

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-01259-2 - The Greek Epic Cycle and its Ancient Reception: A Companion

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Excerpt

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## Introduction: *Kyklos*, the Epic Cycle and Cyclic poetry

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### KYKLOS: TRACING A METAPHOR

The term *kyklos* is notorious for its ambiguity. The word encompasses various interpretations, most of them metaphorical: apart from the proper sense ‘circle’, it can designate any circular body like a wheel, a trencher, a place of an assembly or the people standing in a ring, the vault of the sky, the orb or disk of a celestial body, the wall around a city, a round shield, the eyeballs, an olive wreath, a collection of legends or poems, a circular dance, a rounded period, a globe, a kind of anapaest, the ring composition. Whatever sense one adopts, it can be generally agreed upon that the meaning of *kyklos* as a ‘cycle’ of epic poems must be metaphorical.

We will now offer a synopsis of five possible interpretations of the term *kyklos* with respect to the Epic Cycle. In particular, the word *kyklos* has been employed so as to denote: (a) an idea of uniformity and continuity; (b) a notion of ‘ring form’; (c) the concept of completeness; (d) an encircling or framing function; and (e) a poetics based on manufacturing a perfected whole.

(a) The notion of uniformity and continuity is inherent in an emblematic passage from Photius’ *Bibliotheca* (319a30), which quotes Proclus – but Proclus may have reflected an older introductory justification to a compilation of summaries of the Cyclic poems that possibly were Proclus’ source:<sup>1</sup> λέγει [scil. ὁ Πρόκλος] δὲ ὡς τοῦ ἐπικοῦ κύκλου τὰ ποιήματα διασώζεται καὶ σπουδάζεται τοῖς πολλοῖς οὐχ οὔτωι διὰ τὴν ἀρετὴν ὡς διὰ τὴν ἀκολουθίαν τῶν ἐν αὐτῶι πραγμάτων (‘Proclus says that the poems of the Epic Cycle are preserved and paid attention to not so much for their value as for the orderly sequence of the events narrated in it’).

This passage makes clear that down to Proclus’ day the epic cycle was studied for its narrative linearity, i.e. because it offered a sequential presentation of mythical events stretching from the ‘love mixing’ of Ouranos

<sup>1</sup> West (2013: 25). It is a widespread conjecture that Proclus’ summaries presupposed an older epitome or a plurality of older epitomes: cf. e.g. Burgess and West, below in this volume, respectively pp. 48 and 105. On the identity of Proclus, see below, p. 35.

and Gaia to Odysseus' death and the end of the race of heroes. This narrative concatenation must have created a notion of uniformity that surpassed the individuality of the various epic poems from which the Epic Cycle was formed, and offered the readers a convenient, continuous and linear storyline.

The Cyclic poems' original shape will have substantially resembled that outlined in Proclus' summaries.<sup>2</sup> The summary of each poem begins with a thematic 'bridge' to the last episode or episodes of the previous epic in the list.<sup>3</sup> What seems at first sight like a repetition necessitated by the elliptical form of Proclus' summary may, in fact, reflect a recapitulation device that the original Cyclic poems expanded sometimes into a whole episode. Besides, Proclus' transitions from one poem to the other punctually stress that each poem 'succeeds' to another.<sup>4</sup> This 'cyclic impulse' was a basic feature not only of the archaic epic poems which were later named after it.<sup>5</sup> The

<sup>2</sup> Not without original overlappings and contradictions, however, which the epitomizers probably took care to mend: see here below and West, below in this volume, p. 98.

<sup>3</sup> *Cypria* (end): capture of Briseis and Chryseis and catalogue of Trojans and Allies – *Iliad* (beginning): strife between Achilles and Agamemnon on Briseis and Catalogue of Ships and Catalogue of Trojans and Allies; *Iliad* (end): death of Hector – *Aethiopsis* (beginning): mention of Hector's funeral; the Trojans ask Penthesileia to help them to make up for the loss of Hector; *Aethiopsis* (end): *stasis* between Odysseus and Ajax about the arms of Achilles – *Ilias parva* (beginning): *stasis* between Odysseus and Ajax about the arms of Achilles; *Ilias parva* (end): Trojan horse enters the city – *Iliou persis* (beginning): Trojan horse enters the city; *Iliou persis* (end): Achaeans insult Athena by raping Cassandra – *Nostoi* (beginning): Athena makes Agamemnon and Menelaus fight over the question of whether or not they must appease the goddess before sailing away; *Nostoi* (end): murder of Agamemnon by Clytaemnestra – *Odyssey* (beginning): the gods recall Agamemnon's fate; *Odyssey* (end): decision reached about the burial of the suitors – *Telegony* (beginning): burial of the suitors by their relatives.

Repetitions in the beginnings and endings of Trojan Cyclic epics are however a rather complex phenomenon: a line must be drawn between original overlappings (which may go back to oral epic tradition in the manner of narrative doublets and dwindling pendants) and editorial reworking, the former aiming at connecting an epic that narrates a distinct phase of the war to the next one, the latter trying to create a more smooth and linear narrative progression.

<sup>4</sup> At the beginning of the *Cypria*, 'to this succeed (ἐπιβάλλει τούτοις) . . . the so-called *Cypria*' (Proclus is referring here to the Cyclic poem preceding the Trojan Cycle in the broader Epic Cycle, i.e. the *Thebaid* or the connected *Epigonoï* or the *Alcmeonis*. See below, pp. 30–1, 102); for the *Aethiopsis*: 'to the aforementioned material succeeds Homer's *Iliad* (ἐπιβάλλει δὲ τοῖς προειρημένους Ἰλιάδης Ὀμήρου)', after which are the five books of the *Aethiopsis*'; for the *Ilias parva*: 'next (ἐξῆς) are the four books of the *Ilias parva*'; for the *Iliou persis*: 'to these succeed (ἐπεταὶ δὲ τούτοις) the two books of the *Iliou persis*'; for the *Nostoi*, 'to these connect (συνάπτει δὲ τούτοις) the five books of the *Nostoi*'.

<sup>5</sup> See Scodel (2012: 514–15): 'The discussion of the Cycle has too often been framed in terms based on written texts, where we expect a sequel or introduction to fit itself precisely to the text that precedes it. This is not the standard we should apply to early Greek epic. The general shape of these poems gives the impression that they were composed with a view to telling a single story, but that the poets did not recognize the versions of others as possessed of any absolute authority. I would suggest that we understand the 'cyclic impulse' as a basic (though not, of

same ‘cyclic impulse’ can also be observed in classical historiography, where at least Hecataeus, Herodotus, Thucydides, Xenophon and Theopompus represent a chain of authors each of whom continues his narrative from the endpoint of his predecessor’s account or tries to fill in the gap between that endpoint and the ‘official’ beginning of his own history.<sup>6</sup> This meticulous effort to create a thematic ‘bridge’ linking the start of one’s own work to the end of his predecessor’s bears a striking similarity to Proclus’ summaries of the Trojan Cyclic epics.

In this light, we may see in the ‘repeated’ episodes featuring at the end of one Trojan Cyclic epic and the beginning of the next a reflection of the effort to communicate to the audience that the poem they are going to hear places itself within a chain of poems dealing with the same general topic, i.e. the Trojan War, its background, and its aftermath: the individual poem only makes sense if the audience is to recall that the epic they are about to hear *continues* a unified storyline lying beyond the boundaries of the poem at hand. The same may have been the case for the Theban part of the Epic Cycle. The *Epigonoí* begin with a verse – νῦν αὖθ’ ὀπλοτέρων ἀνδρῶν ἀρχώμεθα, Μοῦσαι (‘But now, Muses, let us begin on the younger men’)<sup>7</sup> – that may presuppose a preceding poem or oral tradition on a previous generation of heroes. There may be yet another instance of this formulaic structure opening a poem that considered itself the continuation of another: the end (1019–20) of the Hesiodic *Theogony* and the beginning (1–2) of the *Catalogue of Women* point to this direction.<sup>8</sup> Along similar lines, Burgess has drawn attention to what he calls ‘verse joints’ aimed at creating an artificial link between the end of a poem and the beginning of the next: the condensed proem of the *Iliad* known to Aristoxenus<sup>9</sup> may have served as a bridge between the *Cypria* and this *Iliad*, and the two verses connecting the *Aethiopis* to the *Iliad*, which we know in two different

course, universal) characteristic of archaic epic.’ See also West (2002a), whose discussion of a Corinthian epic cycle partly rests on the idea of complementarity between its three constituent epics, the *Titanomachy*, the *Corinthiaca*, and the *Europia*.

<sup>6</sup> Canfora (1971 = 1999). See § 2a below.

<sup>7</sup> PEGF 1 (= D., W.). See Cingano, below in this volume, pp. 244–5.

<sup>8</sup> On both *Epigonoí* and *Catalogue*, see Cingano, below in this volume, pp. 254–5.

<sup>9</sup> *Anecdota Osanni* in *Lexicon Vindob.* ed. Nauck p. 273 (= *Vitae Homerí, App. Rom.* B pp. 454–5 West): Ἀριστόξευος δ’ ἐν α’ Πραξιδαμαντείων [F 91a Wehrli X 198] φησὶ κατὰ τινὰς ἔχειν: ἔσπετε νῦν μοι Μοῦσαι Ὀλύμπια δώματ’ ἔχουσαι, / ὄππῃ δὴ μῆνις τε χόλος τ’ ἔλε Πηλεΐωνα / Λητοῦς τ’ ἀγλαόν υἷον· ὃ γὰρ βασιλῆι χολωθεὶς (‘Aristoxenus in book 1 of the *Praxidamanteia* says that, according to some, it [the non-Homeric *Iliad*] begins thus: “Tell me now Muses, who have your homes at Olympos, how wrath and anger seized the son of Peleus and the splendid son of Leto; for he [Achilles] being angry against the king”). See Kelly, below in this volume, pp. 329–30.

variants,<sup>10</sup> indicate that these ‘artificial’ links between one epic and the preceding one within a group of thematically linkable poems may have been created in rhapsodic performance and thus were perhaps convenient for the rhapsodes and agreeable to their audiences.<sup>11</sup>

(b) The metaphor of *kyklos* to express an early notion of circularity inherent in the events of world history or human fate can be detected in Herodotus’ famous ‘wheel’ of human life (1.207.2). Croesus, just defeated, and thus reduced from the greatest power to total misery as a captive, warns his vanquisher Cyrus: ‘learn this first of all: there is a *kyklos* of the human affairs, and as it revolves (περιφερόμενος) it prevents the same people from enjoying success consistently’. Herodotus’ *kyklos* describes a series of events which in his view involve a patterned evolution from a beginning to an acme and later an end which reiterates the situation of the beginning. Cities or nations that are small can become great and powerful for a while, just to return to their initial humbleness/smallness later on; so the Lydian empire emerged from an originally insignificant position to great power with Gyges and Croesus, but it was with them that it sank to misery again.<sup>12</sup>

The *scholia Parisina* to the very last verse of the *Argonautica* by Apollonius of Rhodes specifically state that the Argonauts who return to Iolcos have completed a *kyklos*: ὅθεν οὖν ἀνήχθησαν τὴν ἀρχὴν οἱ ἥρωες εἰς Σκυθίαν ἐπὶ τὸ δέρασ ἀποπλεύσαντες, ἐκεῖσε ὡσπερ διὰ τινος κύκλου κατήχθησαν ἐπανελθόντες (‘from which place the heroes departed in the beginning when they sailed to Scythia in search of the Fleece, there [scil. to the same place] they returned by means of a kind of *kyklos*’). In this context, it is clear that the term *kyklos* refers to the external shape of the Argonautic epic, which may be called cyclical since the Argonauts returned to the very place they had sailed from at the beginning of the epic.<sup>13</sup> Apollonius may also have aimed at creating – in addition to the ‘cyclic’ use of time in his main narrative – an externally cyclical shape.<sup>14</sup> Likewise, it may be claimed that the last poem of the Epic Cycle, the *Telegony*, which ends with the immortalization of heroes, may be seen as a ‘return’ to the beginning of the first epic, the *Theogony*, which was about the creation of the divine world. In fact at the end of the *Telegony*, after Telemachus is married to Circe and Telegonus to Penelope, they are all immortalized and the same is the case with Odysseus who is transferred to the Isles of the Blessed. Thus, the Epic Cycle may have

<sup>10</sup> See Fantuzzi (2012: 268–70); Rengakos, below in this volume, pp. 312–13.

<sup>11</sup> Burgess (2001: 16, 140–1); also Rengakos, below, pp. 158–9.

<sup>12</sup> See below, p. 32.

<sup>13</sup> Adam (1889: 92). <sup>14</sup> See in particular Rengakos (2004: 304).

ended in a way that denoted a kind of ‘return’ to a state of being in which the divine and human worlds coalesced. Like a circle, this compositional ‘ring’ would end exactly where it began.

(c) According to the scholia on Gregory of Nazianzos,<sup>15</sup> Aristotle also presupposed the question of how the epics belong to a ‘cycle’ or ‘circle’. The scholiast reached the conclusion that in *Anal. post.* 77b32 the notion of cyclicity derives from the use of the same mythical material in a variety of epic poems.<sup>16</sup> *Kyklos* here would designate an encircled whole that is complete in its comprehensiveness.<sup>17</sup> The problem with this interpretation is that attempts at defining in what the completeness of the Epic Cycle consisted vary enormously: since at least two of the three subsections (i.e., the Theban and Trojan sets of poems) of the Epic Cycle are complete in themselves, the term *kyklos* was also easily applicable to them, not only to the wider nexus of poems that far surpassed in size these constituent sections. See for instance the first-century BC *Tabula Borgiana*, IG xiv.1292 (= 10K Sadurska), which may be designating at least the *Danaids*, the *Oedipodea* and the *Thebaid* as belonging to a Theban Epic Cycle,<sup>18</sup> and thus ‘performs for other epic poems the sort of pictorial synthesis that the *Tabula Capitolina* acts out for the Trojan Cycle.’<sup>19</sup> On the other end of the spectrum, this idea of completeness perhaps also underlies the prose work of Dionysius the *kyklographos*, who drafted a mythological compilation in seven books called *kyklos historikos*. His compilation was a sort of encyclopedia of the mythical material found in epic, a formal corpus of heroic saga (‘Corpus der Heldensage’).<sup>20</sup> Perhaps it was similar to the fourth-century BC *Tragōidoumena* by Asclepiades of

<sup>15</sup> Σ Greg. Nazianz. *in laud. Bas. Magn.* 12 (ed. Jahn, *Patr. Gr.* 36, 914c Migne) = *Cyclus epicus* PEG T 29: καὶ Ἀριστοτέλης ἐν τῇ λογικῇ τάδε φησί: ‘τὰ ἔπη κύκλος, καθὼς πᾶσα ποίησις περὶ τοὺς αὐτοὺς μύθους καταγίνεται καὶ περὶ τὰς αὐτὰς ἱστορίας ὥσπερ διὰ τίνος περιόγεται κύκλου (‘and Aristotle in the *Organon* says the following: “epic verse is a cycle”, in so far as all [this] poetry deals with the same myths and the same stories as if it rotates in a circle’).

<sup>16</sup> See also Arist. *Categ.* 11a8–11, where the circle is described as a kind of shape that does not have either variation or degree, i.e. that is complete in itself.

<sup>17</sup> See Scafoglio (2004: 42–3).

<sup>18</sup> Wilamowitz (1884: 333–4) suggested that both the *Epigonoï* and the *Alcmeonis* were also included in the damaged part (after line 12) of this inscription; see also *Cyclus epicus* PEG T 2 (= *Tit.* T 3 D.). Davies (1986: 97) is very skeptical of this interpretation, since -]μαχίας in line 9 – preceding the reference to the Theban epics – may well be designating the *Titanomachy* (Τιτανομαχίας), which would void Wilamowitz’s suggestion. Other, even wilder, guesses include Severyns’ suggestion (1928: 122) that there might have been an epic featuring Heracles that would have been placed between the *Titanomachy* and the *Cypria*, since they both contained some reference to Heracles (the latter by means of Nestor’s digression).

<sup>19</sup> Squire (2011: 44; also 47 n. 49).

<sup>20</sup> Dionysius’ work was divided into sections (μέρη) and had the form of a mythological encyclopedia. See Clem. *Protr.* 14; Athen. 9.481e; Rzach (1922: 2347).

Tragilos, a student of Isocrates, which were probably another mythological collection in six books consisting of the summaries of the myths treated in tragedy.

Likewise, we have the idea of *enkyklios paideia* as quite generally a canon of recognized writers that exceeds mere epic poetry. This may have been a rather late development but, as John Philoponus indicates *à propos* of *kyklos* in Aristotle,<sup>21</sup> it is based on the same notion of completeness that seems to be inherent in the meaning of the word *kyklos*. Be that as it may, the idea of completeness does seem to be closely connected to the notion of a ‘cycle’, regardless of whether the term was used for smaller sub-cycles or for the larger Epic Cycle or for even wider collections of material of thematic relevance.

(d) The term *kyklos* has also been employed with respect to an encircling or framing function. According to a scholium to Clement’s *Protrepticus* (2.30.5 [303.35 Stählin]), κυκλικοί δὲ καλοῦνται ποιηταὶ οἱ τὰ κύκλωι τῆς Ἰλιάδος ἢ τὰ πρῶτα ἢ τὰ μεταγενέστερα ἐξ αὐτῶν τῶν Ὀμηρικῶν συγγράψαντες (‘Those poets are called cyclic who have written about the events encircling the *Iliad*, either preceding or following from the Homeric ones’). In this case, the word *kyklos* is neither associated with the notion of ‘unity’ nor of ‘ring form’ nor of ‘completeness’, which are discussed above, but with that of ‘enfolding’, ‘encasing’ or ‘enveloping’. This meaning presupposes the existence of a notional centre, in this case the *Iliad*, around which the *kyklos* is drawn.<sup>22</sup>

(e) A different kind of interpretation is suggested by those who believe that the term *kyklos* derives ultimately from an Indo-European metaphor for poetics. Building on the work of Schmitt,<sup>23</sup> Nagy<sup>24</sup> has pointed out the combination of the verb *takṣ-* ‘join, fit together’, which commonly refers to the handiwork of a carpenter, with the object *vác*, which means ‘poetic voice’, in a passage of the *Rig-Veda* (1.130.6). He also stressed that in the very same passage the verb *takṣ-* takes as object the word *rátha*, which means ‘wheel’ and is used metonymically for ‘chariot’. Greek poetic traditions

<sup>21</sup> Ioann. Philop. ad Arist. *Anal. post.* 77b 32 (156, 12 Wallies): ἡ κύκλον λέγει τὰ ἐγκύκλια λεγόμενα μαθήματα, οὕτω καλούμενα ἢ ὡς πᾶσαν ἱστορίαν περιέχοντά πως ἢ ὡς πάντων (ῥητόρων τε καὶ φιλοσόφων, τῶν τε καθόλου (καὶ τῶν add. Immisch) κατὰ μέρος add. Ra) περὶ αὐτὰ εἰλουμένων (‘or he calls a cycle the so-called general education, which is called in this way either because it somehow contains the whole story or because everyone (orators and philosophers, both on the whole and in part) is drawn together around them’). On *kyklos* in Aristotle, see below, p. 30.

<sup>22</sup> On the use of the adverb κύκλωι, see *Etym. Magn.* 544.12–26 s.v.

<sup>23</sup> (1967: 296–8). The first to develop this idea was Darmesteter (1878: 319–21); on the Indo-European poet as a professional, see Campanile (1977: 35–54).

<sup>24</sup> (1996a: 89–90).

share such metaphors that envision the poet as craftsman, either explicitly (τέκτων ἐπέων<sup>25</sup> ‘joiner of words’) or implicitly (ἤραρε τέκτων<sup>26</sup> ‘the joiner [*téktōn*] joined together [*ar-* in *ararisko*]). Furthermore, the word *kyklos/kykla* (neuter plural) ‘chariot(s) wheel’<sup>27</sup> (which in Homeric diction is invested with the same meaning as the word *harma* in Linear B tablets) can metonymically replace *harma* (‘chariot’) in Homeric Greek. Therefore, Nagy argued that the meaning of *kyklos* as the ‘sum total of epic by the master Homer is a metaphor that pictures the crafting of the ultimate chariot-wheel by the ultimate carpenter or “joiner”’.<sup>28</sup> This interpretation is further reinforced by the fact that the analogy between the activity of the carpenter and that of the poet is based on their shared conservation and unerring application of the rules of their art: ‘a well-made song is similar to a chariot, which the carpenter can manufacture only by repeating and preserving a science much older than himself, a science that ignores individualism and innovation or regularly puts them into an almost imperceptible use.’<sup>29</sup> Seen from this angle, the metaphor implicit in the word *kyklos* may be preserving in fossilized form an old Indo-European metaphor pertaining to the close association between singer/song and carpenter/chariot, the more so since the very idea of *kyklos* as the ‘sum total of epic’<sup>30</sup> was at an early stage linked to the prototypical *tektōn epeōn*, Homer himself.<sup>31</sup>

## THE EVOLUTION OF THE EPIC CYCLE

The term ‘(Epic) Cycle’ seems to be documented already in Aristotle as defining epic poetry or some epic poems (including Homer).<sup>32</sup> This use of the word as a canon of epic poetry may well be derived either from a

<sup>25</sup> Pind. *Pyth.* 3.112–4: ‘We know of Nestor and Lykian Sarpedon, still the talk of men, from such echoing verses as wise craftsmen (τέκτονες οἷα σοφοί) constructed.’ See also Alcman. *PMGF* 13a.8–10: ‘a rival for Alcman the Laconian, the builder (τέκτονι) of elaborate maiden-songs’; *HHomHerm.* (4) 25: ‘Hermes it was who first crafted (τεκτῆνατ’) the singing tortoise’ (transl. by West 2003: 115); Pind. *Nem.* 3.4–5: ‘the builders (τέκτονες) of honey-sounding revels’; Soph. *TrGF* F 159 (*Daedalus*): ‘chief of the builders of verse’ (τεκτόναρχος); Paus. 10.5.8: ‘and first fashioned (τεκτόνατ’) a song of ancient verses’; Bacchyl. 14.12–16: ‘The voice of the phorminx and clear-sounding choruses are not befitting (ἀρμόζει) for the battle that causes grievous woes, nor is the ring of rattling bronze with festivities.’ On the use of poetological phraseology pertaining to handiwork, see Nünlist (1998: 98–102).

<sup>26</sup> *Il.* 4.110; 23.712. <sup>27</sup> *Il.* 23.340; see also *Il.* 5.722 for the plural form κύκλα.

<sup>28</sup> Nagy (1996a: 90). <sup>29</sup> Campanile (1977: 36). <sup>30</sup> Nagy (1996a: 90).

<sup>31</sup> For a complete list of the poems attributed by various authors to Homer, see *Cyclus epicus* PEG T 10 (= \*3<sup>A</sup> D.).

<sup>32</sup> See especially below, p. 30.

Peripatetic reading list<sup>33</sup> or it may have been a Hellenistic creation resulting from the tendency of the Alexandrian Museum to establish canons of ancient literary genres.<sup>34</sup> But long before the fourth century, there already existed some notion of a connected series of epic poems that were either all associated with the Trojan War (and giving a complete ‘circular’ view of this war) or encompassed a broader mythical history that included the establishment of the divine world and the greatest wars of the heroic age (both Trojan and Theban).<sup>35</sup> In fact, it is important to note that since the Cyclic epics were based on earlier epics that were orally composed, Cyclic poetry emerged from the same performance culture as Homeric poetry.<sup>36</sup> The Epic Cycle as a static list of texts containing material that stretches from the creation of the divine world to the end of the age of heroes will have emerged as only one step in the gradual evolution of a performance culture that was once very much alive and did not necessarily pursue the same selective drift as the later list.

Based on these observations, we will posit an evolutionary model for the development of the Epic Cycle that includes six stages or phases. In the first stage, Cyclic poetry constitutes a mythological ‘supertext’,<sup>37</sup> on which Homeric epic, early lyric and in particular choral poetry regularly feed. At this stage the Epic Cycle is a sort of gallery of oral traditions, not a clear-cut construct. The second stage finds expression in a Cyclic performance culture that is centered and contextualized in, but not limited to, the Panathenaic festival at Athens. At this stage, we can see how the performance of portions of these epics may have been accommodated to the time-frame of a single day set aside for musical and rhapsodic contests.<sup>38</sup> The third stage reflects two important changes in the evolution of the Epic Cycle: the first pertains to the creation of a fixed copy of the Cyclic poems, which was rapidly arranged into a written form, the second to their new function as a reading list, a series of texts arranged according to the relative chronology of the events they narrated. This reading list must have contained the Trojan epics but, very likely, included the Theban epics as well. A further stage in the

<sup>33</sup> Cf. West (2003: 3). <sup>34</sup> See below, pp. 9, 29.

<sup>35</sup> See West (1983) for the distinction between a prototypical Trojan Cycle and the broader Epic Cycle first documented with certainty by Athenaeus.

<sup>36</sup> Cyclic lays or oral traditions that are pre-Homeric must be kept distinguished from the written Cyclic epics that are post-Homeric as well as from the creation of a unified canon of epic poetry, the Epic Cycle, which may go back to the fourth century BC. See Reichel (2011: 69 n. 3).

<sup>37</sup> Dowden (1996: 51).

<sup>38</sup> See Burgess (2004b: 8). On a reconstruction of the Panathenaia, see Neils (1992: 13–27). On rhapsodic contests in Sicyon, see below, pp. 11–12, and Torres-Guerra and Debiasi, below in this volume, respectively pp. 241 and 278–80.



evolution of the Epic Cycle would have taken place during the Hellenistic period, when the Alexandrian poets' studies of the Homeric text and their assiduous use of cyclic material re-created the Cycle as the canonical reading list of non-Homeric poetry. At some point, most probably in the Hellenistic period, the series of individual poems narrating different phases of the war at Troy may have undergone a sort of editorial reworking, which modified (especially) their beginnings and endings to reduce overlaps and better streamline the *akolouthia* of the narrated events. It would probably have been only at this point that the original reading list was reshaped into the organic corpus that we can see behind Proclus' summaries.

The next stage involved the creation of prose summaries of the actual poems of the Epic Cycle. This is a definite indication that Cyclic poetry was no longer widely read, perhaps because it had been eclipsed by the pre-eminence of its Homeric counterpart. These prose summaries were mainly used in mythological compendia and began to exercise their own influence on the notion of the Epic Cycle with which we are familiar today. From this extended period stretching from the Imperial age to the early phases of Late Antiquity derives the most informative and authoritative piece of information about the content of the Epic Cycle, i.e. the summaries of Proclus.

Last, we can posit a sixth stage taking place during the Middle Ages, when the Trojan War summaries of Proclus were excerpted and included in manuscripts of the *Iliad*, in order to supply readers with background information. It is at this point that the evolution of the Epic Cycle is completed. The initial, notional, oral 'supertext'<sup>39</sup> has finally become an excerpt added to the margins of the text of the *Iliad*. One can hardly fail to notice the irony of this outcome, since this last phase functions as a metaphor for the ultimate subjugation of Cyclic poetry to Homeric poetry: having gradually lost its independence, it continued its life only in service of its mighty counterpart.

## A NOTIONAL EPIC CYCLE

The idea of an early or notional Epic Cycle should not strike us as odd. The existence of a Sumerian Bilgames cycle or a Hurrian-Hittite Kumarbi cycle or even a Heracles cycle, which are all highly likely, suggest that something

<sup>39</sup> See Burgess (2005: 345): 'The Epic Cycle represents a literary manifestation of a longstanding notional arrangement of early Greek myth.'

of the same sort could have also existed in a loose form for the Theban and Trojan War myths. The basic difference though is that whereas Near Eastern cycles and the saga of Heracles were attached to a specific figure, each of the Theban and Trojan War cycles grew around a major event.<sup>40</sup> It is exactly this point of divergence that may have exercised considerable pressure to create a notional Epic Cycle, i.e. the fact that these two major events (the Theban War and its aftermath and the Trojan war and its aftermath) contained a series of interrelated episodes that almost ‘asked for’ a basically linear presentation.

Even a cursory reading of the summary of the *Cypria* shows that ‘almost every event . . . was causally bound to the events which preceded and followed it.’<sup>41</sup> This observation is of crucial importance for an exploration of early notions of the Epic Cycle. Since the oral traditions relating the events of the Trojan War outside the time-frame of the Homeric epics covered the entire mythical span from the Apple of Discord to the death of Odysseus, an aetiological dimension may well be one of their recurring features. In this context, it is important that in the minds of the ancient Greeks the Trojan tradition formed a coherent whole, a continuous mythical tale with a clear-cut beginning and end. Evidence for this early notion of a Trojan War cycle can be found in lyric poetry<sup>42</sup> as well as – first and foremost – in the Homeric epics. The *Iliad* and *Odyssey* offer a series of allusions to all the epics belonging to the Trojan section of the Epic Cycle, which makes it not unthinkable that some early notion of a gallery of oral traditions pertaining to the Trojan War did indeed exist. For example, the *Odyssey* contains a highly condensed summary of the entire Trojan expedition and its aftermath with references to events featured in the *Cypria*, the *Iliad*, the *Aethiopsis*, the *Ilias parva*, the *Iliou persis* and the *Nostoi*.<sup>43</sup> Nestor’s elliptical ‘Epic Cycle’ (*Od.* 3.103–200) reflects what at the time of the shaping of the *Odyssey* must have been known as a set of mythical events pertaining to the Trojan War expedition. His version is highly abbreviated (it excludes those *Nostoi* that were not of prime importance to the subject matter of the *Odyssey*), and it covertly reflects not only the audience’s knowledge of these stories but also their familiarity with their forming a coherent thematic whole. Further evidence lies in the fact that the alternative versions of Odysseus’ return featuring

<sup>40</sup> See West (2011b: 30–1) and his contribution to this volume, pp. 96–7.

<sup>41</sup> Scaife (1995: 174). <sup>42</sup> See Noussia-Fantuzzi, below in this volume, pp. 430–2.

<sup>43</sup> *Cypria*: 3.105–106 (Teuthrania and twelve other towns plundered by Achilles; see West (2011b, 43)); *Iliad*: 3.110 (death of Patroclus); *Aethiopsis*: 3.109, 3.111–112 (death of Antilochus); *Ilias parva*: 3.109 (death of Ajax the Telamonian – this could also have been part of the *Aethiopsis*), 3.120–129 (Achaean debate what to do and Odysseus’ plan prevails); *Iliou persis*: 3.130 (sack of Troy); *Nostoi*: 3.131–200 (strife in the Greek army, divine punishment, returns of the various Achaean leaders).