

Part I

Background

The Philologist's Homer

Philologists are “lovers of language” and everything about language interests them, but not language as a universally human faculty – linguists do that. Classical philologists are interested specifically in the Greek and Latin languages, or what we can infer about them from the vast number of written pages that survive. The philologist easily forgets that we know nothing directly about the “Greek” or “Latin” languages, however, but are always working with a representation in writing based on them. Writing is a system of conventional symbolic reference, and not a scientific means of representing speech. The distance between writing and speech is therefore very great, as anyone knows who studies French, then travels to Paris.

Greek and Latin speech do not survive, then, but *texts* survive, a Latin word that means “something woven.” Many misunderstand Homer in failing to remember that Homer is a text and that texts are in code; speech, by contrast, is not in code (although it may *be* code). Texts are potentially eternal; speech is ephemeral. Texts are material and liable to corruption, distortion, and error; speech is immaterial and disappears immediately. Homer died long ago, but his texts will live forever.

Where did Homer's texts come from? More than anything the philologist would like to answer this question.

What is a Homeric Text?

Texts of the Homeric poems are easy to find, in print constantly since the first printed edition in Florence in 1488. Because it is a material thing, a text has a certain appearance; not only the texture and color of the paper or leather, but also the conventions by which the signs are

formed. Early printed editions were set in typefaces made to imitate handwriting in Byzantine manuscripts, an orthographic system (= “way of writing”) much changed since ancient times, with many abbreviations and ligatures in which more than one letter is combined into a single sign. Certainly Plato could not have read the first printed text of Homer, nor can a modern scholar without special training, even a professor who has spent an entire lifetime teaching Greek.

In the nineteenth century modern typefaces and orthographic conventions replaced typographic conventions based on manuscripts handwritten in Byzantium before the invention of printing, but in no sense did such modern conventions attempt to recreate the actual appearance, or material nature, of an ancient text of Homer. For example, the forms of the Greek characters in T. W. Allen’s standard Oxford Classical Text, first published in 1902, imitate the admirable but entirely modern Greek handwriting of Richard Porson (1759–1808), a Cambridge don important in early modern textual criticism. Complete with lower- and upper-case characters, accents, breathing marks, dieresis, punctuation, word division, and paragraph division, such Greek seems normal to anyone who studies Greek, let us say, at Oxford or the University of Wisconsin today. Here is what the text of the *Iliad* 1.1–7 from the Loeb Classical Library looks like:

μῆνιν ἄειδε θεὰ Πηληϊάδεω Ἀχιλῆος
οὐλομένην, ἣ μυρὶ’ Ἀχαιοῖς ἄλγε’ ἔθηκε,
πολλὰς δ’ ἰφθίμους ψυχὰς Ἄϊδι προΐαψεν
ἡρώων, αὐτοὺς δὲ ἐλώρια τεῦχε κύνεσσιν
οἰωνοῖσί τε πᾶσι, Διὸς δ’ ἐτελείετο βουλή,
ἐξ οὗ δὴ τὰ πρῶτα διαστήτην ἐρίσαντε
Ἄτρεΐδης τε ἄναξ ἀνδρῶν καὶ δῖος Ἀχιλλεύς.

If you study Greek today, and take a course in Homer, you will expect to translate such a version. You are reading “the poems of Homer,” you think, but in fact the orthography is a hodgepodge that never existed before the nineteenth century. A full accentual system, only sometimes semantic, does not appear until around AD 1000 in Greek writing and is never used consistently. The distinction between upper case and lower case is medieval. Porson’s internal sigma is drawn σ, but in the Classical Period the sigma was a vertical zigzag Σ (hence our “S”) and after the Alexandrian Period always a half-moon shape C (the “lunate sigma”); the shape σ appears to be Porson’s invention. The dieresis, or two

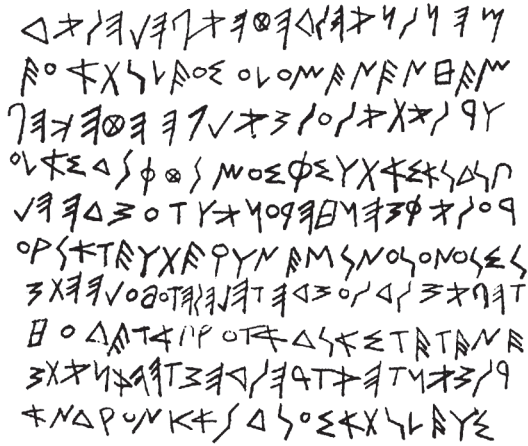


Figure 1 Reconstruction of the first five lines of the *Iliad* in archaic script, written right to left, left to right (after Powell 1991: fig. 7)

horizontal dots to indicate that vowels are pronounced separately (e.g., *προΐαψεν*), is a convention of recent printing. Periods and commas are modern, as is word division, unknown in classical Greek.

The Oxford Classical Text would have mystified Thucydides or Plato just as much as the first printed text. The much earlier (we might say, original) text of Homer would have puzzled them just as much, which seems to have looked something like figure 1. The direction of reading switches back and forth from right to left, then left to right (called *boustrophêdon* writing, “as the ox turns”). In this earliest form of Greek writing, as we reconstruct it from meager inscriptions, there is no distinction between *omicron* = short *ö* and *omega* = long *ō* or between *epsilon* = short *ĕ* and *êta* = long *ē*, and doubled consonants are written as single consonants. There are no word divisions, or upper- and lower-case letters, or diacritical marks like accents, or capitals of any kind.

In reading such a text the exchange of meaning from the material object to the human mind takes place in a different way from when we read Homer in Porsonian Greek orthography, or in English translation. The philologist is keenly interested in how this might have worked. Apparently the Greek reader of the eighth century BC was decoding his writing *by the ear*. For this reason the ancient Greek felt no need for word divisions, line divisions, diacritical marks, paragraph markers, or quotation marks because to him (and very occasionally her) the signs

represented a continuous stream of sounds. A thousand years after Homer the Greeks still did not divide their words. (In Latin, words were divided from the earliest times, but by no means always.)

When we read Greek (or English), by contrast, we decode the text *by the eye*. We are deeply concerned where one word begins and another ends and whether it is *epsilon* or *êta*. The appearance of our texts is semantic, carries meaning, as when a capital letter says “A sentence begins here” or a period says “A sentence ends here” or a space says “The word ends here.” Philologists write articles for or against *êta* = long \bar{e} instead of *epsilon* = short \check{e} as the correct reading, but for 300 years after the alphabet’s invention no consistent distinction was made between the representation of long and short e. Our text of Homer is directly descended from an ancient Greek text, yes, but the text works for us in a different way.

When modern philologists attempt to recover as closely as possible an original text of Homer, as editors claim, they never mean that they are going to reconstruct an original text, one that Homer might have recognized. Rather, they present an interpretation of how an original text might be construed according to modern rules by which ancient texts are explained. What appears to be *orthography* in a modern text of Homer, “the way something is written,” is really editorial comment on meaning and syntax. If editors gave us Homer as Homer really was, no one could read it.

The Homeric Question

Still, the philologist’s Homer is always the text of Homer, however he might inscribe it. Investigation into the origin of this hypothetical physical object, this text, is the famous “Homeric Question” (from Latin *quaestio*, “investigation”), a central topic in the humanities for over 200 years. When did this text come into being? Where and why? How and by whom? What did it look like? If we only knew where the Homeric poems came from, we would know where we come from, or big parts of us. We are Homer’s cultural children.

One way to find the source of something, its origin, is to follow backward, as if going upstream until you find where the water first flows. In physics this source would be the beginning of the universe, but in Homeric studies that spring would be the very first text of Homer. Sometimes people think there must have been “many” first texts, but

the variations in surviving versions of our Homer are so tiny that there can never have been more than one first text, the one we are looking for. Let us see what happens when we travel upstream, from now until then.

Our surviving texts are, of course, not very old. The oldest surviving complete text of the *Iliad* is from about AD 925, a beautiful Byzantine manuscript inscribed on vellum. Kept in Venice, it is called the *Venetus A*. Vellum, also called parchment (from the city of Pergamum in Asia Minor where it may have been invented), is a beautiful and sturdy but very expensive basis for a written document. The *Venetus A* was an object of very high material value when it was made.¹

Like a modern book, the *Venetus* is made of sewn-bound pages, a form of manuscript we call a codex. Modern books are codices, though the paper has been folded many times into “signatures” before being sewn, then cut at the edges. The codex was invented in the second or third century AD. Earlier texts, including texts of Homer, were not codices, but rolls made of papyrus, in Latin called *volumina*, our “volume.” In Greek the word for papyrus is *byblos*, the name of a Near Eastern port from where or from near where came the papyrus that made Homer’s poems possible. The 24 “books” of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are really papyrus rolls, the amount that fit conveniently onto a roll. The Homeric poems are texts and their original basis was the papyrus roll.

Side by side with papyrus, the Greeks and Romans wrote notes and composed long works on tablets, usually of wood, hinged at the back with a low depression filled with wax into which the writer would impress the characters. The single mention in all of Homer to writing refers to just such a tablet (*Il.* 6.168, about which more later). Probably most written composition, as we think of it, was done on such ephemeral tablets, although the immensely long Homeric texts must have begun their life directly on papyrus. Most Greek literature survives because at some point what was written on a tablet was transferred to papyrus, an astonishingly durable and transportable substance.

The codex enabled the reader to look things up by paging through the text, as we do today, whereas it was difficult to look something up in a roll. The format of the codex was a kind of barrier between ancient and modern literatures. Unless a work was transferred from papyrus roll to codex in the early Christian centuries, and so leaped the barrier of a changed format, it was lost, as for example was the entire corpus of the obscure Greek lyric poets, little read in the early Christian centuries, including Sappho and Alcaeus (mostly only tiny specks survive on actual

papyrus found in Egypt). Perhaps today we experience a similar disjunction between the preservation of information on hard copy and in electronic files, when much is being transferred but much is not. By the time Homer was transferred from roll to codex in the second or third century AD a standard text had been established that we call the “vulgate” or “common” text. Deviations between different manuscripts are small, and there is a fixed number of lines, as far as we can tell. The vulgate of the first few centuries AD is virtually our modern text, if you allow for modern developments in orthography.

Vellum’s greater strength (along with its inordinate cost) allowed for a larger page than was possible for a papyrus roll, and the generous margins of the extraordinary *Venetus A* are covered with commentary written in a medieval script called minuscule, the ancestor of our “small letters,” as opposed to the “capital letters” in which all Greek manuscripts, including Homer, were until then written. The small medieval script and the large margins allowed scribes to record in the *Venetus A* excerpts taken from scholars who worked in the library of Alexandria in Egypt, founded by the energetic Ptolemy II (285–246 BC), son of Alexander’s general, as part of his “temple to the muses,” the *Museion*. Called *scholia*, these notes offer views on every conceivable topic pertaining to the Homeric poems. Study of the scholia is our only means for reconstructing what Alexandrian scholars of the second and third centuries BC thought about Homeric problems.

Somehow Alexandrian scholars stabilized and regularized the text of Homer, in fact created the vulgate later transferred from papyrus to codex. The original works of Alexandrian scholars are lost, but we may infer their views from the scholia, although the layers of recomposition in the scholia make it impossible to be certain which scholar thought what. Of course, the Alexandrians lived hundreds of years after Homer and had no direct knowledge about him or the origins of his text. The earliest commentator was Zenodotus of Ephesus (third century BC), followed by Aristophanes of Byzantium (ca. 257–180 BC) and his student Aristarchus of Samothrace (ca. 217–145 BC), and in the first century BC the formidable “bronze-gutted” Didymus, said to have written 3,500 books. Philologists would like to work their way back all the way to the text that Homer himself in some way created, but we must admit that we have almost no evidence whatever for the condition of the text earlier than the Alexandrian editors.

Our best evidence for the problems the Alexandrians faced comes from the many fragments of Homer’s poems that survive on papyrus

found in Egypt (mostly on mummy wrappings for sacred crocodiles), more fragments than from any other author, and two or three times as many fragments from the *Iliad* as from the *Odyssey*. In these fragments there sometimes appear “wild lines” not found in the vulgate that almost always repeat a line or lines found elsewhere or are slight variations of lines found elsewhere. The wild lines seem to have been scribal errors rather than attempts to flesh out, add to, or change the meaning of the text. The wild lines do not represent multiple original versions, then, but are textual corruptions that depend on scribal behavior. Mainly the Alexandrians seem to have removed the wild lines. Wishing to “purify” the text from “false” accretions, they invented several signs still used today, including the *obelus*, a sort of cross in the margin (†) to designate a line suspicious for some reason. There are therefore no collateral lines of descent for the text of Homer, as there are, for example, of the medieval *Chanson de Roland* (“Song of Roland”), which existed in more than one original version. By the first century AD the wild lines have disappeared from the papyrus fragments, as if the authority of an edition produced by the Mouseion had replaced earlier haphazard versions. Perhaps the book trade depended on royal labor or favor; the Mouseion produced the official version and its authority quickly prevailed. Most scholars think that the Alexandrians created the division of the poems into 24 rolls each, although occasional arguments are made for an earlier division.

We have abundant papyrus fragments from Egypt, the earliest being of the third century BC, but before this time there is little direct evidence about what the text might have been like. Quotations by such writers as Plato often differ from the vulgate, but Plato is quoting from memory in a roughshod manner. What is the earliest evidence that the texts of Homer even existed? Herodotus first mentions “rhapsodes” in connection with Sicyon of about 570 BC. Homer must be earlier than that, because rhapsodic performance was not composition but based on memorization of a written, fixed text. The iconoclastic, monotheistic Xenophanes (ca. 560–478 BC) of Colophon, a Greek colony on the coast of Asia Minor, deplors Homer’s immoral polytheism: “Homer and Hesiod have ascribed to the gods all that is reproach and blame in the world of men, stealing, and adultery, and deception” (frag. 10 Diehls-Kranz), proving Homer’s prominence in Greek education as early as the sixth century BC as an influence to be resisted. The *Homeric Hymn to Apollo*, probably in its present form from a performance on Chios in 522 BC under the sponsorship of Polycrates of Samos, claims to

be by “the blind man of Chios,” taken to refer to Homer (the myth of Homer’s blindness comes from the blind poet Demodocus in the *Odyssey*). The Hymn is not by Homer, but its boastful claim proves again Homer’s classic status in the sixth century BC. Certainly full texts of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* existed then, according to reports that Hipparchus, the son of Pisistratus (605?–527 BC), tyrant of Athens, instituted a definite order in the presentation of the episodes in the poems at the reformed Athenian patriotic festival of the Panathenaea (more on this topic later). The archaic poet Callinus from Asia Minor seems to be our earliest certain outside reference to Homer, in the first half of the seventh century BC. Callinus refers to the *Thebais*, about the war against Thebes, as a poem by Homer (the poem, of uncertain authorship, is lost). By now we are only 150 years from the date of the invention of the Greek alphabet, which made Homer possible, around 800 BC.

Bellerophon’s Tablet: The Arguments of F. A. Wolf

Because the philologist’s Homer is the text of Homer, and because the text consists of symbolic markings on a material substance, the Homeric Question is tied to the history of writing. Already in the first century AD Joseph ben Matthias, or Josephus, Jewish general and author of *History of the Jewish War* (AD 75–9), noticed the relevance of writing to the Homeric Question. In an essay *Against Apion* he attacked a Greek named Apion who had challenged the antiquity of the Jews. But the Greeks themselves, complains Josephus, are only a recent people, who had not even learned writing until very late:

They say that even Homer did not leave behind his poems in writing, but that they were transmitted by memorization and put together out of the songs, and that therefore they contain many inconsistencies. (Josephus, *Against Apion*, 1.2.12)

Because the Greeks were late-comers to writing, Josephus goes on, Homer’s very long songs could not have come into existence as we have them. They must be made up of shorter, memorized poems, later written down, and then assembled into the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.

Josephus gave no evidence for his views and had none. Only modern scholarship has made possible an accurate dating of the invention of the Greek alphabet and thus an accurate “time after which” (*terminus post*

quem) the texts of the Homeric poems could have come into being. European scholars of the eighteenth century had no good evidence to date the origin of the Greek alphabet, but a German scholar (writing in Latin) named Friedrich A. Wolf (1759–1824) argued the same position as Josephus with a vigor and brilliance that has influenced all subsequent Homeric scholarship. Basing his model of analysis on contemporary theories about the origin of the Hebrew Bible through editorial redaction of preexisting manuscripts, Wolf published in 1795 a complex theory about the origin of the Homeric poems in a book called *Prolegomena ad Homerum I*. The *Prolegomena* was intended to precede a critical edition of the text of Homer, but the edition never appeared. Wolf addressed his explanation to the conundrum that whereas Homer exists in writing, descriptions of writing do not seem to appear in his poems:

The word *book* is nowhere, *writing* is nowhere, *reading* is nowhere, *letters* are nowhere; nothing in so many thousands of verses is arranged for reading, everything for hearing; there are no pacts or treaties except face to face; there is no source of report for old times except memory and rumor and monuments without writing; from that comes the diligent and, in the *Iliad*, strenuously repeated invocations of the Muses, the goddesses of memory; there is no inscription on the pillars and tombs that are sometimes mentioned; there is no other inscription of any kind; there is no coin or fabricated money; there is no use of writing in domestic matters or trade; there are no maps; finally there are no letter carriers and no letters.²

We can discount the single apparent exception in Book 6 of the *Iliad*, Wolf argued, where King Proetus of Corinth sends his guest Bellerophon, falsely accused by the queen, to the king's uncle across the sea in Lycia. He gives Bellerophon a folded tablet with “baneful signs” (*sēmata lugra*) (*Il.* 6.178) – presumably the message “Kill the bearer!” As the story continues, King Proetus' uncle could not himself kill his guest–friend Bellerophon because that would be a terrible crime against *xenia*, the customs regulating host and guest. Instead, he sends him to fight the dread Chimera.

“Bellerophon's tablet” carries weight in every discussion of the problem of Homer and writing up to this day. Wolf denies that Homer referred to writing in this passage, because in ordinary usage *sēmata* (“signs”), the word that Homer uses for the marks on the folded tablet, in later Greek never designates characters in writing, which are called *grammata* (“scratchings”). Furthermore, Wolf insisted, in good Greek

one never “shows” (*deixai*) writing to someone, as Homer reports. Homer’s *sēmata* were therefore symbols not attached to human speech. They are like the *sēmata* in another Homeric passage, where the Achaean heroes make *sēmata* on lots and shake them in a helmet to decide who will fight Hector (*Il.* 7.175ff.). When a lot flies out, the herald does not know what the *sēma* means but must walk down the line until its maker recognizes the *sēma*. Unspoken is Wolf’s assumption that “writing” requires a direct relation between graphic symbols and human speech.

We now think of “writing” as being a broader category, being of two kinds, one referring to elements of human speech, or *lexigraphy*, and one communicating in other ways, or *semasiography*. The writing in this book is mostly lexigraphy. The signs 1, 2, 3 are semasiography because they have meaning but do not designate necessary elements in human speech; they are pronounced differently in every language. The Greek alphabet is lexigraphy and icons on a computer screen are semasiography. Homer’s *sēmata lugra* in this important passage are undoubtedly semasiographic signs, then, because they bear meaning, but they are not lexigraphic, hence not evidence for the technology that made Homer’s poems possible. Wolf did not in any event need to make an exception for the *sēmata lugra*, because his argument depended not on a single ambiguous example, but on the remarkable consistency of Homer’s ignorance of writing. Of those who rejected his explanation of *sēmata lugra*, Wolf noted that the phrase “was made more problematic by those who used not to learn Homeric customs from Homer but to import them into him, and to twist doubtful words to fit the customs of their own time.”³

In the story of Bellerophon’s tablet Homer has evidently received from an Eastern source, along with an Eastern story, the folktale motif of the “fatal letter.” The motif turns up in the biblical story of David and Uriah the Hittite, whom David sends to the front line with a letter instructing that he be exposed to mortal danger (David wanted to marry Uriah’s wife Bathsheba: see 2 Samuel 11.15). Bellerophon’s name appears to be formed from that of the Near Eastern storm god Baal. The Lycian king sends Bellerophon against the Chimera, a variation of a dragon-killer myth found already on clay tablets ca. 1400 BC from the international emporium of Ugarit on the Syrian coast near Cyprus: Lycia lies on the coasting route west from Ugarit. So the motif came with the story. Homer knew nothing about “writing”: *quod erat demonstrandum*. In Homer’s day lexigraphic writing is over 2,000 years old in the Near

East, and we wonder how Homer has remained so ignorant of it that he refers to it a single time in 28,000 lines and then in a garbled fashion. The absence of writing in Homer's world is clear testimony to Hellenic provincialism after the collapse of the Mycenaean world ca. 1150 BC and proof of Hellenic remoteness from the centers of ancient civilization.

The modern shape of the Homeric Question begins with F. A. Wolf because he saw the problem clearly: if Homer knows nothing about writing, how have his poems been preserved in writing? Assuming, as did many (with little reason), that Homer lived around 950 BC, when there was no writing in Greece (another guess), Wolf argued that Homer's poems must have been preserved as songs short enough to be memorized without the aid of writing. In this "oral form," Wolf thought, they were passed down until, when writing appeared later, they were written down. In the sixth century BC in the time of the Athenian tyrant Pisistratus, skillful editors put together the shorter written texts and fashioned our own elegant (but obviously imperfect) *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, Wolf thought.

Wolf's model was parallel to, and inspired by, the discovery in the late eighteenth century that the biblical Pentateuch (= "five-rolls"), the first five books of the Bible, was composed of three or four textual strands skillfully but not seamlessly melded at the hands of editors, no doubt during the captivity of the Jewish elders in Babylon (586–538 BC). Although attributed to Moses, the Pentateuch is much too late to be attributed to him meaningfully. Sometime in the sixth century BC Jewish scholars sat at a table with different scrolls before them. Taking now this, now that, these editors combined preexisting inconsistent texts to create the version we have today. Some called God Yahweh (a volcano spirit), others called him Elohim (Semitic for "gods"). That is why he has both names in Genesis, a thesis about the origins of the Pentateuch on which all modern scholars agree.

Wolf's evidence for his theory was complex. Certain superficial dialectal features appear to reflect an Athenian handling or dusting-up of the text. According to Cicero, who lived in the first century BC about 100 years before Josephus, Pisistratus (605?–527 BC) "first put together the books of Homer in the order in which we have them, which before were mixed up" (*de Oratore* 3.137). Cicero seems to mean that the "books," that is the rolls of papyrus, had earlier circulated independently and so could be recited in differing orders, until the time of Pisistratus. Cicero lived 500 years after Pisistratus, but depended on a Hellenistic commentator, who may have known something.

Cicero's remarks seem to accord with the claim from the fourth century BC in the Platonic dialogue *Hipparchus* (probably not by Plato), to which we referred above. There Socrates refers to Pisistratus' son Hipparchus as "the eldest and wisest of Pisistratus' sons who, among the many excellent proofs of wisdom that he showed, first brought the poems of Homer into this country of ours and compelled men called *rhapsodes* at the Panathenaea [the principal Athenian festival] to recite them in relay, one man following on another as they still do now" (pseudo-Plato, *Hipparchus* 228 B). If there was need for a rule to govern how the poems should be read, there must have been times when they were read otherwise, that is, not in order. To Wolf that fact meant that the poems did not up to this time have a unity at all, but existed first in the short pieces suitable for memorization that Homer's life in an illiterate age required.

Whereas most of the poems that went to make up the fresh compilation of the sixth century BC, now called the "Pisistratean recension," were composed by Homer, Wolf thought, some were composed by the *Homeridae*, "descendants of Homer," said in various sources to have lived on the island of Chios. Pindar of the early fifth century BC mentions them. Nothing real is known of the Homeridae, however, except that they recited the poems of Homer and told stories about his life. Their presence on Chios is likely to be the origin of the story that Homer himself, about whom nothing whatever is known, came from Chios. Perhaps Pisistratus got the short poems from the Homeridae that were assembled into our poems, Wolf theorized.

In sum: you cannot have such long poems as the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* without writing, in spite of exaggerated claims about the mnemonic skills of ancient peoples. Because Homer's world is a world without writing, the poems, which exist in writing, cannot come directly from this world. They must in some way be the product of evolution. They no more owe their present form and meaning to someone named Homer than Moses wrote the early books of the Bible (which describe the death and burial of Moses). The false attributions are parallel. Scholars may disagree about where Homer stands on the evolutionary arc that begins in an illiterate world and ends with the poems we possess, but for Wolf, Homer stood at the beginning of the arc as the creator of the short poems from which Athenian editors made the Pisistratean recension in the sixth century BC, the basis for the text that became the modern vulgate.

No important scholar disagreed with Wolf's model and for over 100 years, throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century,

intelligent and devoted men dissected the Homeric poems from every angle to identify the separate songs, or accretions, of which Wolf had proved it to be composed. Even today there are scholars who closely follow Wolf's argument. For example, an editor of the recent three-volume Oxford commentary on the *Odyssey* writes the following about Book 21:

Schadewaldt is inclined to accept a broad unity of authorship in [Book] xxi, attributing the whole book to A [one hypothetical author] with the exception of eight lines: namely, Telemachus' boast in 372–5 (already rejected by Bérard), whose removal requires the further deletion of the suitor's simile in 376–7 and the first foot and a half of 378 (which will therefore have to be rewritten); and Zeus's thunderbolt in 412–15. The latter is a melodramatic interpolation, as von der Mühl observed.⁴

Wolf's explanation, just like these remarks, is learned, logical, and clever, but, just like these remarks, it is completely wrong. He had put his finger on the essential problem – a written poem from an illiterate age – but few today believe that the Homeric poems came into being as editorial redactions of preexisting texts, as certainly did the biblical Pentateuch. The followers of Wolf, called Analysts because they attempted to break up Homer's texts into their constituent parts, produced interesting theories and complex proofs, but because their premises were wrong their work to a large degree was a waste of time. In a way, the Homeric texts are made up of shorter songs, but they are not redacted texts. They are the creation, from traditional material, of a single human intelligence, Homer's, as the Californian Milman Parry proved in the early twentieth century.

The Oral-Formulaic Theory: The Arguments of Milman Parry

Milman Parry (1902–35) lived a romantic life and died prematurely at age 34 (perhaps a suicide). Parry showed through stylistic studies of the Homeric texts that Homer's literary style was unique and unknown in such poets as the third-century BC Alexandrian Greek Apollonius of Rhodes, author of the *Argonautica*, the first-century BC Roman Vergil, author of the *Aeneid*, or the English John Milton of the seventeenth-century AD. Parry proved that, from a stylistic point of view, Homer composed by means of units larger than the "word," contrary to what we might expect, and that in our terms these units include phrases,

whole lines, and groups of lines. Parry thrust a sword between the old view that great poetry is made with slow beautiful words aptly chosen to fit the moment and a modern view that great poetry can be made in other ways. His theories have been more influential than those of any other literary critic of the twentieth century, not just on how we understand Homer, but also how we understand literature itself, its origins and nature.

Parry began with the ancient mystery of the fixed epithet in Homer, so striking and so odd – those unvarying phrases tacked on to certain names that every reader notices immediately. Why is Achilles “swift-footed” even when he is seated, Hector “shining-helmed,” Hera “cow-eyed,” and the sea “as dark as wine” (unless the Greek epithet *oinopa* means “wine-faced,” as some believe)? Many had looked, but Parry was first to notice that such fixed epithets changed not according to narrative context, but according to the place of the name within the rhythm of the line. In other words, the epithet satisfied the needs of the meter, not the needs of the narrative.

By modern analysis, the complicated meter (dactylic hexameter) consists of lines made up of six units (feet), each of which can be a long and two shorts (— ∪∪ = dactyl) or two longs (— — = spondee), except for the sixth and last foot, which only has two beats. The last syllable can be long or short, but was probably felt as a long because of the line ending; that is, the hexameter always ends with a spondee (— —). Homer would have known nothing about any of this, but had a feeling for a unit made up of six principal beats, each followed by two shorter beats or one longer beat, but the sixth principal beat always followed by a single beat. The concept “line” depends on alphabetic writing, which this rhythmical system precedes, yet the rule about the spondee in the sixth foot means there must have been a pause there, or could be a pause there. Homer’s audience, too, would have a feeling for this meter and would expect it and enjoy it.

The system of epithets helps make up the metrical line by providing precast units larger than the name or word. The system within the metrical line is elaborate but thrifty: elaborate because of the different epithets assigned to different places in the line, and thrifty because ordinarily only a single epithet exists for any given place in the line. Such rules could have evolved only within an oral environment, where the poet is singing and the audience is listening.

For example, when the poet wishes to fill the last two feet of the line with the name of Odysseus, the hero is called “noble Odysseus” (*dios Odusseus* = — ∪∪ / — —). When he wishes to fill the last two and one

half feet of the line, his name is “wily Odysseus” (*polumêtis Odusseus* = $\cup\cup / - \cup\cup / - -$, commonly with the verb “said” – *prosephê* – more than 70 times). But if in the same position the preceding word ends with a short vowel that needs to be lengthened, then he becomes “city-sacking Odysseus” because “city-sacking” begins with two consonants in Greek and two consonants lengthen the preceding short vowel (*ptoliporthos Odusseus* = $\cup\cup / - \cup\cup / - -$). Furthermore, in over 90 percent of Homeric verses a curious word break that scholars call a *caesura* (“cutting”) occurs in the third foot; that is, the word does not end before or after the foot, but in the middle of it. In fact the third-foot caesura marks a point where set phrases (formulas) tend to meet, one phrase occupying the line before the caesura, and a second phrase occupying the line after the caesura. In order to fill the line after this caesura with the name of Odysseus (a recurring need) the poet uses the set phrase “much-enduring noble Odysseus” (*polutlas dios Odusseus* = $\cup / - - / - \cup\cup / - -$).

Because epithets shift not according to narrative context, but according to metrical demands, we must adjust our sense of the semantic value of the epithet, what it “means.” The varying repeated epithets of Odysseus may tell us something about his essential character and tie him to a larger body of tales about clever deeds and city-sacking, but they do not drive the narrative forward. As far as the action of the narrative is concerned, they all just mean “Odysseus.” Hence Parry’s proof had direct bearing on our understanding of what is “poetic” in Homer’s poetry. We must also accept that the complex system of formulaic expressions represented in noun–epithet combinations cannot be the work of a single poet, but must have come into being over time through evolution. Homer’s poetic language must be “traditional,” a word of central importance in this discussion.

By contrast, the poetic language of, say, William Butler Yeats is not “traditional” because Yeats uses words to express his intention, not to fill out the line. Of course, one might say that all language is traditional, otherwise it would be gibberish, but the Homeric language is a special kind of traditional language because it exists within the expectation of six principal longs followed by two shorts or one long and the sixth principal beat always followed by a single beat. There can be no doubt that Homer and Yeats approached the use of adjectives in a different way. Yeats was a “literate” poet and Homer was an “oral” poet. For Yeats, epithets are nontraditional, but for Homer they are part of the machinery by which he generates his narrative. They enable the poet to finish his line in oral delivery and get on with his story, and they are not

a necessary part of the story itself. The “theory of oral composition” or the “oral-formulaic theory” is based on evidence from Parry’s study of the fixed epithet, but the systematic application of his method to the Homeric text led to enormous perplexities and logical conundrums that still frustrate Homeric studies.

Parry described the noun-plus-epithet combination as a *formula*, a fixed expression with a certain meaning and metrical value and a certain place in the line. Unconscious that he was adopting a convention of alphabetic literacy in his description, which according to Parry’s own theory was not the means by which Homer had composed, Parry saw the formula as a fixed “phrase” made up of more than one “word” that worked in the rhetoric of poetry as the “word” does in the rhetoric of prose. In prose a word is a unit of meaning, whereas in Homer’s oral poetry a formula is a unit of meaning. We must remember that the theory that speech consists of “words” is a convention of alphabetic literacy, the result of analysis and the making of lexicons.

The proof of Homer’s “orality” is the existence of the formula, a device of no value to the literate poet. We can identify formulas beyond noun-epithet combinations, for example such expressions as “then he answered him” attached indifferently to “much-enduring goodly Odysseus,” to “Agamemnon king of men,” or to “swift-footed divine Achilles” to fill out a line. Many whole lines are formulaic, too, for example “When early rosy-fingered dawn appeared . . .” One in eight lines in the Homeric corpus is repeated somewhere else. All of Homer is formulaic in this way, Parry thought, made up of preset expressions and fixed phrases, although we do not always have enough of the tradition to see the formulas clearly. Only a very long tradition could explain the formulaic basis of Homeric style. Parry was certain that Homer had composed without the aid of writing by means of such a traditional formulaic rhythmical speech. On this point Wolf and Parry agreed: each thought that Homer had composed without the aid of writing.

Eager to go beyond stylistic analysis and find in the contemporary world a model for what Homer may have been like in the ancient world, Parry traveled with his assistant Albert B. Lord to the southern Balkans between 1929–33, storied journeys in the history of literary criticism. There Parry and Lord amassed an enormous collection of recordings of songs by *guslari*, illiterate peasants who sang long songs, including songs about heroic battle and the abduction of women. One type of song told of a man who returned home after many years just as his wife was about to marry another man.

Parry's best *guslar*, Avdo Mejedovich, at Parry's encouragement, sang for recording by dictation a song as long as the *Odyssey* (called *The Wedding of Smailagich Meho*), although he could neither read nor write. Parry's South Slavic field collection, on aluminum discs and aluminum wire, only partly published and today stored in the Widener Library at Harvard, remains the largest field collection ever made of what we now call "oral song." When analyzed, the written versions of the South Slavic songs prove to fall mostly into a ten-beat line, although the South Slavic line does not approach the Greek line for complexity, and there is little evidence for the elaboration and thrift in the use of epithets that Parry found in Homer. Parry's studies, published as short papers in professional journals, made almost no impression until the 1960s, when Albert B. Lord published *The Singer of Tales*, a synthesis of Parry's theories and penetrating work of his own. Long after Parry's death, Lord returned to the southern Balkans in the 1950s to make fresh recordings and sometimes took down the same song from the same singers as he and Parry had recorded 30 years before.

Lord took a keen interest in the lives and social environment of the *guslari*, inseparable from the tradition in which the singing took place. When a boy wished to become a singer, he would apprentice himself to a master singer. Listening to him and practicing alone, the student gradually learned, by unconscious means, the special metrical language of the *guslar*. If he was persistent and had talent, he could himself become a *guslar*, maybe even a great one.

A *guslar* would know several or many songs, but in the *guslar's* mind the song did not consist of a fixed sequence of words, about which he could know nothing. The "word" is a convention of literacy (just as much as the "line"), an abstraction that linguists cannot define beyond "things listed in dictionaries." (Is it "some times" or "sometimes"?) Master *guslari* claimed to be able to repeat a song exactly, which they heard a single time, "word for word." When challenged, such singers would never sing the same song verbatim, but would keep close to the same sequence of themes. First this happened, then that happened, then that happened, although even so they would embellish and add new material. The sequence of themes was the song, "word for word." Nor does the *guslar* have a concept of the line as a discrete unit with ten beats, although we can analyze written versions in this way.

There is no such thing as verbatim repetition because there is no fixed text, as Lord put it, meaning really that there is no text at all. A text is a physical thing with symbolic markings on it liable to distortion and

corruption and unfaithful copying, what the philologist studies, and texts have not yet come into being. The *guslar* remade his song each time he sang, using the resources of his technique of rhythmical singing. By analogy, Homer must have done something similar, Parry thought. Homer was an oral poet, a *guslar*.

By drawing an analogy between modern South Slavic *guslari* and ancient *oidoi*, “singers,” (singular = *oidos*) as Homer calls them, Parry and Lord confounded Wolf’s conviction that without writing you cannot generate very long poems, while agreeing with Wolf that Homer had not used writing in the creation of his poems. In any event, Wolf’s attention was not so much on the impossibility of creating long poems in an illiterate environment as on the impossibility of transmitting them. The famous instances of “Homer nodding,” inconsistencies that had formed the basis for theories by the Analysts who followed Wolf (because they sought to reduce the poems to their constituent parts), appear in Parry’s theory as a common feature of “oral style.” Neither the *guslar/oidos* nor his audience is annoyed when someone makes a mistake because they are swept along in the thrill of divine song and have no means of checking it anyway, in an oral environment, or any interest in doing so. No wonder Homer’s style is unique. He was an oral singer and the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are oral song, Parry argued.

Parry’s stylistic studies were impeccable and the Parry/Lord analogy between oral composition in the modern Balkans and in the ancient world has been a compelling anthropology. Wolf’s premises were proven wrong and his followers therefore misguided. The Homeric poems were dictated oral texts and they were not redacted from preexisting shorter texts of various authorship. But if all Homer is formulaic, the proof of Homer’s “orality,” where is the brilliance and poetic genius of the divine Homer? The followers of Wolf had removed Homer from the equation: no more did Homer “write” the *Iliad* than Moses “wrote” Genesis. Parry restored Homer and disproved the redacted text, but in so doing seemed just as much to take away Homer’s opportunity for creativity and greatness. If all his language is traditional, consisting of formulas and formulaic expressions, then was not Homer more spokesman for a tradition than a creator in his own right?

Because the proof that Homer was an oral poet was based on the existence of the formula, scholars expended great labor to define a formula, only to discover that “fixed phrases” open into looser phrases, now called “formulaic phrases,” and that formulaic phrases can drift into almost anything. One scholar showed how one formula, *pioni dêmoi*,

“[hidden] in rich fat,” can in other contexts (with different accentuation) mean “amid the flourishing populace.” Transformed by a series of rational steps, the same phrase even appears to shift from “in rich fat” (*pioni dêmoi*) by means of intermediate expressions into “he came to the land of strangers” (*allôn eksiketo dêmôn*). Formulas and formulaic expressions, Parry’s proof that Homer was an oral poet similar to Balkan *guslari*, cannot themselves be defined! Furthermore, ordinary speech, although hardly metrical, is to a remarkable degree made up of set phrases hard to distinguish from Homer’s formulas.

Work to define the formula proved to be a dead-end. Evidently the realities of the printed page, on which the philologist labors, are not the same as those of human speech. The elusive formula, which at first looks clear-cut then drifts away, is only behaving in the same way that “words” do in ordinary speech, whose exact definition eludes us but which we use with perfect ease. No one knows, or has good theories about, how speech works. It is an innate human faculty. Whatever the details, we cannot doubt that Homer was speaking a special language with its own vocabulary, rhythm, and units of semantic meaning, analogous to but different from ordinary speech. Somehow Homer generated his poetry within the rules, limitations, and opportunities of this special language. According to Parry’s analogy, the speech of “Homeric Greek,” with its many odd forms and mixture of dialects, must have been learned by absorption like an ordinary language by a young person from an older. Homeric speech had an inherent beat, a rhythm that the singer felt but did not understand in a conscious way. When the singer sings, he speaks this special language whose units are not “words” but “formulas,” at least much of the time.

To say that the formulaic style limits a poet’s expressiveness is therefore like saying that words limit what we can say. The rhythm drives the narrative, and words and word groups have settled down in certain places in the rhythm, which tends to break at certain places, especially in the third foot. Word groups, or formulas, fit in nicely before and after this break so that many lines, as it were, build themselves, once you have absorbed the system of word groups. Then you can talk in this language. Other Greeks can understand you, although they cannot themselves speak the language. Modern English-speakers, if they have studied Shakespeare, can follow most of it on stage, but not all, and they do not speak such English. Shakespeare is not an oral poet, but the relation between the performer’s speech and that of his modern audience is similar to that between Homer and his audience.

Wolf showed how Homer could not have created the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* because he lived in a world without writing and only writing made the poems possible. Parry showed how Homer could well have created his poems without the aid of writing, just as did the *guslari*. His formulaic style proved that Homer was an oral poet, heir to a long tradition of oral verse-making. Parry and Lord insisted on the origin of the Homeric poems through dictation, but how was this possible, if there was no writing in Homer's world?

Homer in Context: Technological and Historical Background to the Making of the First Texts

Neither Wolf nor Parry investigated the history of the technology that made Homer's texts possible – the Greek alphabet – but in recent years we have learned a good deal about its origins, the *sine qua non* of Homeric texts. In spite of their length and ambition, the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* seem to have been the first texts written in the Greek alphabet, as far as we can tell, but such extraordinary texts did not appear from nowhere or without clear historical antecedents. Although most direct information about these antecedents has been lost, we can infer a good deal from comparative study and from sparse testimonies.

No doubt the earliest texts of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were encoded on papyrus, according to the predominant practice in the eastern Mediterranean on which the Greek model is based (hardly or not often on very expensive leather). Papyrus was an Egyptian invention from around 3200 BC, made from strips of a marsh plant pounded together at right angles, then cut into squares and pasted end to end. In the Ptolemaic period (323–30 BC) papyrus production was a royal monopoly and perhaps always had been. The word *papyrus* seems to mean “the thing of the [king's] house.”

When we think about ancient writing, there were two spheres: the papyrus-using Egyptians and their cultural admirers on the eastern shore of the Mediterranean, and the clay-using Mesopotamians, who had the older and truly international culture. The textual (but not intellectual) tradition of the Homeric poems comes from the Egyptian sphere. Papyrus is flexible, easily stored, durable, transportable, abundant, and to some extent reusable. Clay, by contrast, was in the Bronze Age the usual medium for writing outside the papyrus-using Egypt/Levantine axis.⁵ The literatures of the Sumerians and the Semitic Assyrians and Babylonians

of Mesopotamia and the Indo-European Hittites of Anatolia, which go back into the third millennium BC, were all inscribed on clay tablets. The Bronze Age Cretans, too, used clay. Clay was versatile, available anywhere, cost nothing, and if you fired it would last forever, but clay is unsuitable for recording very long poems. *Gilgamesh*, by far the longest literary work to survive from 3,000 years of literate Mesopotamian culture, and of great importance to understanding the origin of the Homeric poems, is the length of about two books of the *Iliad*.

Egyptian magical texts were inscribed in narrow vertical columns, but ordinary Egyptian texts were written in lines that read from right to left arranged in broad columns, the ancestor of the modern printed page. The heirs of this writing tradition, including the Semitic Hebrews, also wrote right to left in broad columns. You held the papyrus in your left hand and unrolled it with your right, the pages also being arranged from right to left. The Egyptian sat on the ground, stretched his linen kilt taut between spread thighs, ankles crossed, and used the surface of the kilt to support the papyrus while he wrote or read. In Greece the literati did not wear kilts, but sat in chairs where they nonetheless stretched the papyrus across their knees. There were no writing desks in the ancient world.

Outside of Egypt, only the Western Semites used papyrus, those amorphous peoples who spoke a Semitic language and lived along the eastern shore of the Mediterranean and in the inland valleys (the Eastern Semites are the clay-users living in Mesopotamia). Outside Egypt where papyrus grew, papyrus was always an imported commodity, yet most documents in the eastern Mediterranean used it principally or exclusively from the earliest times.

Homer calls these seafaring papyrus-using Western Semites *Phoinikes*, “redmen,” apparently because their hands were often stained from producing purple dye from shell fish, a Phoenician specialty, or *Sidonians*, “men of Sidon,” a port near Byblos. The Phoenicians were never a united people, and in their disunity and relative poverty resembled the Greeks. “Phoenician” is a convenient term to distinguish the northern, coastal-dwelling Western Semites from the southern inland-dwelling Western Semites that included the Hebrews and the Canaanites, after the biblical name *Canaan* for this area, or Palestinians, after the Philistines (Indo-European Mycenaean refugees from Crete living in five towns in the Gaza strip). Geography determined the division into the coastal north and the inland south: there are several good ports in the north Levant, none in the south.

Only two good passes lead inland from the Phoenician ports in the north through the Lebanon ranges that run right along the coast. The great Bronze Age port and emporium of Ugarit lay south of one pass, ideally located to transship goods coming from inland Syria and Mesopotamia onto ships sailing to Mediterranean destinations. We will later return to the remarkable clay tablets with epic poems on them found at Ugarit, destroyed ca. 1200 BC in the general collapse of Bronze Age civilization.

The Cypriots, just 75 miles off the coast from Ugarit, were natural partners in trade and culture with Phoenicia. Cyprus was a place of transshipment for goods heading to Cilicia on the southern coast of Anatolia and to Rhodes, Euboea, and the far west. Egypt in the south was easily reached by sea. The Phoenician city of Byblos in modern Lebanon was nearly an Egyptian colony from the third millennium BC onwards and provided timber products for Egypt throughout its history, the biblical “cedars of Lebanon.” Phoenician arts borrowed heavily from the Egyptians, as did the arts of Canaan, including the Hebrews.

Like the Indo-European Greeks, the Semitic Phoenicians were superb seafarers. In the Late Iron Age, under military pressure from Assyrian imperial power in northern Mesopotamia, they colonized North Africa, Spain, Sicily, and various islands in the western Mediterranean, including Sardinia, about the same time that the Greeks settled southern Italy and eastern Sicily. These *Phoinikes* turn up repeatedly in Homer’s *Odyssey*, where they are greedy, knavish slavers plying their wares on the high seas. From an early time the Phoenicians shared with their Canaanite cousins a remarkable system of writing of around 22 signs. Commonly called an “alphabet,” it was really an odd syllabary in which each sign stands for what we call a consonant plus an unspecified vowel. More precisely, each sign referred to a speech sound defined as an obstruction or modification of the passage of air from the mouth (the consonant), without comment on the quality of the vibration of the vocal chords (the vowel): you, the native speaker, have to fill in that sound according to context and your knowledge as a speaker of the language. In practical terms, you cannot pronounce something written in the “Phoenician alphabet” unless you are a Phoenician. Furthermore, the extreme paucity of signs, 22 or 25, enormously enhanced ambiguity; early West Semitic inscriptions, although complete and legible, are often not understood.

The “Phoenician alphabet” belonged to a family of scripts called West Semitic, which had various external forms called by scholars Ugaritic, Aramaic, Hebrew, Moabite, or Canaanite, but it was a single system of

writing with local variations. The oldest example in linear form is from a sarcophagus of about 1000 BC from a King Ahiiram of Byblos, but unreadable possible antecedents to West Semitic writing are found from 1800 BC, carved on rocks in remote valleys in Egypt.

Although West Semitic writing seems to be dependent in some way on Egyptian hieroglyphic writing, which also gave no information about how the vocal chords vibrated (hence is unpronounceable), its structure is unlike Egyptian writing because *all* signs in West Semitic are phonetic, whereas in Egyptian only *some* are phonetic. The origins of the West Semitic family may somehow be tied to Cretan Aegean writing, where another mostly phonetic system called Linear B, which recorded Greek, appeared at about the same time as the West Semitic writing. The Philistines in Gaza appear to be Mycenaean from Crete, although no examples of Aegean writing have been found in Palestine.

The Western Semites so preferred Egyptian papyrus as a basis for writing that their entire literature has been lost except for the Hebrew Bible, which survived because the Jews identified their survival as a people with faithful transmission of the text. Only about 90 West Semitic inscriptions survive on hard substances from ca. 1000–300 BC in the Levant (considerably more turn up in Punic North Africa). By contrast, tens of thousands of Greek alphabetic inscriptions survive on stone and other substances. The Greeks are approaching writing in a different way.

The common but inaccurate use of the word “alphabet” to describe both the Greek alphabet and the West Semitic writing on which the Greek alphabet was based, as in “Hebrew alphabet” or “Arabic alphabet,” obscures the enormous and cataclysmic historical change that took place when writing passed from the Western Semites to the Greeks. We date this moment of transference and modification of technologies by looking for the earliest Greek alphabetic inscriptions, which come from around 775 BC, then, just guessing, go back about a generation. Because after 775 BC we get a trickle, then a stream, then a river, then an ocean of inscriptions, it doesn't seem likely that the alphabet was in Greece long before our first evidence for it. The method places the invention of the Greek alphabet around 800 BC, one of the few secure dates we have in our investigation of the date of Homer. Homer must come after 800 BC because Homer is a text and texts are material things with markings on them.

The Greek alphabet and the “Phoenician” syllabary are historically related, yes, but fundamentally different in structure. The difference is

best seen in the fact that you can pronounce Greek alphabetic texts without knowing the language. West Semitic writing had one kind of sign, each giving hints about the obstruction of the breath. The Greek alphabet had two separate kinds of phonetic signs. The Greek vowel signs are pronounceable by themselves, whereas the Greek consonantal signs are not pronounceable by themselves. Thus A = the sound [a], but P cannot itself be pronounced (even if we might say [puh] if someone asked us). In West Semitic, by contrast, P would = [pa], [pu], [po] or some other combination and a native speaker would know which. The invention of the Greek alphabet on the basis of the Phoenician syllabary depended, first, on the division of the signs into two different kinds and, second, on the spelling rule that one of the five vocalic signs must always notate every consonantal sign. BCKUP, the spelling preferred by Microsoft Word, is therefore a mixture of West Semitic and Greek practice, but such common usages as CMDR (= commander), painted on US war planes, are a return to ancient West Semitic practice. If you speak English, you guess it's "commander" but otherwise you're out of luck. Such license is never allowed in ancient Greek orthography, where the spelling rule that you must have both kinds of signs is inviolable.

Four hundred years earlier than the sarcophagus of Ahiiram come our very earliest certain examples of West Semitic writing, but written in a nonlinear script, ca. 1400, on clay tablets from Ugarit, the Bronze Age emporium destroyed ca. 1200 BC. The signs are made up of wedges pushed into clay in the way that wedges make up the otherwise unrelated "cuneiform" writing of Mesopotamia. This "Ugaritic alphabet" was apparently a free invention by someone used to writing with wedges on clay and survives only in Ugarit and its near environs. Because these odd Ugaritic texts were impressed in clay in imitation of Mesopotamian practice instead of on the usual papyrus, they survived the sack of the city and we can read them today.

Fifteen tablets preserve the story about the triumph of the storm god Baal ("lord") over his enemies Yamm ("sea") and Mot ("death"), the son of El ("god"). We learn of Baal's imprisonment in the underworld, whence his sister/wife Anat freed him, and about Baal's victorious kingship over gods and men. Other tablets record legends close to the sort of histories we find in the Bible, based on similar semi-legendary accounts of historical figures.

A unique statement appended to the end of the Baal tablets reports that they were taken down by one Ilimilku from Shubani as dictated by the chief priest Atanu-Purliani. For their efforts, both were supported

by Niqmadu II, king of Ugarit, who reigned from 1375–1345 BC. The colophon draws a clear distinction between the composer of the mythical text, Atanu-Purliani, and its recorder, Ilimilku, a procedure for which there is no clear example in any earlier tradition of writing. The earliest attested use of West Semitic writing, the “cuneiform alphabet,” the direct ancestor of the Greek alphabet, is therefore seemingly to take down a literary text by dictation.

Even so, Jeremiah dictated to his scribe Baruch (Jeremiah 36.18), and perhaps all the early texts of what became the Old Testament are the result of dictation. The odd focus on purely phonetic but unpronounceable elements in West Semitic writing, which made it unlearnable except by someone who spoke the language, may well reflect this writing’s origin in the practice of dictation as a means of composition. The composer speaks, and the scribe represents the sounds as best he can. In this way you can write anything you can say, so long as there is enough context for a literate speaker to reconstruct the message. If you applied the West Semitic system to write down in this way the first line of the *Iliad*, and separated the words by dots as the Phoenicians did, it might look something like

MNN•D•T•PLD•KLS

for the Greek alphabetic

MENIN AEIDE THEA PELEIADEO AKHILEOS.

Whereas the West Semitic system of writing worked after a fashion for West Semitic languages, whose words are built around an unvarying consonantal skeleton, it did not work for Greek verse, filled with contiguous vowel sounds that establish the verse’s rhythm. To judge from very early inscriptional finds in hexametric verse, the Greek alphabet was from the beginning used for just this purpose. Perhaps a bilingual Semite, heir to an ancient tradition of taking down poetry by dictation, tried his hand at taking down Greek song. Making technical alterations to the West Semitic Writing to accommodate the very different phonology of Greek speech, he established two kinds of signs and the inviolable spelling rule that made Homer’s text possible. He invented the first true alphabet, the first writing that can be pronounced by someone who is not a speaker of that language, a system now used over virtually the entire planet.

Oral Song Becomes Text

Parry was interested in oral poetry as a living, breathing tradition, but Homer's poems are not oral poems; they are texts, the philologist's Homer. An oral poem is a public event, a performance before an audience, usually small, where there is music, facial expression, gesture, emphasis, and spontaneous adaptation to the mood of the audience. Homer himself gives us a vivid picture of the oral poet, the *oidos*, and his oral song in the *Odyssey*, where a singer named Phemius (= "famous one") entertains the suitors in the house of Odysseus, and another singer Demodocus (= "pleasing to the people") holds in rapt attention the Phaeacian court, where Odysseus tells of his strange journey. The *oidos* is a commanding presence in the court and provides life with a special richness and meaning:

For myself I declare that there is no greater fulfillment of delight than when joy possesses a whole people, and banqueters in the halls listen to an *oidos* as they sit all in order, and beside them tables are laden with bread and meat, and the cup-bearer draws wine from the bowl and carries it around and pours it in the cups. This seems to my mind the fairest thing there is. (*Od.* 9.5–11)

Such men held a special place in Greek society, analogous to religious leaders in other ancient societies, whom according to an extraordinary development in Greece the *oidoi* replaced. The *oidoi*, not the priests, defined moral values in Greek society.

A text, by contrast to oral song, is a physical object with marks on it capable of interpretation, if you are clever. A text allows the reconstruction of a phonetic version of the signs intelligible to someone who speaks Greek, but not similar even theoretically to any song that any poet ever sang. Specialists called *rhapsodes* memorized these texts and while holding a staff delivered them in a histrionic fashion at public gatherings, especially at the Athenian festival of the Panathenaea reformed by Pisistratus in the sixth century BC. *Rhapsode* probably means "staff-singer," but the Greeks falsely etymologized it to mean "stitcher of song." *Rhapsodes* are not descended from the *oidoi* who generated their song afresh with each performance, but from the inventor of the Greek alphabet, whose spelling rule allowed an approximate notation of the actual sounds of Greek verse. *Rhapsodes*, unlike *oidoi*, could read and write and like proto-professors prided themselves on their ability to

explicate a text, above all Homer's text. Plato snidely mocks such pretensions in his dialogue *Ion* from the fourth century BC. Plato does not trust men like Ion, who take pride in scholastic mastery of a text and think that truth resides therein:

Socrates: I often envy the profession of a rhapsode, Ion, for you always wear fine clothes. Looking as beautiful as possible is part of your art. Furthermore you are obligated to be constantly in the company of many good poets, especially Homer, best and most divine of poets. To understand him and not merely learn his words by rote memorization is a thing greatly to be envied. And no man can be a rhapsode who does not understand the poet's meaning, for the rhapsode should interpret the mind of the poet to his listeners. But how can he interpret him well unless he knows what the poet means? All this is greatly to be envied.

Ion: Very true, Socrates. Interpretation has surely been the most laborious part of my art, and I believe myself able to speak about Homer better than any man. Neither Metrodorus of Lampsacus nor Stesimbrotus of Thasos nor Glaucon nor any one else who ever lived had as good ideas about Homer as I have, or as many. (Plato, *Ion*, 530b–d)

Unlike the oral poet, who is an entertainer, the *rhapsode* is also a proto-scholar. He not only recites, but he explicates, using the text as a basis for teaching (teaching what? Plato goes on to wonder).

It is important not to confuse “oral poem,” what an *aoidos* sings, with Homer's text, which an *aoidos* dictated and a *rhapsode* memorizes and recites. Getting these two mixed up has led to much confusion in modern Homeric studies, so that some think that Homer sang something similar to our texts of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* throughout his career, or that the “same poems” were sung by other poets during their own careers. It would then be possible for different people in different places at different times to have written down the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*, as we know that the medieval French *Chanson de Roland* was taken down in different versions from different singers. According to the Parry/Lord model, however, our *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are unique versions that came into being at a single time when, under unusual circumstances, a poet dictated his song to an amanuensis.

We can only speculate about earlier or later forms of these songs, but can be sure that they bore scant resemblance to our *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.

Because of their enormous length (about 16,000 lines for the *Iliad* and 12,000 lines for the *Odyssey*) these poems remain a transcendent mystery in the history of literature. The average length of an oral song, according to Parry's studies and modern field studies, runs to about 800 lines, roughly the length of a single book of the *Iliad*. As we will see in part two of this book, the poems are made up of just such shorter elements that may in some form have stood alone. The oral singer is limited by the attention-span of his audience and by his own powers of voice and bearing. What can such long poems have been for? Not for readers who read for edification or pleasure, because there can have been none when Homer lived. There is no writing in Homer's world and there are no poets who pore over papyri. Yet the poems seem to have existed in writing from the very dawn of alphabetic literacy in the eighth century BC.

No doubt as a professional *aoidos* the historical Homer sang the anger of Achilles and the homecoming of Odysseus many times, but our textual versions are determined by the conditions under which the stories were transferred from the invisible and ephemeral realm of oral song into the visible and material realm of a written text. Their extraordinary length and manifest desire, annoying to a modern reader, constantly to prolong the narrative divorces them as works of entertainment from real songs sung in real time to real audiences. The form and length of the poems depend on the unique circumstances of the creation of the texts. In the experience of Parry and Lord, the very process of dictation encouraged a longer and more elaborate poem. Freed from the challenge and restraints of live performance, the *guslar* could spin out the tale as he chose. As we have seen, Parry prodded one singer, his favorite, into dictating a song as long as the *Odyssey*. There is no writing in Homer, yet he was written down, as Wolf complained 200 years ago.

The Date of Homer's Texts

Although most handbooks call Homer an Ionian poet, who lived and worked in Asia Minor, he may have worked on the long island of Euboea that hugs the east coast of mainland Greece. Certain technical features of his dialect may mark it as West Ionian, as opposed to the East Ionian of the Asia Minor coast. According to recent archeological finds on Euboea at Lefkandi, a modern name for an ancient settlement at the edge of the much-contested Lelantine Plain that separates the rival Euboean towns of Chalcis and Eretria, Euboeans were the most

advanced and wealthiest of all Greek communities during the Greek Dark Ages ca. 1100–800 BC. Objects of Egyptian and Near Eastern origin in graves from this period prove that the Euboeans alone of mainland Greeks maintained contact, directly or through middlemen, with Cyprus and the Levantine coast and even Egypt. Within an enormous, long, narrow structure with an apse at one end, built around 1000 BC, unparalleled anywhere in Greece, was an extraordinary warrior's cremation burial, along with sacrificed horses and gold ornaments in the accompanying inhumation burial of a woman. In just such an environment we imagine the *aoidoi* to have plied their trade.

The Euboeans were the earliest and most aggressive of Greek colonizers, and the *Odyssey* is a poem tailor-made to fit their historical experience in the western Mediterranean in the “Wild West” days of the late ninth and early eighth centuries BC. By the second quarter of the eighth century BC they had permanent posts in southern Italy, including one at Cumae on the Bay of Naples, so important to Vergil's story of migration to Italy. At the same time Euboeans maintained permanent posts in northern Syria near the Orontes estuary, not far from the Bronze Age emporium of Ugarit, home to West Semitic traditions of culture and writing. The oldest example of Greek alphabetic writing appears to be part of a name, EULIN, recently discovered on a clay pot found, to everyone's astonishment, in Latium in Italy, dated by stratigraphy to ca. 775 BC. Latium is near Euboean Cumae on the Bay of Naples and the Euboean settlement on Ischia in the bay, where other very early pieces of writing are found. Sherds with pieces of names are found from about the same early date of 775–750 BC on Euboea itself.

As we have seen, the Greek alphabet's obsession with phonetic representation (so unlike earlier systems of writing) is internal evidence that it was invented to notate hexametric verse, perhaps even the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Certainly its Phoenician model was incapable of notating such Homeric words as *aaatos*, “decisive,” which in Phoenician script would be written *ts!* Although vowel clusters are common in Greek, such extravagant examples are found only in verse, where the sequence of vocalic sounds assists the formation of the complex rhythm. In any event you do not need phonetic verisimilitude to make a written record of just any Greek, as proven by the Linear B script, which provides only a rough approximation of the sound of any spoken word.

Our earliest inscriptions support the theory that the desire to record hexametric verse inspired the invention of the Greek alphabet. Still probably the oldest “long inscription” of more than a few letters was found

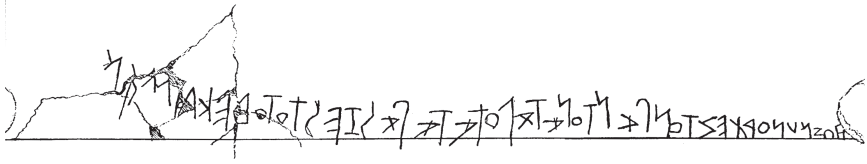


Figure 2 The Dipylon Vase inscription (from Powell 1991: fig. 58) 23

in 1871 in Athens, called the Dipylon Vase inscription (see figure 2). The inscription has been scratched with a sharp object ripping through the glaze of a pot made in a shop just outside the Dipylon Gate in Athens ca. 740 BC. Reading from right to left, it preserves a perfect dactylic hexameter followed by some signs of unclear meaning, perhaps partly a garbled portion of an abecedarly (the signs of the alphabet in a row).

HOΣENUNORXEΣTONΠANTONATAΛOΤATAΠAIZEITOTOΔEK{M}
M{N?}N

Whoever of all the dancers now dances most gracefully . . .

Another “long inscription” was found on Euboean Ischia in the Bay of Naples on a Rhodian drinking cup, made ca. 740 BC, about the same time as the Dipylon Vase inscription. Called the Cup of Nestor inscription, the first line seems to be prose, but the second and third are again dactylic hexameters. In translation:

I am the cup of Nestor, a joy to drink from.
Whoever drinks from this cup, straightway that man
The desire of beautiful-crowned Aphrodite will seize.

The find excited wide attention because the cup appears to refer to the cup of Nestor described in Book 11 of the *Iliad* (632–5), when Patroclus comes to Nestor’s tent to ask about a wounded companion:

The maid first drew before the two a fine table with feet of well-polished lapis and set on it a bronze basket and with it an onion, a relish for their drink, and pale honey and ground meal of sacred barley and beside them a beautiful cup that the old man brought from home, studded with bosses of gold; there were four handles on it and about each two doves were

feeding, while below were two supports. Another man could scarce have lifted that cup from the table when full, but old Nestor raised it easily. (*Il.* 11.628–37)

In one of the shaft graves at Mycenae Heinrich Schliemann found a cup that resembles Homer's description, suggesting that the cup, like the boar's tusk helmet, may be a Mycenaean heirloom. If the "cup of Nestor" of the inscription is the same as that in *Iliad* 11, the *Iliad* must have existed before the inscription was made around 740 BC. The inscription would then be a "time before which" (*terminus ante quem*) for the composition of the *Iliad*. Some think, however, that the cup of Nestor was a traditional motif on the lips of many poets, although the only cup of Nestor we know anything about is the one described by Homer.

The Greek alphabet was therefore used from the earliest times to notate epic verse. Because Homer's texts cannot predate the Greek alphabet, and because no object described in the Homeric poems post-dates 700 BC, and because the Cup of Nestor inscription may refer to the *Iliad*, and because of the social and historical conditions reflected in the poems (see chapter 2), the first texts of Homer must belong to the eighth century BC. When in the eighth century? Many scholars place him in the second half, to give the alphabet a chance to "ripen" and become sophisticated enough to fashion our texts. But the alphabet did not begin as a primitive device that became more sophisticated in time. The Greek alphabet appeared within a tradition of taking down texts by dictation perhaps 1,000 years old in the days of Homer. Placing Homer in the second half of the eighth century does not adequately take account of Homer's ignorance of the tradition of writing that made his texts possible, which will place him close to its invention around 800 BC. Greek legend said that a man named Palamedes invented the Greek alphabet, and maybe he did. In myth, Palamedes was a Euboean who lived in Nauplius, "ship-town" (not the Nauplion in the Peloponnesus). Because legends preserve real names, Palamedes may be the name of Homer's amanuensis, although we cannot prove it.

Someone of great wealth and power stood behind the creation of these texts. The cost of the papyrus alone was great, and the whole project was an insane ambition, as sometimes happens at the beginning of a new technology. For example, the most ambitious stone temple complex in Egypt, surrounding the step-pyramid of King Djoser ca. 2600 BC, is also the earliest. The dictating of the poems was laborious and expensive, but the Euboeans had the means and through their

Eastern contacts now the technology of writing. It is likely that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, as well as the poems of Hesiod from nearby Boeotia, were written down on the island of Euboea and were first in the possession of Euboeans.

What can have been our Palamedes' motives for fashioning texts of unprecedented length and complexity? What did our scribe, who had the backing of wealth and an unknown purpose, do with the texts once he had them? If he was also the inventor of the alphabet, he was the only man in the world able to read the first texts, until others learned the secrets of his method. We know that Homer's texts were the basis of Greek education by the sixth century BC; plausibly they were the basis for Greek education from the moment of the alphabet's invention.