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

Barry B. Powell

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## WRITING AND THE ORIGINS OF GREEK LITERATURE

Professor Powell ties the origin and nature of archaic Greek literature to the special technology of Greek alphabetic writing. In building his model he presents chapters on specialized topics – text, orality, myth, literacy, tradition, and memorization – and then shows how such special topics relate to larger issues of cultural transmission from East to West. Several chapters are devoted to the theory and history of writing, its definition and general nature as well as such individual developments as semasiography and logosyllabography, Chinese writing, and the West Semitic family of syllabaries. Powell shows how the Greek alphabet put an end to the multilateralism of Eastern traditions of writing, and how the recording of Homer and other early epic poetry cannot be separated from the alphabetic revolution. Finally, he explains how the creation of Greek alphabetic texts demythicized Greek myth and encouraged many free creations of new myths based on Eastern images.

BARRY B. POWELL is Halls-Bascom Professor of Classics at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. He is the author of the best-selling *Classical Myth* (4th edition, 2004) and *A Short Introduction to Myth* (2002), a study of the social, historical, and religious categories in which myth is effective. He has also co-edited *A New Companion to Homer* (1997), the most modern and comprehensive up-to-date study of Homer, but is best known for his book *Homer and the Origin of the Greek Alphabet* (1991), which has attracted wide attention internationally in both the general and the academic press. Proficient in ancient Egyptian, as well as in the classical and modern European languages, he is also a published poet. He has lectured and travelled widely throughout Europe, the Middle East, and the Far East and has been a member of the Managing Committee of the American School of Classical Studies in Athens, where he has spent many summers as an adjunct scholar.

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BARRY B. POWELL

*Halls-Bascom Professor of Classics, University of Wisconsin–Madison*



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The real sciences advance in lines, with checks and halts, but in lines. Philology, the study of the past, seems to move by escapes and loops, in a kind of circle, and ever and anon returns to the point it started from. Herein it resembles religion.

T. W. Allen, *Homer: The Origins and the Transmission* (Oxford, 1924) 109

“... he’s been reworking his songs in concert since he began touring with The Band in 1966; he calls the familiar recorded versions merely ‘blueprints.’ He’ll distill a verse of ‘Mr. Tambourine Man’ to just two or three notes, followed up by a couple of choruses on guitar, repeating a single three-note pattern over each of the changing chords. When he’s on, there’s no place you’d rather be.”

D. Gates on Bob Dylan, *Newsweek* (Oct. 6, 1997) 66

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*In memoriam Roy Bundy*

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## *Preface*

I am a Homerist by training and inclination. Nothing can explain the mystery of Homer, so I won't try to explain the fascination he has held for me throughout my life. Perhaps Homer's mystery lies in the unknown world that he presents to us with unparalleled vividness, so different, yet like our own. His world is familiar and strange.

The other mystery of Homer is that we have him at all, a fact defying basic assumptions. Where is the primitiveness of the late Iron Age? Where is its stumbling towards greatness in the archaic and classical periods? Why perfection at the first?

My own research, and that of others, into the mystery of Homer has revealed how his greatness depends more than we imagined on the achievement of earlier, especially Mesopotamian, culture. We are surprised to see how little in Homer is wholly Greek, beyond the patina of nomenclature and geography. As for Bronze Age Homer, we cannot find him, and Iron Age Greece now appears more Eastern Mediterranean than Balkan. Although much is traditional in Homer, we are also surprised to find how much belongs to the individual poet, to the genius of a single man.

None of this conversation about Homer, nor the poems themselves, could exist without the technology of Greek alphabetic writing. We take it for granted, but easily forget that for Homer it is *sine qua non*. The relationship between the written form and theories of that form's origins must always constitute the heart of the Homeric Question. This book is about a lot of things, but mostly about that.

*Madison, 2001*

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