

# WRITING AND THE ORIGINS OF GREEK LITERATURE

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## *Contents*

<i>List of figures</i>	<i>page</i> ix
<i>Preface</i>	xv
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xvi
1 Introduction: building models like a wigwam	1
2 Text	4
3 Orality and genre	11
4 Myth	18
5 Literacy	21
6 Tradition	26
7 Memorization	29
8 M. L. West and the Eastern origins of Greek tradition	33
9 Cultural transmission by literate means in the Near East	48
10 Writing: general	56
11 Writing: semasiography and logosyllabography	62
12 Writing: the Chinese enigma	72
13 Oral and written in the land between the rivers	80
14 Oral and written in the Valley of the Nile	89
15 The West Semitic revolution	99
16 The invention of the Greek alphabet and the end of multiliteralism	112

17	Where does Homer fit in the alphabetic revolution?	125
18	The <i>aidos</i> in context	134
19	Aoidic innovation in myth: stories from pots	146
20	Summary and conclusions: early Greek literature in context	188
	<i>Bibliography</i>	197
	<i>Index</i>	206

## *Figures*

1. The Bankes papyrus, showing <i>Iliad</i> 24.649–91, second century AD. London, British Museum, Papyrus cxiv. © The British Museum	page 5
2. Sappho with unrolled papyrus holding poetic text, which would be performed to the accompaniment of the lyre that a companion holds. Attic red-figure, c. 430 BC. Athens, National Archaeological Museum, 1260	31
3. Fresco from the throne room at the palace of Pylos as reconstructed by Piet de Jong, c. 1200 BC. Photo courtesy Blegen Archives, University of Cincinnati	45
4. A three-fingered bronze lyre-player from Crete, c. 750–700 BC. Heraklion, Archaeological Museum, 2064	47
5. Reliefs of scribes, from the palace of Tiglath-pileser III, c. 725 BC. London, British Museum, 118882. © The British Museum	53
6. Bulla with impressions, southern Iraq, c. 3500 BC (after Schmandt-Besserat, 1996, figure 72)	57
7. Sign showing duck and ducklings. Author's photo	63
8. Burning cigarette	63
9. Hellenistic <i>technopaignion</i> in form of an altar, second century AD (after <i>Bucolici Graeci</i> , ed. A. S. F. Gow). Used by permission of Oxford University Press	66
10. Column from the tomb of Nefertari, west face, Chamber G, Valley of the Queens, thirteenth century BC. Los Angeles, The Getty Conservation Institute. © J. Paul Getty Trust, all rights reserved	67
11. The Buddha as the character <i>fo</i> . Photo © Wang Miao/Paris, Agence de Press, ANA	76

- |  |     |
|--|-----|
| 12. Wooden tablet from the Ulu Burun shipwreck, c. 1300 BC. Courtesy of the Institute of Nautical Archaeology, Texas A&M University, photo by Don A. Frey  | 82  |
| 13. Waxed ivory writing boards from Nimrud, c. 720 BC. London, British Museum, 131952–3. © The British Museum  | 83  |
| 14. Horus leads Ani into the presence of Osiris, from the Nineteenth-Dynasty Papyrus of Ani, Spell 30B. London, British Museum. © The British Museum   | 93  |
| 15. The ceremony of opening of the mouth, Chapter 21 of the <i>Book of the Dead</i> , from the Nineteenth-Dynasty Papyrus of Ani. London, British Museum. © The British Museum   | 95  |
| 16. Trade routes of northeastern Mediterranean. Madison, University of Wisconsin–Madison Cartographic Lab  | 100 |
| 17. Ugaritic signary, with transliteration into Roman characters, characters from the International Phonetic Alphabet, and modern Hebrew characters (after Naveh, 1982, fig. 25)   | 104 |
| 18. The Inscription of Zakur, king of Hamath, c. 800 BC (after Naveh, 1982, figure 73)   | 105 |
| 19. A miniature amuletic ivory writing board from a tomb in Marsigiliana d'Albegna in northern Etruria, c. 700 BC (after Guarducci, 1967, figure 89)   | 115 |
| 20. A boy doing lessons on a folding tablet, from an Attic red-figured <i>kylix</i> , c. 450 BC. Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, MS 4842  | 116 |
| 21. A man holding a papyrus roll, beside his wife who holds a folding tablet and stylus, from the House of Terentius Nero, Pompeii, first century AD. Photo: Naples Archaeological Museum, Archives G. dagli Orti. Courtesy Soprintendenza Archeologica delle Province di Napoli e Caserta | 117 |
| 22. The oldest Greek inscription, from Gabii in Latium, c. 775 BC (after Ridgway, 1997, figure 2)  | 118 |
| 23. The Dipylon Oinochoe Inscription, c. 740 BC (after Powell, 1988, figure 2)   | 119 |
| 24. The earliest written law from Greece, from the temple of Apollo at Dreros on Crete, c. 640 BC (after Guarducci, 1967, figure 59a)  | 119 |

25. Voice spectrograph of snippet from a Bob Dylan song.  
Courtesy of Adam Powell 123
26. Avdo Mejedovich at Bijelo Polje in 1935. ©1999 Milman  
Parry Collection of Oral Literature and the President and  
Fellows of Harvard College. The author acknowledges the  
kind permission of Gregory Nagy and Stephen Mitchell  
(Curators of the Milman Parry Collection of Oral  
Literature) and David Elmer (Assistant Curator) to use  
this photo 136
27. School scene, Attic red-figure by Douris, c. 485 BC. Berlin,  
Staatliche Museen, F2285. Photo © Bildarchiv  
Preußischer Kulturbesitz 138
28. Another school scene, other side of Attic red-figure vase  
by Douris, c. 485 BC (figure 27). Berlin, Staatliche Museen,  
F2285. Photo © Bildarchiv Preußischer Kulturbesitz 139
29. A rhapsode delivers his song from a podium, Attic  
red-figure amphora by Kleophrades, c. 480–470 BC.  
London, British Museum, E270. © The British Museum 143
30. The so-called Moliones, funerary scene with charioteers  
from a Geometric krater, c. 750–735 BC. New York,  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1914,  
14.130.15 147
31. Man fighting a lion, Geometric stand, c. 735 BC. Athens,  
Kerameikos Museum, 407 148
32. The death of Neoptolemus, on an Apulian red-figure  
volute krater, c. 370 BC. Milan, Intesa Bei Collection,  
Inv. F.L. –00111A –E/IC (formerly Milan, H.A. Collection) 150
33. The Narmer Palette, c. 3100 BC. Cairo, Egyptian  
Museum, no. 14716 152
34. The battle on the Orontes River, from the Great Hall  
of the Temple of Ramses II at Abu Simbel, north wall,  
c. 1300 BC. Author's photo 155
35. North wall of side chapel to the south of the main  
hypostyle hall of the mortuary temple to Ramses III at  
Medinet Habu, c. 1150 BC. Author's photo 157
36. The battle of Til-Tuba, from Nineveh, Southwest Palace  
of King Sennacherib, Room 33, c. 660–650 BC. London,  
British Museum, 128801/802. © The British Museum 158
37. A hero stabs a female Cyclops, on a terracotta relief from  
Khafaje, c. 2025–1763 BC, from the Diyala excavations of

- the Oriental Institute. Chicago, University of Chicago, Oriental Institute, 3195 159
38. Two heroes fighting a seven-headed serpent, on a cylinder seal from Tell Ashmar, c. 3000–2340 BC. Chicago, University of Chicago, Oriental Institute, 7237 160
39. Hero fighting bird, on an Assyrian cylinder seal, c. 750–650 BC. New York, The Pierpont Morgan Library, 689 161
40. Marduk and the dragon, from a seal found in Babylon, 800–700 BC (after Oates, 1979, 198, figure 136) 163
41. North frieze, military landing and naval battle, Room 5, West House, Akrotiri (Thera), c. 1650 BC. Athens, National Archaeological Museum 165
42. Siege scene on a silver rhyton from Shaft Grave IV of Grave Circle A at Mycenae, c. 1550 BC. Athens, National Archaeological Museum 166
43. Hero kills a seven-headed serpent, with scorpions, on a Sumerian seal, c. 3000–2500 BC (after Frankfort, 1955, pl. 47, no. 497. Cf. Ahlberg-Cornell, 1992, 39) 168
44. Siege engine from the palace of Tiglath-pileser III at Nimrud, c. 730 BC. London, British Museum. © The British Museum 169
45. The Trojan Horse and Heracles on a Boeotian fibula, c. 700 BC. Drawing after London, British Museum, 3205. © The British Museum 170
46. The Trojan Horse on a *pithos* from Mykonos, c. 670 BC. Mykonos, Mykonos Museum, 70 170
47. Early Attic sherd showing archer, c. 650 BC. Athens, National Archaeological Museum, 16400 171
48. Bird-strangler on an Assyrian cylinder seal, eighth–seventh century BC. Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris 172
49. Geometric vase, c. 750–700 BC. Copenhagen, Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, I.N. 3153 173
50. Assurbanipal killing a lion, from Nineveh, 668–630 BC. London, British Museum. © The British Museum 174
51. Presentation scene on a cylinder seal from Ur, c. 2500 BC (U 18974, L. Legrain, *Ur. Excavation X. Seal Cylinders*, New York, 1951, pl. 19, no. 295) 174
52. The Judgment of Paris on a Laconian comb, from the sanctuary of Artemis Orthia at Sparta, c. 625 BC. Athens, National Archaeological Museum, 15368 175



*List of figures*

xiii

- |   |     |
|---|-----|
| 53. The Judgment of Paris on a Corinthian <i>olpe</i> , c. 600 BC.<br>Rome, Villa Giulia, 22679   | 175 |
| 54. Man holding a lion, facing a lion, from the Geometric<br>stand, c. 735 BC (see another view in figure 31). Athens,<br>Kerameikos Museum, 407  | 177 |
| 55. Tarantine stater showing man riding dolphin, c. 735 BC.<br>Madison, University of Wisconsin, Elvehjem Museum of<br>Art, Gift of Herbert M. Howe, 1980.148   | 180 |
| 56. Man riding dolphin, on a black-figure <i>lekythos</i> by the<br>Athena Painter, c. 490 BC. Baltimore, Baltimore Museum<br>of Art, Antioch Subscription Fund and Frank J. and<br>Elizabeth L. Goodnow Collections, by exchange,<br>1960.55.1 | 181 |
| 57. Blinding of Polyphemus on a proto-Attic amphora,<br>c. 670 BC. Eleusis, Archaeological Museum, 546  | 183 |

## 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.

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

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.