

INTRODUCTION

We tend to take literacy and its prestige for granted. We regard higher literacy rates as desirable, lack of literacy a sign of backwardness, but without thinking carefully about either the character or advantages of literacy, or the nature of its supposed converse, communication by word of mouth. In the study of the past, the written word is elevated above the oral, the written document generally much preferred as evidence to oral tradition, and written sources given more attention than oral ones, even when the written sources actually derive from oral communication. The reasons for this elevation are, one suspects, more a matter of inherited assumptions and beliefs than of individual thought about the nature of the written word (whose application is in fact exceedingly complex). A strong tradition of historiography and political thought has seen literacy as essential to civilization and liberal democracy. As Gibbon put it, ‘the use of letters is the principal circumstance that distinguishes a civilized people from a herd of savages, incapable of knowledge or reflection’¹ – a belief which recurs today, though expressed differently. Nineteenth-century political theorists (and indeed modern ones) could not conceive of liberal democracy without widespread literacy. Since classical Athens was seen as the epitome of both civilization and democracy, it followed that Athenian citizens were highly literate.

Greater understanding of oral communication and tradition are in some ways now modifying these assumptions of the superiority of literacy. Oral communication and oral tradition have more positive associations, and the term ‘orality’ has been coined to avoid the obvious negative connotations of ‘illiteracy’. The value of oral tradition and communication are now more readily recognized; non-written sources have gained respectability for anthropologists and some historians. Yet in some ways we are still not so far from Gibbon’s separation of literate civilization and barbarism. To many people oral communication and tradition still suggest primitive characteristics or backwardness – though both are in fact common enough even in the modern world; or else the somewhat idealized world of folklore, folk traditions, the rediscovery of the people’s culture, and the like. Most fundamental, the two spheres of literacy and oral communication are usually kept separate, regarded as

¹ Gibbon, *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ed. Bury (1896), vol. 1, ch. 9, p. 218.

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quite distinct, and 'literate societies' strictly distinguished from oral ones, with clear-cut characteristics attributed to each.

Classical Athens of the fifth and fourth centuries B.C. provides a striking refutation of these ideas and divisions. We are forced to think again about the nature of literacy, the role of written record and communication by word of mouth, and the interaction rather than the distinction between the two. For classical Athens had written records, yet it also relied heavily on oral tradition, and indeed the very organs of the radical democracy used oral communication extensively. Athens was in many respects an 'oral society'. A strict division between oral and literate societies is manifestly inappropriate here. The very idea is severely undermined, not to mention the optimistic equation between sophistication in cultural and political achievements and literacy. We are made to reconsider the nature of literacy itself and its relation or interaction with oral communication. In addition, the written histories from Greece were largely derived from oral tradition, so again we need to pay attention not merely to the written texts but to the nature of the oral sources they reflect and the possible influence of one on the other.

Greater understanding of oral tradition and literacy by anthropologists, and of the workings of memory by psychologists, now make it particularly urgent to approach these problems with more sophistication. This book re-examines literacy and the use of writing in Athens against the background of oral communication and analyses the character and processes of Athens' oral traditions and their relation to written historiography. This should contribute understanding not only to specific parts of Athenian history, but to the nature and mechanisms of oral tradition in general, its relation or reaction to the written word, and therefore to literacy itself.

Classical scholars are increasingly aware of the elements of Greek society which depended on word of mouth rather than writing. Milman Parry's work on oral poetry in the 1930s has been the most influential in drawing attention to the unwritten aspects of Greek culture. Through his study of contemporary oral bards in Yugoslavia, he produced the startling and now widely accepted theory that Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, our earliest Greek literature, were in fact essentially oral poetry: they were the product of a long tradition of oral composition by Dark-Age bards before the poems were eventually written down. While attention still concentrates on 'Homer' himself, it is also increasingly recognized how much the rest of Greek literature was heard rather than read, presented and transmitted orally even if a written text existed.² As

² Esp. in the sphere of Homeric scholarship: see (e.g.) bibliography of Fantuzzi (1980); Gentili (1984); Morris (1986); on the symposium, O. Murray (1983a), (1983b); Bowie (1986); Kennedy (1963), though old, has useful remarks.

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the concept of Homeric oral poetry has rendered the idea of total literacy in Greece irretrievable, there have been repeated attempts to estimate the extent of literacy in the ancient world and some recognition of the importance of the coming of writing to an oral society. Numerous works outside the classical field have tried to generalize about the characteristics of 'oral societies', and they have in some areas begun to penetrate ancient historical or literary studies. Goody and Watt's essay, 'The Consequences of Literacy' (1968) has been particularly influential. They took ancient Greece as a test case to examine the 'effect' of literacy on a previously oral society. Some of these general theories about 'oral societies' can be seen now to have been simplistic or misleading. Increasingly criticized, they imply a strict division between 'oral' and 'literate' characteristics and 'oral' and 'literate' societies that does not bear close scrutiny. However, like Havelock's controversial work on ancient Greece, they have helped focus attention on the 'oral' elements of Greek society.

The most familiar type of oral tradition in Greece is the poetic oral tradition of the Homeric epics. But oral tradition in a wider sense provided most Greeks with a knowledge of their history. The oral traditions I shall be most concerned with are orally transmitted statements from the past or, in Vansina's definition, 'verbal testimonies which are reported statements from the past beyond the present generation' (see further discussion below, p. 10). A simple example of oral tradition by this definition would be an account from somebody's grandparents of something that their parents did. The importance of this wider oral tradition in Greece is now more widely accepted – and it should be stressed that there was no teaching of history for its own sake in schools. Ancient writers often assume oral tradition or memory in the preservation of the past, whether they are scholiasts guessing how the poet Pindar found out about local legends, Xenophon discussing previous conditions in the mines, or Ephorus criticizing narratives of ancient times. The range of such comments is even wider than we usually think, and certainly not confined to historians.³ For the Greek historians

³ Pindar: schol. on *Ol.* vii 100a, 101, surmising that Pindar asked the local *logioi* or wise men; Xen. *Poroi* iv 14f.; Ephorus: *FGH* 70 F9, declaring that it is improbable that all the deeds or the greater part of the speeches were kept in memory for so great a span of time. Cf. also Isoc. *Panath.* 149f. and *Paneg.* 30, on the truth of things he did not see; Arist. *Rhet.* ii 13.12 and 21.9: the old are always talking about the past because they live in memory; Xenoph. fr. 18 Diehl (cf. vi West, 19–22); Polyb. xxxviii 1.6, the disasters of the Achaian War. Herodotus regularly mentions *akoē* ('hearing') and *opsis* ('seeing') (esp. ii 99, 147, 156), and Thucydides uses *akoē* as 'oral tradition' (i 20.1, 73.2; vi 53.3, 60.1; Hunter (1973), 27, n. 5). The terms expressed a distinction vital amidst predominantly oral communication, between eye-witness accounts and hearsay (see Schepens (1975), but he misses the practical background to the division). Plato presents the most rigorous ancient examination extant of the effect of memory and oral transmission versus

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themselves, particularly Herodotus and Thucydides, it is increasingly agreed that they used primarily oral sources and oral tradition.⁴ The nature of oral tradition thus becomes a particularly urgent problem for the study of Greek history and society.

Yet there have been very few detailed and sustained attempts to examine oral tradition in the ancient world in its own right. Few go further than mentioning the relevance of oral tradition and perhaps citing a general anthropological work.⁵ Often oral tradition – or misleadingly, simply ‘tradition’ – is mentioned briefly, especially for early periods where it clearly lies behind our sources. But discussion goes no further than wide generalization about the reliability of oral tradition. There is a broad division between ‘optimistic’ scholars who stress the longevity of oral tradition in societies without writing and the sceptical who assert that oral tradition is all useless fiction.⁶ But we must go further than that. Oral tradition does not have a single characteristic degree of reliability (which is what these remarks usually dwell on). Though it is widely held that people in oral societies have extremely long memories, even that is not certain: they do have to have better devices or mechanisms for remembering, which is an entirely different thing.⁷ The longevity and

writing on the preservation of the past (*Tim.*, esp. 21e–25d, and *Crit.* 109d–110d, for the story of Atlantis). The Athenian orators regularly assume oral transmission (Ch. 4.1 for references), as do ancient remarks on family tradition (Ch. 2.1). For memory in Greek literature, cf. Notopoulos (1938), Simondon (1982).

⁴ Momigliano (1972, repr. 1977) and (1966b); Finley 1965 (repr. 1975), and more recently (1983) and (1985), stressing ancient historians’ neglect of written documents. Jacoby pressed the idea of Herodotus’ oral sources particularly (*RE* Suppl. 11, 413f.); Murray (1980) and (1987) treats his oral sources in more detail. Cf. also Evans (1982), ch. 10 (very schematic), Hunter (1982), Fornara (1983), and hints in Boedeker (1987), esp. Dewald’s article. Other studies try to deal with Herodotus’ work as ‘oral narrative’ or work from that assumption: e.g. Lang (1984), S. West (1985), and Nagy (1987). For ‘folktales’, implicitly oral, Aly (1921) is still useful.

⁵ Cf. for example, Hunter (1982), esp. app. 1 (for both Herodotus and Thucydides); Evans (1982), ch. 10; Cartledge (1979).

⁶ For the optimistic, see e.g. Nilsson (1952), Day (1980), 30, Fornara (1971a) citing Jacoby’s *Atthis* on the ability of oral tradition to remember chronological data along with events (cf. Rhodes (1976), 227). For the sceptical, see esp. Finley (1965), 26; he also criticizes the ‘uncritical acceptance’ by modern historians of what they call ‘tradition’ or ‘oral tradition’, ‘though no one has yet demonstrated a plausible mechanism for the oral transmission of accurate information over a period of centuries’ (1983), 209.

⁷ Henige remarks ((1982), 67) that belief in such extraordinary memory is ‘largely untested and untestable’. There are some indications, though. Cole and Scribner (1981) found that the experience of rote learning of the Koran (in Liberia) did not seem to improve capacity for ‘free recall’. Similarly, Baddeley ((1983), 204–7) cites both the work of Wagner in Morocco, confirming that memorizing (here of the Koran) does not actually improve skill in memorizing, and also (p. 207) tests on a South African tribe with a reputation for remarkable memory: the tests showed that in fact their memories were not abnormal except for an immense capacity to remember cattle, which were very important in their social structure. So memory’s efficiency depends largely on relevance or interest. Goody (1987), ch. 8 now questions the existence of verbatim memory at all in oral societies.

reliability of oral traditions vary immensely according to certain factors, and these one must consider for each kind of oral tradition separately.

A few more detailed studies tackle directly the peculiar questions raised by oral tradition. Finley's 'Myth, Memory and History' (1965, repr. 1975) is interesting but brief and extremely general. More recently, Oswyn Murray has been examining oral tradition from a particularly Herodotean perspective,⁸ and J. K. Davies has applied anthropological findings to the historicity of the Trojan War traditions.⁹ Otherwise it is the expulsion of the Peisistratid tyrants, along with Thucydides' own comments on *akoē* ('hearing', therefore 'oral tradition'), which have focused most attention upon oral tradition, and prompted detailed analysis. Yet here analysis of the traditions is still building upon Jacoby's now old-fashioned schema in his *Atthis*.¹⁰ Though the discussion is couched in terms of oral transmission, the traditions have been seen through modern assumptions about ancient political bias and propaganda, and the workings of oral tradition taken for granted. There has been little treatment of other oral traditions or of oral tradition in general outside the narrow circle of memories of the tyranny. Since these memories are often taken to epitomize Greek oral tradition, I have used this complex of traditions as a final detailed test case for the mechanisms and development of Athenian oral tradition (Ch. 5).

So a great deal of our understanding of ancient oral tradition is left to 'common sense'. Yet anthropologists have long been encountering and discussing the problems of oral tradition, and they have developed complex methods for collecting, evaluating and interpreting it. For ancient historians, one difficulty, perhaps, is that it is easier to cite general anthropological works than apply them in detail. Anthropologists treat societies still in existence where researchers can collect 'raw' oral testimonies in great quantity, whereas for the ancient world we have only what was eventually written down. Many anthropologists' remarks about collecting testimonies, details of transmission, or the problems of 'feedback' from published works, seem more relevant to research in the field. In addition, the types of society, interests, narrative motifs, and therefore the very types of oral tradition discussed, seem remote from the oral traditions of ancient Greece. Of what relevance to Greece, for instance, are the lengthy and impressive dynastic traditions carefully transmitted through professional memory-men in certain African states? It is true, we only have written sources from which to approach ancient oral tradition. But that simply makes the study more difficult. There are various ways to approach oral tradition without living informants. The

⁸ Murray (1980), and at greater length (1987).

⁹ (1981), the most detailed treatment so far.

¹⁰ With Fornara, Ehrenberg and others: see Ch. 5 for detailed references.

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central role of oral tradition in Greece and the preservation of the Greek past make it essential to try and understand something of its nature.

The anthropological works which treat oral tradition in general are particularly useful, as they discuss the overall problems and principles with which to study oral tradition. Vansina's older work, *Oral Tradition*, was for a long time a standard handbook and introduction (1961; the Penguin edition (1973) has important additions). He has now replaced it by a very different and more complex study, *Oral Tradition as History* (1985). This devotes less time to practical advice for field work and concentrates much more on the processes by which oral tradition is formed (against the rather more severely functionalist approach of his earlier book). This is invaluable. The works by Finnegan and Henige are also extremely useful.¹¹

Anthropological studies show the fundamental importance of certain elements to the study of oral tradition. The most important factor in oral tradition is the way the tradition is passed on. This includes several elements: the precise nature and form of the transmission, for example, whether the tradition is passed on in poetic or other fixed form; the group which transmits it, whether a family, dynasty or whole community; and why it is being transmitted (e.g. for status or honour). All these factors bear on the character of the tradition, its 'distortions', whether it is likely to be transmitted accurately or over a long period of time, the tenor or bias of the tradition. For instance, where we find traditions kept by professional memorizers who lay great stress on strict accuracy because they are responsible for dynastic traditions, we may expect fairly accurate transmission over a long period. The reasons behind transmission are also crucial. Even without a narrowly functionalist view of oral tradition, it is obvious that nothing is remembered or passed down for no reason at all. Traditions may, for instance, confirm the prestige and authority of the royal house. Those aims help select and transform the content of the traditions.

So little is known of the nature of oral tradition and transmission in Greece, however, that it is necessary to start at an even more basic level of research. We must decide what evidence is most useful or nearest to oral tradition, in order to isolate oral traditions in the first place. In the complex world of oral transmission it is crucial to devote our attention first to the direct oral traditions themselves. There are no neat and generally applicable criteria for distinguishing oral tradition, though that would be convenient. We must simply look for evidence on how a

¹¹ Finnegan (1977) on oral poetry; Henige (1974) on the 'chronology of oral tradition', and (1982).

certain type of tradition was passed down, where an historian got his information, and use our wider knowledge of the society.

I have therefore tried to find clear examples of direct oral tradition from texts which either directly represent oral tradition or which represent its transmission. The speeches delivered in the Athenian assembly and courts presented a view of Athenian history which expressed Athenian oral tradition (the traditions of the polis or city-state) and actually transmitted it (see Ch. 4). They also include speakers' family history, a valuable source of *direct* family tradition. Comedy also expressed popular tradition. We can only return to the historians after this, and I cannot overstress this. For though they used oral tradition, they may have rearranged their material considerably (as indeed a study of oral tradition suggests) and engaged in extensive research. They may be a source for information contained in oral traditions but not necessarily for any one unaltered tradition. Herodotus in particular cannot be taken as a direct source for 'uncontaminated' oral traditions. This might be tempting, partly because of the surprisingly common image of him wandering around the Mediterranean writing down anything he is told without further inquiry, literary aims or arguments of his own. We cannot evaluate the historian's methods or achievements adequately before we understand what his sources were like.

Inevitably we must concentrate on Athens, and the best direct evidence must be from the better documented classical period of the fifth and fourth centuries B.C. Since there is more evidence for that than for the archaic period (eighth to sixth centuries) or earlier, we can look at certain traditions in depth with external information against which to judge the traditions. Thus, we will be able to discern changes in detail, look at wider questions more adequately, and know more about the character of certain types of oral tradition, what to expect of oral tradition and how to examine it. We can then be more confident about how to treat the oral traditions of earlier periods for which there is so much less evidence.

I should add a word of explanation about my use of the 'external information' derived mainly from the historians. One can often judge the accuracy and changes in an oral tradition by comparing it with the very much more detailed accounts of Herodotus and Thucydides. This does not assume the historians always provide a reliable and historically accurate account, since they may restructure or transform the information they use.¹² But in the cases I discuss, the account of Herodotus or Thucydides is the one generally accepted by historians as most reliable, and Thucydides was himself writing of contemporary events for which

¹² See (e.g.) de Romilly (1956), Hunter (1973), Fehling (1971).

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detailed information was available. We must balance the oral traditions against the generally accepted version of events and, as will become clear, the cases are comparatively straightforward.

There are other angles of approach. For instance, memories and traditions depend partly on the customs available for transmitting information, and on the ideals (e.g. of honour) which determine what is thought worth remembering. We can examine the incentives and opportunities for oral tradition and the ideals lying behind it. This I do for family tradition (Ch. 2.1) and rather differently in Ch. 4 where I look at the 'official' Athenian ideals and preoccupations and their reflection in the official vision of the past.

Sometimes we can see how a tradition has changed in the course of time. Even small, apparently minor, changes can illuminate the way traditions change and why they do, and thus the very processes of memory and transmission. Here again, it is important, I think, to concentrate on the later detailed evidence first. One could look at certain common types of oral tradition such as 'migration stories' for which anthropological works can be helpful. But these general, even legendary traditions have undergone very long periods of transmission and change which must be extremely complex. Broad theories about 'official traditions' or 'collective memory' do not adequately explain why and how such traditions formed in the first place or how they changed to reach the much later forms we have. We need a more basic understanding of Greek oral tradition before going on to 'age-old' legends widely known, accepted and enshrined in poetry (and see Chs. 4 and 5 for the immense complexity of the traditions of a community). It is not enough to identify 'oral traditions' – or take tales assumed to be oral tradition – and discuss them only in relation to the contemporary society in which they are found, though that is interesting. Oral tradition by its nature may change, disappear or grow constantly. Its development over the passage of time is not only fascinating in its own right, but also crucial to understanding the character and processes of oral transmission.¹³

Once we have distinguished types of tradition, groups and means of transmission, we can begin to understand the relation between different traditions and how they interact and influence each other. No memory is completely self-contained (this is related to the processes of memory to which I return below). Family traditions give excellently clear and

¹³ See esp. Vansina's most recent work (*OTH*). Unfortunately much anthropological work has captured oral traditions at one time only. When earlier colonial records of older contemporary traditions exist, they show where traditions have changed and are extremely interesting in explaining why those traditions were remembered and *why* they changed. Or sometimes anthropologists have been able to return much later. Cf. for example, the 'structural amnesia' of the Tiv (Bohannon 1952) (see Ch. 3.2); Firth (1961), 71ff. (Tikopia); Goody (1987), ch. 8 on the Bagre.

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comparatively simple examples of such influence (Ch. 2). So we can begin to understand how memories turn into traditions, how traditions form and re-form, the relation between individual esoteric memories and the general traditions of the state; and how oral traditions may gradually become stereotyped expressions of a society's overall beliefs (a characteristic sometimes taken to define oral tradition – see below, p. 10). In short, we may begin to see how historical events and personal reminiscences, if important enough to the society, can become the stereotyped stories with common 'typical' features with which we are familiar from Herodotus.

However, neither classical nor archaic Greece lacked the written word entirely. We cannot simply declare that Greece was primarily an 'oral society' and proceed as if writing and written works did not exist. It becomes increasingly clear that we cannot consider Greek oral tradition alone, completely distinct from the use and application of writing. While very stimulating, many of the studies concerned with either literacy or 'oral societies' tend to leave an impression of a great divide between oral societies and literate ones or between 'orality' and 'literacy'. Some attribute recognizable, even predictable, characteristics to each. So ancient Greece is thought of as an oral society if literacy levels can be argued to be extremely low.¹⁴ The division is clearer in the case of oral tradition. It is a commonplace that oral tradition dies out with the coming of literacy. Anthropologists in the field worry (understandably) about the influence of 'feedback' from written publications into the oral traditions again.¹⁵ The problem has been brought to the fore in classical scholarship by the oral nature of the Homeric epic, the relation between the tradition of oral poetry and our written Homeric text and the possible effects of literacy on the skill of oral bards suggested by Parry's and Lord's findings in modern Yugoslavia. To put it very crudely, the picture often presented is either one of an 'oral society' equipped with flowering oral traditions, minimal literacy and the characteristics often argued to belong to oral societies in general;¹⁶ or one in which literacy is widespread and we need worry little about 'oral' aspects or oral tradition. This division is immensely misleading. It blinds one to the complexity with which the written and spoken words combined and interacted in Greece (I argue this in more depth in Ch. 1.1). Even in our modern world, after all, with its extreme respect for writing, oral presentation has an

¹⁴ As Havelock (1982).

¹⁵ Henige (1982), 81ff. gives good examples of 'feedback'; Vansina, *OTH* 155ff. See Ch. 3, p. 189, however, for the possibility that oral traditions sometimes reach their greatest flowering just after literacy arrives.

¹⁶ See e.g. Ong (1982), Havelock (1982); and Finnegan (1977), ch. 1 for a discussion of romantic views of oral tradition.

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important role, from television to the lecture hall. This is why my study deals both with oral tradition or communication and with aspects of the use of the written word.

Thus, rather than minimize the 'extent' of full literacy or the purity of oral tradition, we should examine certain fundamental questions about the nature of both literacy and oral tradition that the combination suggests. We should examine not so much the extent of literacy but *how*, and with what degrees of sophistication, it was used (this I do in Ch. 1.2). For literacy and extensive oral communication are not incompatible and they subsist alongside each other even well into the fourth century B.C. Moreover, 'literacy' is not a simple, self-explanatory skill: it develops and changes. We are dealing in the classical period not simply with the presence or absence of literacy but with attitudes which partly govern the use of writing. That greatly affects our interpretation and understanding of the ancient use of the written word. Thus, it is hardly surprising that right into the later fourth century people still knew of the past primarily through oral tradition, and even historians made relatively little use of written documents.

Secondly, a more complex relation between writing and oral tradition may be discerned. It is possible that writing may influence oral tradition – and not simply by killing it. The process of writing down oral tradition may sometimes order and transform it. One area where writing and written scholarship seem to have been applied early to the oral traditions was that of genealogy (see Ch. 3). We can see some of the effects. These findings may suggest further ways of approaching early historiography and the extension of the written word to other oral traditions (see Ch. 5.1 also).

Finally, I return to the definition of oral tradition. How does it differ from the material of 'oral history', the use of living informants for evidence rather than documents? Various scholars stress different elements. These differences raise interesting and complex issues and touch, I think, at the very heart of our understanding of oral tradition. For they involve the processes of its formation.

Vansina's original definition (1973) was 'all verbal testimonies which are reported statements concerning the past'. Thus oral traditions were any reported statements, and they were specifically *about* the past. According to his recent definition (*OTH* 27f.), however, oral traditions are not necessarily about the past, and while transmission is stressed, a prerequisite for 'oral tradition' is that 'There must be transmission by word of mouth over at least a generation.' Oral traditions are 'verbal testimonies which are reported statements from the past beyond the present generation'. I shall be using 'oral tradition' in a similar way, but the implications of alternatives deserve further discussion as they highlight important points about the nature of oral tradition.