

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-03631-3 - Writing and the Origins of Greek Literature

Barry B. Powell

Excerpt

[More information](#)

CHAPTER I

Introduction: building models like a wigwam

By now we might hope for some kind of consensus on the genesis of the Homeric poems, the central question in the history of Greek letters, but the plot seems as muddled as ever. Everyone has a good idea and there is scarcely consensus. In the history of Homeric studies comes our truest exemplum of cultural myopia. We are not sure what to do with Homer because we think he is like us. As we change, he changes.

Until the early twentieth century, classical scholars did not well imagine a difference between how they themselves made a text and how the ancients made a text, who made them, why they made them, and to what use they put them. The study of ancient Greek literature is complex, but always begins with the Homeric Question, *quaestio Homerica*, interrogations about Homer, and there we should begin. The Homeric Question is always about origins. We possess the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, but whence do they come? In modern times Robert Wood (1717?–1771), in his *Essay on the Original Genius and Writings of Homer* (printed privately 1767, published posthumously in 1775) and François Hédelin, abbé d'Aubignac (1604–1676), associate to Richelieu, in his *Conjectures académiques ou dissertation sur l'Iliade* (1715), saw that the problem of origins was inseparable from the relationship between the technology of writing and a spoken form of the poem. Even in the ancient world the historian of the Jewish War Josephus raised the question explicitly (*contra Apionem*, 1.11–12).

What, however, is meant by *spoken form* is hard to clarify, and nineteenth-century Homeric scholars therefore saw no reason to question the primacy of the written text. Analyst and Unitarian alike applied their experience with modern written texts to ancient texts, which they read silently, to themselves, in cubicles and cold rooms, in northern climes, or aloud before a *Philolog*. Such conditions cannot have pertained in “the days of Homer.” If we could only be sure when that was, or what were the conditions of those days.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-03631-3 - Writing and the Origins of Greek Literature

Barry B. Powell

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Milman Parry's demonstration in the 1930s that the Homeric poems were orally composed refocused Greek literary studies in a dramatic way by suggesting a different manner of composition for Homeric verse. Although neither Parry nor his follower A. B. Lord attempted to explain why, and scarcely how, such oral poems came to be texts, or what happened next, scholars nonetheless began to reinterpret early Greek civilization as an "oral culture" where writing played an important but auxiliary role, essentially different from that in our own society, where writing controls everything. If Homer was an oral poet, and oral poetry is always shifting, then the *Iliad* existed in many, even innumerable versions, some say, so that variations in our text may reflect different oral versions. Such other poets as Sappho or Archilochus were influenced by "Homer," but not necessarily by our own *Iliad* or *Odyssey*, our own Homer, which represent single examples from a plurality. Being oral, Homer's verse, and even certain formulas, may reach back into early times, the argument goes, as do Homer's stories, his myths, so great is the power of orality. Lyric poetry – Archilochus, Sappho, Solon – was oral in origin too, and maybe oral in nature, and existed in similar metrical forms long before our first written evidence. Even the songs of Pindar and the tragedians, who undoubtedly created their verse in writing, were sung, hence part of oral culture. Scarcely a book appears today on Greek literature in which the word "oral" or "orality" does not appear, opposed to "written" and "literate," as if everyone agreed on what was being said and what the issues were. Even Roman literary criticism accepts such distinctions, as, for example, in a recent book on Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (Wheeler, 1999, 272) that finds an "inherent tension between the implicit orality and explicit literacy" as a key to understanding Ovid's poem.

Such theories about "orality" and conclusions drawn therefrom may not survive rigorous criticism, however, because they do not depend on clear descriptions of how ancient texts came into being and how they were used. They make erroneous assumptions about the nature and function of writing itself, the technology that separates "orality" from "literacy." Above all, commentators ignore the highly idiosyncratic nature of Greek alphabetic writing, which has distorted our ability to perceive speech directly. Alphabetic writing is not a mirror held up to speech, it appears, but a special technology with functions unprecedented in earlier writing traditions. Nor do commentators take sufficient account of the importance of A. B. Lord's elaboration of Milman Parry's theory of the dictated Homeric text and the need rigorously to distinguish such dictated texts from free creations in writing. Nor do they recognize the

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-03631-3 - Writing and the Origins of Greek Literature

Barry B. Powell

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction: building models like a wigwam*

3

novelty of some of the best-known Greek myths, the subject of Greek literature. We seek conclusions about the origins of Greek literature, whose mysterious quality and influence continue to earn admiration, but are hampered by methods that follow out single lines of inquiry and do not see the problem whole, in all its complexity.

To understand the past, we build models from pieces scattered and fragmented, but hardly seek proof through mathematical calculation; when we do measure quantities, we are not sure what to do with them, or whether we have selected criteria with hidden conclusions in mind. Because of the difficulty and diffuseness of the topic – the relation between writing and the origins of Greek literature – we will need to build our model rather like a wigwam, placing pole beside pole, spread out at the bottom but touching in a bunch at the top and supporting an overall design. But there will be no mathematical rigor. Our poles will consist of a series of special studies that support a general description. Because our present myopia is bound up with a set of terms that mean many or different things, we will want to discuss such terms, beginning with the distinction “oral/literate,” growing from the work of Parry/Lord and their theories about tradition in Homeric poetry. I do not hope to present a universal description of every concept, or an exhaustive description of how such terms as “text,” “orality,” “literacy,” “writing,” and “myth” have been used, but to show how these and related terms are mixed up with each other in a befuddling way to create illusions of understanding (Powell, 2000b). We will want also to look closely at important issues in the history and theory of writing, the technology that makes literacy and literature possible. Finally, we will want to face difficult evidence from the history of art, which emphasizes innovative elements against traditional ones in the study of “traditional” Greek myth.

When we think about literature, we think theoretically and historically. In this book I try to do both. Each yields a conclusion in and of itself, which forms the basis for the next chapter, which builds, I hope, to a coherent understanding about the nature and origins of archaic Greek literature.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-03631-3 - Writing and the Origins of Greek Literature

Barry B. Powell

Excerpt

[More information](#)

CHAPTER 2

Text

Because we are beginning with Homer, we need to remember that Homer is a text and has always been a text (figure 1). Orally composed, perhaps, the Homeric poems are not oral poems; it is amazing anyone could think so. The *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, which we know only through alphabetic versions, do not even theoretically resemble the living experience of Homer's speech, his oral song. They are texts, cold abstract graphemes on a material basis that support an approximation of some phonic aspects of what was once an oral poem, but not that poem's pitch, emphasis, color, or musical backing. They are also poems that no one ever heard in a traditional context. An oral poem is performed before an audience and is accompanied by music. There is interruption, strong drink, camaraderie, and the things that happen in a night club with live jazz. The poems of Homer are none of this, but a physical object first with look and texture and graphemes capable of interpretation, skeletons really, which suggest through symbolic means a vague impression of the poetic flesh that once clothed them.

Because the Homeric Question is concerned with origins, we are interested to know how this physical object, this text, came into being. One way of making a text is to hold a pen and inscribe marks on a flexible substance, arranging the marks into rows according to complex rules of orthography and formal grammar, in expression following classical models that you can expect your socially equal readers to understand and enjoy. The creation of a poetic text will lie in the hands of a master of literature, of one highly trained in artistic expression in "words." The Alexandrians made poetic texts in just this way and so did the Romans, who imitated them. Shakespeare and Wallace Stevens did something similar. In general people have wanted Homer's texts to have come into being in the same way, at the hands of a similar master, and to precede any translation of the text into spoken symbols. The "oral formulaic theory" of Homeric composition reverses the process, but still leaves unclear how

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-03631-3 - Writing and the Origins of Greek Literature

Barry B. Powell

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Text

5

Figure 1. The Banks papyrus, showing *Iliad* 24.649–91, second century AD.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-03631-3 - Writing and the Origins of Greek Literature

Barry B. Powell

Excerpt

[More information](#)

our text came into being. It is easy to see how a text created in writing can be translated into speech symbols by someone trained to do so, but it is not easy to see how something that began as poetic speech symbols became a stream of cold graphic abstractions, or why.

Our own conceptual world consists more and more of sounds and images rather than of abstract markings on a flexible substance, and the word-processor mocks the theory of a fixed, original text dear to traditional philology, its basis really, rooted in the scholasticism of the medieval and modern academy. Because of our own experience with change in the technology of communication, it seems easier to question assumptions about how archaic Greek poetry became texts and about what happened next, but also to become confused about *text*. Hence some speak of “oral text,” a phrase that seems to allow a new model for Homer’s “text” that like all things oral (or like files in our computers) is ever shifting, refined, and altered on the tides of orality. If oral song can be “oral text,” then Homer’s text could appear at any time at all, and more than once, freeing us from the burden of a historical Homer, who is only a tradition or a symbol for the tradition (cf. Nagy, 1996).

Milman Parry died before the computer age, but he pioneered the use of modern technology to make new models of historical explanation. He discovered a new way to make a text. He carried to Yugoslavia the best electronic recording equipment he could find, when electronic recording was primitive and some songs were taken down on aluminum wire, others on metal discs. In the Milman Parry Collection at Harvard, Albert Lord showed me, shortly before his death in 1991, several rolls of this wire, hopelessly tangled in a drawer – what lost songs does this tangled text preserve? Aluminum wire, tangled or not, is not oral song, but a kind of text, just as figure 1 is a text. Parry’s aluminum discs and wire, just as much as a papyrus with graphemes scratched thereon, provide a material basis – obviously liable to corruption – for a code impressed upon it. In either case the text depends on technological innovation: the Greek alphabet, on the one hand, inscribed on parchment or papyrus, and electronic magnetization, on the other. All texts are useless without the technology to decode its symbols: the rules of Greek alphabetic writing in the one case, a 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 wire or discs or by means of graphemes on a flexible substance. Parry experimented with both methods and

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-03631-3 - Writing and the Origins of Greek Literature

Barry B. Powell

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Text*

7

noticed that the slower, more plodding grapheme-method produced a longer and more complex text. Writing has no ordinary part, nor could have, in the ordinary composition of such song, because such song is a form of entertainment whose purpose is to entrance, through a good story well told, the singer's listeners, a small, familiar, and homogeneous group (Lord, 1995, 2). A song is not made into a text under ordinary conditions. There is no audience to entertain, except the recorder, and expectations are even antithetical to those under ordinary conditions. Gone are the essential constraints of time and human attention, within which entertainers must function. The recording of the poem is doing something to the shape of the poem and to the nature of the poem.

It is of course possible to record a song more than once, if you have the motive, and Parry/Lord made deliberate experiments along these lines, including recording the same song after an interval of years. But Parry's repeated recording of the same song was for experimental purposes and cannot be thought to have occurred in the ancient world. Many have wondered at the improbability of making the Homeric texts – the time, the expense, the circumstances now lost and hard to imagine. The dictation of an oral version of the Homeric poems, and of the *Hymns* and of the *Cycle* and of Hesiod's poems, the making of texts, can have happened only a single time for each text. In fact traditional philology assumes a single archetype for all these poems.

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, for example 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 could conceive of "phrase" or "word"). Such phrases are the "formulas" and "formulaic phrases" of Homeric criticism, the irreducible basis, after seventy years, of the Parry/Lord theory of oral composition, the oral-formulaic theory: without formulas, there is no theory. Embarrassingly, no one has been able to define a formula, which like "word" or "phoneme" in modern linguistic analysis resists precise description. Formulaic analysis reached a dead end thirty years ago (Hoekstra, 1964; Hainsworth, 1968; cf. Russo, 1997). Nonetheless, Homer's style remains inappropriate to written composition and unknown in written composition. Neither Parry nor Lord, however, were interested in the nature or history of the technology that had made the text of Homer possible, any

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-03631-3 - Writing and the Origins of Greek Literature

Barry B. Powell

Excerpt

[More information](#)

more than Parry investigated the history of the recording machine. The technology was there and somebody brought it to bear.

Here is the paradox, the conundrum. The technology of writing that made our text, which may or may not bear a relationship 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 the epoch-making *Prolegomena ad Homerum* of 1795 (Wolf, trans. Grafton et al., 1985). The curious ignorance of writing in the Homeric poems was Wolf's strongest evidence that Homer's world was illiterate. We cannot believe that Homer has suppressed all reference to writing in order to create "epic distance," a literary ploy to make his poetic world seem long ago and far away, in the way Homer's warriors use bronze weapons exclusively, special beings glorified by bronze. Iron, by contrast, is common in Homeric similes, which describe the everyday world. Bronze weapons are obviously old-fashioned and Homer knows this, but no illiterate bard could have so well understood the historical importance of writing that he removed references to it in his song. If Homer had seen writing, the technology that made his text possible, he ought to have mentioned it. He does mention writing once, in the story of Bellerophon (*Il.* 6.157–211). The king of Corinth sent Bellerophon to his father-in-law in Lycia with a folding tablet containing "baneful signs," *σήματα λυγρά*. But "writing" is always *γράμματα*, "scratchings," reflecting the ancient Greek experience of writing, learned by scratching marks in a wax tablet. Homer does not understand the reference to writing. It came to him with the Eastern story, whose hero's name contains the Levantine storm god Baal (Powell, 1997b). If writing were part of Homer's world, we would find more of it in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* than in a single clumsy reference, and it is not hard to point out places where it would be natural to mention writing. For example, when the Achaeans mark lots to determine who will fight Hector (*Il.* 7.175–89), out flies the *klēros* of Ajax. "And the herald carried it everywhere through the crowd, and moving from left to right showed it to the Achaean captains; but they did not recognize it and denied it." Only when the herald reaches Ajax, does Ajax recognize the *sēma*, unique to himself, not part of a system.

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 narrative in the literatures of literate societies. In the societies of Egypt and the Near East, written documents and writers of documents appear constantly and play key roles in narrative. In the Egyptian classic "Tale of Sinuhe," for example, an Egyptian

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-03631-3 - Writing and the Origins of Greek Literature

Barry B. Powell

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Text*

9

nobleman from the Twelfth Dynasty (c. 1800 BC) flees to Syria after the assassination of King Senwosret. He establishes himself among desert tribesmen, acquires wealth and family, defeats a powerful antagonist, then pleads to the gods to go home. Senwosret, now Pharaoh, hears his plea and sends a written message to urge Sinuhe's return to Egypt (Lichtheim, 1973, 223–33).

Copy of the decree brought to this servant [i.e. Sinuhe] concerning his return to Egypt:

Horus: Living in Births; the Two Ladies: Living in Births; the King of Upper and Lower Egypt: *Kheperkare*; the Son of Re: *Senwosret*, who lives forever. Royal decree to the Attendant Sinuhe [these are four of the five royal names]:

This decree of the King is brought to you to let you know: That you circled the foreign countries, from Qedem to Retenu, land giving you land, was the counsel of your own heart. . .

and so forth, the missive describing in detail Sinuhe's achievements, his moral qualities, and the comforts that await him back home in Egypt.

When it had been read to me, I threw myself on my belly. . . . I strode around my camp shouting: "What compares with this which is done to a servant whom his heart led astray to alien lands?"

Then:

"Copy of the reply to this decree: The servant of the Palace, Sinuhe, says: In very good peace! Regarding the matter of this flight which this servant did in his ignorance. . . ."

and so forth for a long time, as in his written reply Sinuhe describes in elaborate language his innocence from crime and gratitude for permission to return to Egypt. Formally, Sinuhe's epistolary reply is a hymn of praise, containing such language as

Re has set the fear of you throughout the land, the dread of you in every foreign country. The sun rises at your pleasure. The water in the river is drunk when you wish. . . .

and ending with the formal prayer

As Re, Horus, and Hathor love your august nose, may Mont lord of Thebes wish it to live forever!

The scribe, or scribes, who invented this tale took pleasure in describing a world in which texts motivate action, and in showing off their own skills in epistolary art.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-03631-3 - Writing and the Origins of Greek Literature

Barry B. Powell

Excerpt

[More information](#)

It is hardly surprising that writing and written documents should play a key role in Near Eastern literatures, because writing played a key role in Near Eastern society. It is a test of Hellenic provincialism during the Iron Age that their epic poets, at its conclusion, have never heard of writing (except in the story of Bellerophon). Later details of the Trojan saga are happy to refer to **ΤΕΙΚΑΛΛΙΣΤΕΙ** on the Apple of Discord, or the false message by which *Odysseus* destroyed his enemy Palamedes, who had himself invented *grammata* (Apollodorus, *Bibliotheca* 3.8). Of such refinements the Homeric and Hesiodic poems know nothing. For this reason alone we cannot push Homer's *floruit* into the historically literate period.

Literacy is a technology, a how-to-do, and those who possess it know others who possess it. Parry, through stylistic analysis and field experiment, proved Wolf's point about the origin of the epic tradition in an illiterate age, but the two men drew opposite conclusions: Wolf, that Homer was not historical; Parry, that he was. Like Parry's tape recorder, a new technology came to Greece from outside in the hands of outsiders, *Phoinikeia grammata*, to create texts where before was oral song. The technology must have come to Greece near the time that Homer and Hesiod were singing, before news of its power could enter traditions of oral song, a conclusion in accord with the epigraphic record, which begins in the second quarter of the eighth century near where every other index places the illiterate composer of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. The concinnity of Homer's *floruit* with the date of the origin of the Greek alphabet is one of the strongest reasons for thinking that the adapter, the man who invented the alphabet on the model of Phoenician writing, himself recorded the songs of Homer and even Hesiod (Powell, 1991, 221–37; 1997b). There are no tape recorders mentioned in the songs of the guslar Avdo Mejedovich either.