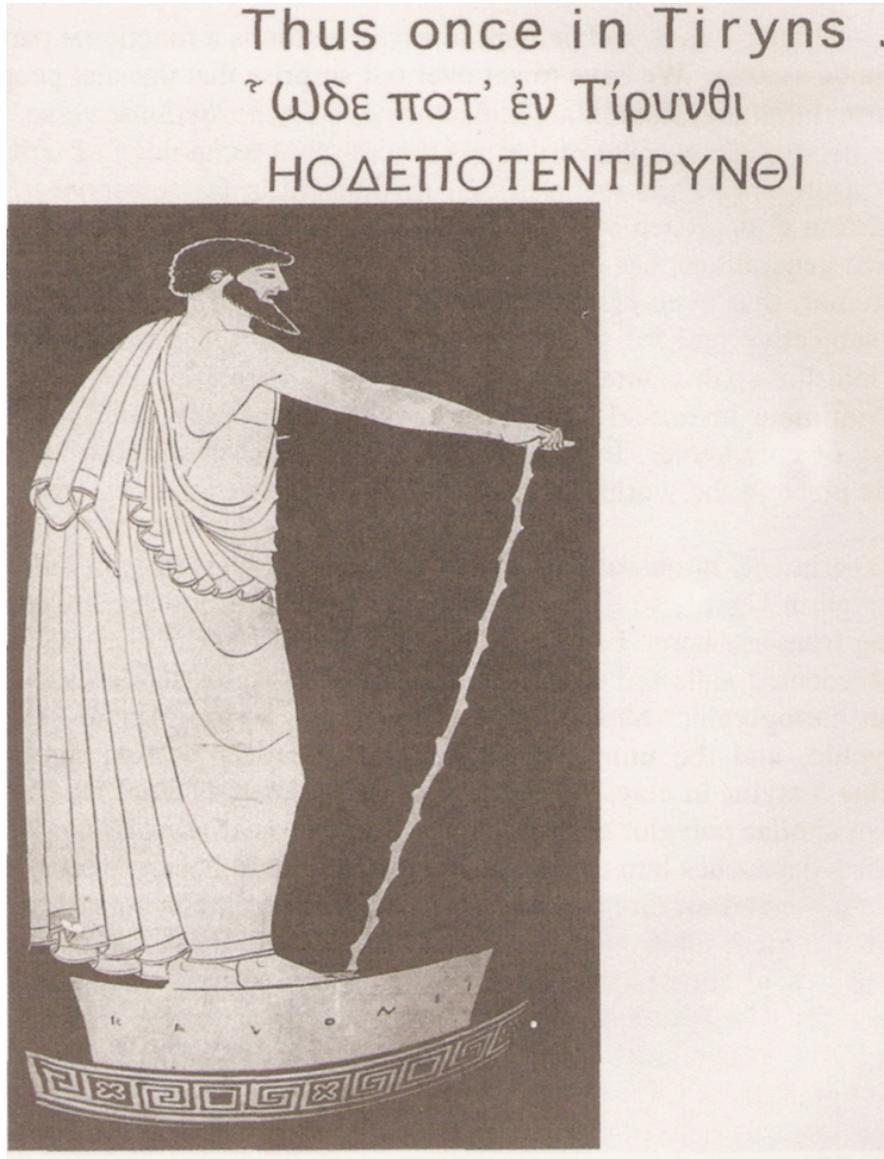


Fig. 11. A rhapsode declaims from a low platform (on which is painted ΚΑΛΟΣ ΕΙ ["You are beautiful"], the beginning of a hexametric poem, perhaps on Herakles). The words, invisible in the photo, are shown as a continuous stream pouring from his mouth as he leans on his staff (ῥάβδος), from which ῥαψωθός, "staff-singer," probably derived.

in modern times the etymology has encouraged theories about the "stitching together" of Milman Parryesque traditional phrases and lines, but the *aoidoi* composed in performance, whereas the rhapsodes were members of the literati in good standing.

Where does rhythmic speech come from? Rhythm is implicit in speech, but when rhythm is regularized and becomes predictable, that is

poetry. In Homer's case, and perhaps always, rhythm is a functional part of the semantic system. We have to get over our surprise that unusual people, with unusual training, can tell a nonmemorized story in rhythmic verse, but we have also to take account of the fact that the first technology of writing capable of preserving the realia of that rhythm did in fact preserve it. A disinclination to approach such problems historically, and a preference for ill-defined generalities, has created the odd impression that little is known about Homer, that even his date can be bandied about according to the critic's subjective feel for what is going on. Recent efforts to downdate Homer into the sixth century BCE proceed as if there were not from the first an intimate historical relation between alphabetic writing and the recording of epic verse. In reality, we know a good deal about Homer, about his place in the world, and about how his poems were recorded and used.

Experiments in notating poetry by dictation reach back into the Late Bronze Age in Ugarit, so the unusual Greek success cannot be viewed as appearing from nowhere. Excavators of Bronze Age Ugarit (Fig. 12) found an unprecedented *mélange* of scripts and languages: tablets side by side in Egyptian hieroglyphic, Mesopotamian cuneiform, Cypro-Minoan, Hittite hieroglyphic, and the unique Ugaritic West Semitic writing made by impressing a stylus in clay. The Greek alphabet emerges from what must have been similar polyglot environs in the later but nearby Al Mina, where the Orontes debauches into the Mediterranean, where Euboean Greeks, who established the earliest Greek colony in Italy, had an emporium. Hesiod's song about a great monster that threatened the world must come directly from here, where Hittites lived side by side with Semites in the vigorous late Iron Age. The Hittite Song of Ubelluri is the best parallel to Hesiod's story of Zeus' war against the monster Typhon, which according to later sources (Apollodorus 1.49) took place beneath Mount Casius on the Orontes plain, the very gap between the Taurus range to the north and the Lebanon ranges to the south through which the intellectual culture of the ancient East poured into the provincial Mediterranean.

Homer lived in this Euboean circle, presumably on Euboea itself (Fig. 13), where his poems may have been recorded. In his *Odyssey* he celebrated dangerous sea-travel to the far West where Euboeans founded the first Greek colonies. Achilles, that famous hero from Phthia in southern Thessaly, was born just across the straits from the northern tip of Euboea. The expedition to Troy assembled at Aulis, the Euboean port for overseas embarkation. Some small portion of Homer's songs may go back to the Greek Bronze Age, perhaps the story of an Achaean campaign, but the central tradition appears to come from abroad. The somewhat later, but

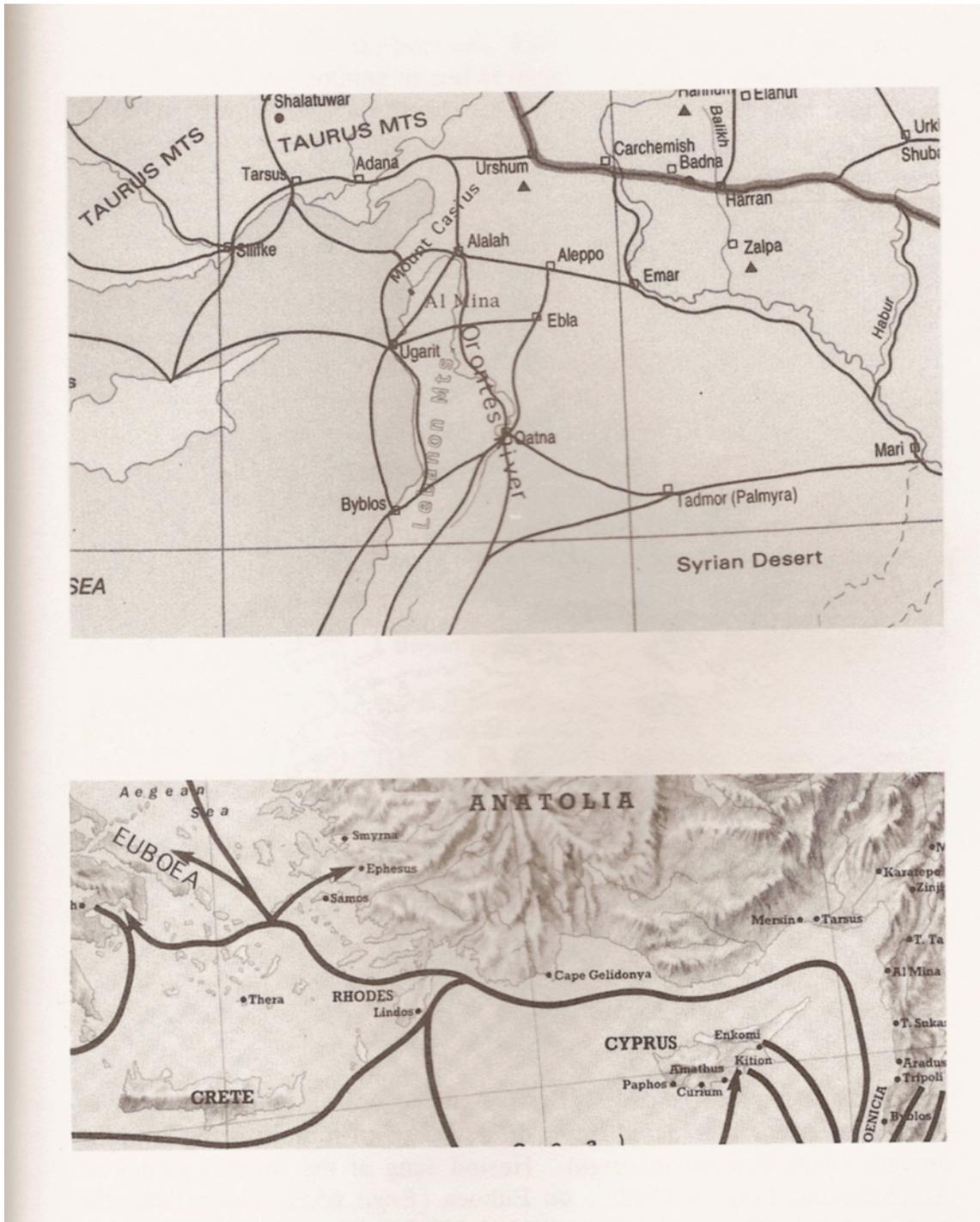


Fig. 12. Trade routes, east and west.



Fig. 13.

very early, Hesiod depended on Eastern cosmogonical mythical narratives and, in his poem *Works and Days*, on traditions of moral instruction long recognized as Eastern in origin. Hesiod sang at the funeral games of Amphidamas, king of Chalcis on Euboea (*Erga* 655), where lived the earliest alphabet-possessors (Powell 1991:181-86).

The unnecessary confusions that surround Homeric studies today reflect the inadequacy of badly used critical categories, words, and phrases that betray more than they explain. The contrast of orality and literacy is

especially treacherous because literacy is many things and its absence— orality—nothing in and of itself. Literacy for the Egyptians is so different from literacy for the alphabetic Greeks that we are not sure we are talking about a related technology. It disfigures our understanding to speak as if literacy in Egypt and in Montana were somehow comparable, and in either case opposed to an orality held to illuminate the Homeric Question. In the study of the history of writing we find our best clues to understanding the history of Greek literature and the historical forces that lay behind the creation of the Homeric epics and other texts of the Greek archaic age.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> My thanks to Silvia Montiglio for many helpful suggestions. Fig. 1, Wace and Stubbings 1962:plate 3; Fig. 3, Guarducci 1967:Fig. 89; Fig. 5, Christopoulos 1974:337; Fig. 7, Powell 1991:58; Fig. 8, Guarducci 1967:Fig. 59a; Fig. 10, Christopoulos and Kakrides 1986:vol. 1., Fig. 32; Fig. 11, Christopoulos and Kakrides 1986:Fig. 33.

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