Songmakers and Texts in Early Greek Poetry*

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Περίληψη_ **Peter Agócs | Τραγουδοποιοί και κείμενα στην πρώιμη αρχαιοελληνική ποίηση**

Η παρούσα μελέτη εξετάζει την πρώιμη ιστορία των αρχαίων ελληνικών ποιητικών κειμένων υπό το πρίσμα όσων γνωρίζουμε για την *ταυτόχρονη* προφορική *και* γραπτή τους παράδοση. Υποστηρίζεται (επί τη βάσει και συγκριτικών στοιχείων κυρίως από τον χώρο των μεσαιωνικών σπουδών) ότι αυτά τα δεδομένα θα πρέπει να επηρεάζουν τον τρόπο με τον οποίο αντιλαμβανόμαστε θεμελιώδεις έννοιες, όπως 'ποιητικό κείμενο' και 'έργο', στην ερμηνεία της αρχαιοελληνικής ποίησης.

As students of literature, we sometimes still treat the texts we read, however old they may be and whatever culture they happen to have originated in, as though they were the inevitable and self-evident products of a familiar literary process that led them from creation to publication and then, in certain cases, on to canonization. The history of literature from Gilgamesh to Sally Rooney can on this view be best illustrated by the systematic order of a library catalogue. All one must do to write that history is to read everything (or at least the handbook summaries) and connect the dots. Academic literature curricula are constructed in a roughly similar way: some texts may be added and others removed according to the political and aesthetic fashions of the day, but the overall framework is essentially that of a library. To paraphrase Gertrude Stein, a text is a text is a text, and if every interpretation is essentially equal, there is no reason, except perhaps antiquarianism, for us to regard the historical or cultural circumstances in which any given text was produced and consumed as important to its meaning. This is partly thanks to a disciplinary orthodoxy that has held the field, at least in Anglo-Saxon literary studies, since the 1950s, and which has tended to emphasise the form, language and autonomy of the

* This piece originated in an online lecture delivered on the 7th of December 2022, to the first-year class at the University of Crete's Department of Philology, as part of their "Introduction to Classical Philology" course: the lecture was also opened up to the general public. The atmosphere, questions and discussion were very memorable for me. I would like to express my deep thanks to Lucia Athanassaki and Athena Kavoulaki for the invitation and the opportunity to publish it in *Ariadne*.

given work or genre over its context, and to view and write the history of literature as a dialogue between such closed, autonomous genres and works. Where this broad formalist consensus has come under attack, as it increasingly has in academic English departments over the two decades, the result most often seems to be a return to even older styles of biographically-focused interpretation—a mode of exegesis grounded in an appreciation of the circumstances and intentions of an author—or, alternatively, to an anything-goes, free-floating ahistorical comparativism. Any methodologically compelling awareness of the fact that texts have a history is restricted to the relatively specialised and increasingly esoteric fields of textual criticism and the history of the book.

Classics, and Greek lyric studies in particular, have in recent years begun to experience a modest reaction of this kind against historicizing and contextualised readings of literary texts.[1] While such scholarship naturally does not wholly reject contextualized approaches to Greek poetry, it does express some dissatisfaction with what it sees as the field's overemphasis on social and anthropological interpretation over form, beauty and 'poetic effects'. Focusing on the social use of ancient song-texts and their production of social meaning is, on this account, only one less-important strand in the critic's total endeavour. It disregards the formal and aesthetic qualities of the poems and, finally, the pleasure they generate—a pleasure that is without doubt as significant for us as it was for the putative original audience. As well, it takes us away from the primary field in which we, as literary critics, are supposed to be experts. This, however, relies on two underlying and largely unspoken assumptions: first, that the social and anthropological aspects of verbal art can somehow be separated from its underlying aesthetics and in particular from the primary, self-evident givenness of individual experience, and second, that the 'work' is something stable and unchanging across readings and even cultures. Both assumptions are unquestionably true, in the trivial sense that your reading of a Pindar fragment, or any text, will not necessarily be identical to mine, and that we may, in fact, offer two quite contrasting interpretations of the same verbal formulae. We need intersubjective dialogue and a common language ('criticism' in its simplest natural form) in order to establish a common ground of aesthetic experience and meaning. It is also however equally self-evidently true that the basic assumptions and axioms of aesthetic experience, including the concept of the 'work' itself, and even the nature and experience of the pleasures it gives, are by necessity historically contingent and linked to the cultural assumptions that underlie each and every 'literary system'. That is to say, following the brilliant Soviet literary theorist Yury Nikolaevich Tynyanov (1894–1943),[2] the total range of social, economic, and cultural factors that de-

[1] For a sensible articulation of the claims and challenges inherent in such a position, see the introduction to Budelmann and Phillips 2018.

[2] On the importance of Tynyanov and the so-called Russian Formalists, Tynyanov 2019, and

fine the production, dissemination and consumption of literary works, which in our case, as will become clear, includes of course the very notion of a 'work concept' itself.[3]

For Tynyanov, the work of the literary historian becomes, in its broadest definition, a labour of comparing individual systems in order to define the immanent laws that govern the 'system of systems' over its historical development. The literary system in which modern academic criticism took shape and flourished, marked most notably by a particular association of capital, technologies of mechanical reproduction, a mass-market for published texts, the growth of mass literacy in industrializing countries, and intellectual property rights (all of which are arguably today reshaping themselves, if not collapsing, under the simultaneous hammer-blows of social change, deregulation and technological progress), has existed in England arguably since about the second quarter of the 18th century, emerging later in many other countries (a good century later in Hungary, for example, and in Africa only in the 20th century). It is by no means universally dominant, in a global sense, even today. Nor is it, from a historical perspective, any more pre-ordained or natural than the manuscript cultures of the European Middle Ages or the papyrus roll and wax tablet literary system of the high Roman Empire. And just as the broader cultural systems of literary life can change, so too can the place and meaning of individual works and textual corpora within them. This historical and cultural contingency of literary value and the work itself should, I think, be of interest to a classical scholar interested in recovering experience other than his or her own (which, for me, has always been the most interesting aspect of our trade), not least because the traditions and disciplinary identity of our field, if not today its everyday practice, are so strongly bound up with the interpretation, editing, and guardianship of texts. It is on this latter question—the status and meaning of text, and the status of the poetic work—that I want to focus here, within the broader context of archaic and early classical Greek poetry, the textual corpus within which these problems present themselves most pressingly. I will argue that the concepts of text and work revealed in a close reading of the archaic Greek sources are different from our own, and that these differences are in fact important to our understanding of these texts, especially within the context of a critical approach that values and enables meaningful cultural comparison.

When we read the text of an archaic or classical Greek poet—Homer, Sappho, or Pindar—what, exactly, are we reading? What kind of thing is it? What sort of object? What kind of object was it in the immediate circumstances of

Todorov 1965 (a classic anthology of important texts). The idea of the 'literary system' was formulated in his essay "The Literary Fact", published in 1924. For recent works that use his theory in ways helpful to classical scholars, see Maslov 2015, and Maslov and Kliger 2016.

[3] For 'work concept', see Goehr 1992.

its creation? Was it an object (or a work) at all? How did it come to be in the state in which we possess it today, and how did its status and meaning change over the course of that two thousand-year story? And how do its ancient forms of existence compare with our modern ideas of 'text', 'work', 'poetic oeuvre' and 'poem'? It's worthwhile reminding ourselves that an ancient text, even in a modern printed edition, differs in many of its basic traits and underlying assumptions from a modern one. Here is a page from the Anglo-American poet T.S. Eliot's poem *The Waste Land*, which is understood to be a foundational moment of Modernism in 20th-century English literature. You see Eliot's original draft, typed by a secretary from his first fair copy, with corrections by his friend Ezra Pound in black pencil on the typescript (**Fig. 1**). On the right-hand side of the sheet, you can see the words "'Perhaps' be damned": Pound was nothing if not slashingly aggressive in his criticism of his brother poet's work. He famously cut the first draft of Eliot's poem down from roughly 800 to just over 400 lines, producing a much more fragmentary and discontinuous text. Thanks to the preserved manuscripts, typescripts, printed editions and facsimiles, we can trace the genesis of Eliot's text and also establish it with almost total clarity, since unlike the final stages of a human life, and apart from fragments and other *ephemera*, we can assume that the final stage of a modern poem's development reflects the final intention of its author. There are of course instances where this finally-expressed intention may not reflect the consensus of readers: W.H. Auden, for example, is widely thought to have ruined some of his brilliant early poems by revising them in old age, when his political and aesthetic views had markedly changed.

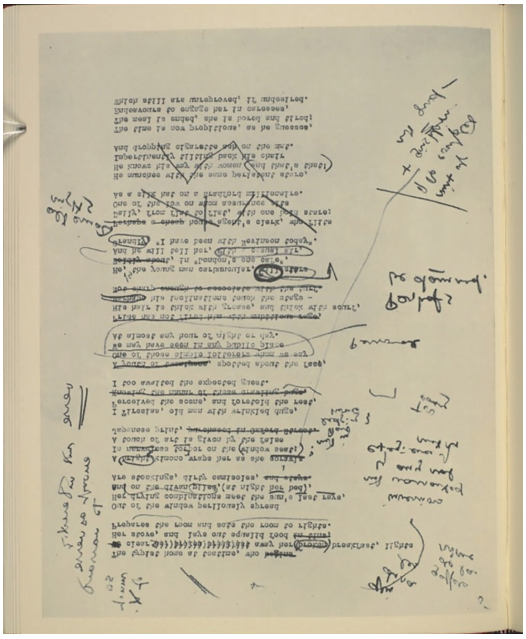

Fig. 1 : Manuscript of T.S. Eliot's poem *The Waste Land*, with annotations by Ezra Pound. Berg Collection, New York Public Library, Cup. 410 g. 63.

But this is *not* the case with any poetic text that we possess from the ancient world. As with a modern poet, we can point there too to a whole chain of manuscript and print evidence in constituting the text. But unlike a modern poet, we do not have access to the authorial copy, or, as in the case of *The*

Fig. 2 : Venetus A manuscript of Homer's *Iliad*, with text and scholia. Bibliotheca Marciana, Venice: Marcianus Graecus Z. 454 (=822).

Waste Land, to a series of authorial drafts that allow us precisely to follow the decisions Eliot made in composing his final text, and to measure the decisive impact of Pound's revisions on the work. With a classical poet like Homer or Sophocles, we base our text mainly on a tradition of mediaeval, that it to say, Byzantine Greek manuscripts (each of which has its own particular history, and which belongs to a particular strand or lineage of its tradition) sometimes supplemented by the evidence of papyri excavated from Egyptian sites over the last two centuries, and from quotations in later authors that can attest an earlier state of the tradition than is attested in the direct, mediaeval tradition (**Fig. 2**). These latter, often fragmentary sources for classical texts, like the famous Oxyrhynchus Papyrus no. 801 (published in 1908) that contains much of the text of Pindar's *Paeans*, make it possible for us to trace the history of the text back to the high Roman empire, or—if we are lucky—to Ptolemaic Egypt. With certain important lyric poets such as Sappho of Mytilene, we are almost entirely dependent on the papyri and the secondary tradition. In neither case can we get within even 200 years of the poet's lifetime.

If establishing the text of a modern author can be difficult, and can require the editor to take account of multiple variants in manuscripts, typescripts and printed editions, the textual criticism of older manuscript traditions is even more complicated. The interrelationships between manuscripts are complex and hard to understand, and are often best understood through close study of variants and errors. Often this history (or rather genealogy) can be interpreted in different ways. The modern edition of any classical author reflects the editor's understanding of the text's history—its development over time. We are used to the shape of such a critical edition. Above is the 'main text', the text that is assumed, judged or (in the best cases) argued to be correct by the modern editor; immediately below it are the so-called 'testimonia': quotations in later authors, or similar passages that can be assumed to attest the state of the text at a particular point in Antiquity by citing, playing with, or parodying it. Then at the bottom we have the 'apparatus criticus': essentially a list of the variant

readings revealed by a careful comparative study of the manuscript tradition, combined with the various proposals suggested by critics, often over centuries, to 'heal' real or perceived difficulties, or points of incomprehensibility or grammatical or other error in the text.

The use of this kind of conjectural criticism is indeed a remarkable fact about how textual critics of Classical authors work. It is not, for example, a very common practice in the editing of medieval vernacular, or modern texts, where editors most often choose to produce a record of a single important manuscript (often admittedly *the* single important manuscript—the example here is *Beowulf,* the oldest complete epic poem in the English language, which survives in the Nowell Codex, a parchment manuscript dating to about 1000 AD that survived burning in the fire that destroyed much of the Cotton Library in 1731 [**Fig. 3**]). Some mediaevalists have defended the application of conjectural emendation to mediaeval texts, but the overwhelming consensus in that field is against it.[4] The assumption is that the words of an old manuscript, or the alternative variants of a corrupt written tradition, however corrupt and hard to understand they may be, are better than the creative hypotheses of even the most brilliant modern critic. Classicists are perhaps more used to the idea that an ancient text, however fragmentary, needs to be perfect, perhaps by its own simple (perceived) virtue of being ancient and a product of a culture defined by us as Classical, and thereby paradigmatic. The need to recognise the importance, and social or anthropological significance of various types of textual coherence and variation is really only beginning to emerge in Classical studies. In the early days of oral poetry studies, in the immediate aftermath of Lord's paradigm-changing book *The Singer of Tales* (1960), it was quite often argued that simply establishing the relative proportion of formulaic to non-formulaic text in an early Greek poem would allow us to define how oral it is. But more recent work has largely falsified this theory, most notably through refer-

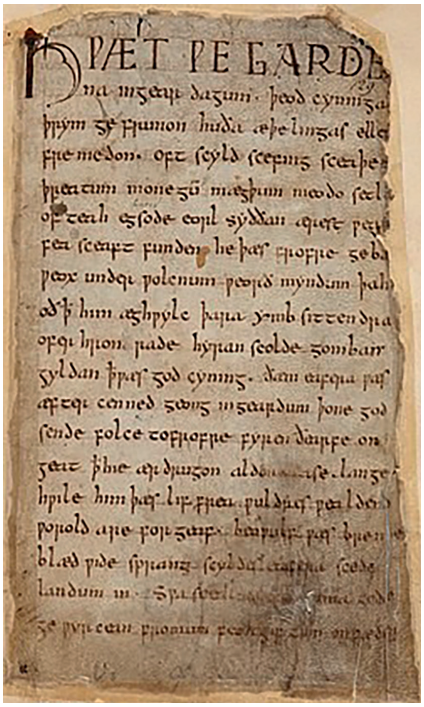

Fig. 3 : Manuscript of Cotton MS Vitellius A XV, ff. 94r-209v, f 132r containing the opening lines of Beowulf. Copyright British Library.

[4] See for example Lapidge 1991.

ence to *bona fide* oral traditions that are entirely or partly non-formulaic.[5] We are gradually learning to think about orality and literacy not as opposed states, mentalities or mutually-exclusive phases of cultural development, but rather as systems of social practice that can co-exist and even influence one another. This is easily confirmed by reference to the work of anthropologists working on oral and written traditions and how they co-exist and support one another in Africa today. But the work of mediaevalists—particularly those active on early mediaeval vernacular poetic traditions—also provides valuable parallels with which we can begin through comparison to stretch and interpret the evidence preserved for us in our very thin ancient Greek sources.[6]

These comparisons are useful to me because they help me think about what it is, as a scholar, that I am doing. It is also useful to be reminded that there are different ways to think about the history of texts and the importance of that history for us. This is especially true, as we will see, of what we call early Greek literature, poetry and prose: essentially the transmitted literary expressions of the pre-Hellenistic period of ancient Greek culture. Classical scholars, especially, tend to bear the marks of hundreds of years of arrogant and somewhat complacent scholarly tradition, and it is good for us to remind ourselves that things can in fact be different, and often are, even in disciplines relatively close to ours. Since at least the 16th century, but certainly since the methods of modern comparative textual criticism and text-history were worked out in 19th-century Germany, where the work of Karl Lachmann, who formulated a set of rules scholars still follow today, comes to mind,[7] Classical scholarship has grown accustomed to seeing the Classical text as something with a history—a text in motion, where variants accumulate, and the final result—the edited and printed text—is essentially a collaborative product: the product of all the hands, hearts and minds that went into making it. But we also, paradoxically, tend to think of the Classical text as the product of a single hand and mind—the author's—, and we tend to conceive the editor's task as one of bringing us, as readers, back to the state the text was in on the day it left its author's hand. This is especially true of English textual criticism, which, for cultural reasons which are hard to understand because they are so little interrogated, tends even today to endorse a 19th-century model of conjectural criticism that puts the modern critic second only to the Classical author. The editor's task is seen as one, primarily, of *eliminating* textual variation, rather than asking what it might be able to tell us about the use and social meaning of a text in a given phase of its historical development.

[5] The literature is enormous, and has overflowed into related fields (e.g. mediaeval studies). For a clear-sighted critique of the evidence, see Finnegan 1992 and Thomas 1992.

[6] See, on Africa, the work of Karin Barber, especially Barber 2007, and Paul Zumthor (1972 and 1990).

[7] See Timpanaro 2005.

This, I think, is one of the most paradoxical aspects of traditional Classical philology's relationship to what it has always defined, since at least the Hellenistic scholars of Alexandria, as one of its most important natural tasks, that of healing, nursing and restoring texts—a task which, in turn, is still often (and quite interestingly) understood as somehow separate from the work of interpreting them. As is often the case, scholars of mediaeval vernacular literatures, especially in France and Italy, have been much more interested in what critics like Paul Zumthor and Bernard Cerquiglini have called the 'movement' of the early manuscript text: the play of variants that ensure that no two manuscripts are exactly the same.[8] They ascribe this type of variation—which in the mediaeval vernacular traditions can often be extreme, to the point that the text can often become in effect the shared authorial possession of whoever rewrites it—to the particular position the societies that produced these texts occupied between what we like to think of as the opposed cultures of orality and literacy. Script and text, they argue, meant different things in a society that was characterised by large-scale illiteracy and a natural bias towards the oral performance of texts—in which all texts, prose works included, were at least read out loud, and in which the variegated genres of poetry were still largely understood as 'song' (a kind of 'heightened voice', marked out by its various formal, dialectal and performative features as a distinct mode of utterance). Much the same is true, or even more so, of the Hellenic literature of the 6th to 4th centuries BCE.

This is clear first of all from the culture's terminology for 'text', 'literature' and 'poem'. The familiar concept of 'literature' did not yet exist, even if the culture had various words for 'written text' (terms that tended to refer to particular contexts, types and materials in which text could be produced and consumed).[9] The book (or papyrus roll imported from Egypt) was simply known by the material medium on which it was inscribed (*byblos*, named after the Phoenician trading port of Gebal (Jebeil) in northern Lebanon, or *deltoi*, another Phoenician term, for wooden tablets covered in wax). 'Poetry' (and its related terms *poiesis* and *poiema*) were, as Andrew Ford and others have shown, quite simply absent from the language of the song culture, whose 'poets' describe themselves and, in the case of choral poetry, their performers, as 'singers' and their texts as 'songs'. These terms appear for the first time in prose writers, especially Herodotus, who mention poets and their works, and tell anecdotes that clearly derive from and interpret certain songs in the tradition. They also describe the writing and sending of lyric songs in written form to their addressees, much as one would send a letter.[10] The poets, on the other

[8] For Zumthor see n.6 above; Cerquiglini 1989.

[9] See Ford 2001.

[10] See Hdt. 2.134-35 (ἐν μέλεϊ Σαπφὼ πολλὰ κατεκερτόμησέ μιν); and 5.95, where direct reference is made to the poem as a means of mediated communication between sender and addressee: ταῦτα δὲ Ἀλκαῖος ἐν μέλεϊ ποιήσας ἐπιτιθεῖ ἐς Μυτιλήνην ἐξαγγελλόμενος τὸ ἑωυτοῦ

hand, do not refer to themselves as writers or to their song-texts as written, even though the survival of those texts is impossible to imagine without some form of writing or inscription. While the Hellenistic poet, like Callimachus, sets to work stylus in hand with his wax tablet on his knee, thinking as it were through the medium of writing, and correcting or rewriting his work as he goes, the Archaic poet sings or speaks, presenting his utterance as though it were something actually composed in performance.[11]

The notion of a 'literary work', as opposed to a performance—a form of artistic creation, a type of aesthetic object whose form and meaning could be grasped, enjoyed and even potentially exhausted on the basis of the words alone—becomes indisputably evident only in that strange moment in Aristotle's *Poetics* where he declares that tragedy, as an art-form, can be effectively judged by the critic and reader on the basis of the written text alone.[12] There is nothing really like this in any of the texts that form the pre-Aristotelian tradition of Greek poetics or literary theory. For Plato in the *Republic*, it is precisely the power of poetry, as a medium of mass communication and entertainment, to reach a wide audience, the majority of whom are probably quite unprepared to deal with its moral and political provocations, that explains the need to censor and limit it to genres that naturally extol, and never criticise, the essential values of his imaginary utopia: "hymns for the gods and encomia for good men".[13] I think it is also helpful if we consider for a moment the Greek terminology of writing and reading. From Aeschylus onward, poets and prose-writers alike describe writing as a sort of artificial memory, and memory as a kind of writing or inscribing of words, or a stamping of images, in the wax tablets of the soul.[14] This way of connecting writing and memory has a long tradition in Greek culture. It continues in the fourth-century debates, most notably in Socrates' famous pseudo-myth of Thoth and Ammon in the *Phaedrus*, about the relative value of writing as a form of 'artificial memory'.[15] Even in Plato, the superiority or ubiquity of writing is by no means taken for granted. We can expand this picture by thinking about Greek culture's way of talking about the act of reading. Even under the Roman Empire, when written texts and the so-called 'book culture' were apparently much more common and natural, the basic vocabulary of ancient reading remained quite strongly connected to the concept of reading aloud (or voiced reading, as I like to call it). That is to say, the act of reading was also always in a sense a *performance* of the text, and great

πάθος Μελανίππῳ ἀνδρὶ ἑταίρῳ.

[11] Call. *Aet*. fr. 1 Pfeiffer, 21–24. For a view of what is involved in composition in performance, see Lord 1960.

[12] Ar. *Poet*. 6, 1450b15-20.

[13] Pl. *Rep*. 607a.

[14] This material is collected in Agócs 2019.

[15] Pl. *Phaedr*. 274c5–276e.

emphasis was placed in Greek and Roman education on students' acquisition of the proper methods of *hypokrisis*, reading or voicing texts—the methods, I mean, of 'acting out' that were appropriate to different genres and styles of poetry and prose.[16]

This idea—the cultural primacy of voiced reading—is one of the great themes of 20th-century classical scholarship, and even if people have correctly disputed the older, rather dogmatic view put forward, for example in József Balogh's work *Voces paginarum* (1921), the first systematic monograph on the topic, that silent reading was unknown in Antiquity, it is clear that most ancient reading was in fact voiced.[17] Even most strictly private reading was on some level vocalised—at least as a low murmur; and ancient and later mediaeval rhetorical writers make it clear that this sort of sub-vocalisation while reading was understood as a necessary and convenient tool for readers striving to internalise and memorize the text and its meaning.[18] A necessary consequence of the primacy of voiced reading, at least in the early period (i.e. the 6th–5th centuries BC) is that people understood written texts, whether prose or poetry, as a record of someone's living utterance, or as a voice that had to be re-animated (read out) by a reader.[19] A famous inscriptional (votive) epigram from Halicarnassus (Bodrum) in Caria (*CEG* 429) expresses this idea clearly. It is cut into the stone base of a lost bronze athlete—or Apollo—statue dedicated in his youth by Panamyes son of Kasbollis, a member of the local Greek-Carian élite who seems to have gone on to hold the post of *mnemon* ('living remembrancer': apparently some kind of archivist and legal expert) in his native city.[20] The text is as follows:

αὐδὴ τεχνήεσσα λίθο, λέγε τίς τόδ' ἄ̣[γαλμα]
στῆσεν Ἀπόλλωνος βωμὸν ἐπαγλαΐ̣[σας].
Παναμύης υἱὸς Κασβώλλιος, εἴ μ' ἐ̣π̣[οτρύνεις?]
ἐξειπῆν, δεκάτην τήνδ' ἀνέθηκε θε[ῶι].

– You artful voice of the stone, tell me, who was it that set up
this statue, in adornment of the altar of Apollo?
– Panamues, son of Kasbollis, if [you bid] me
tell you, dedicated this to the god as a tithe.

[16] The bibliography on this problem of voiced versus silent reading is immense. Here is a very narrow selection: Knox 1968; Schenkeveld 1992; Svenbro 1993, 160–86; Gavrilov 1997, and Johnson 2000 and 2010, 17–31. On *hypokrisis* and its roots in the mimetic performances of rhapsodes and actors, see González 2013.

[17] See n. 16 above. For Balogh, an influential scholar of Jewish origin who was murdered in 1944 at the age of 51, see Balogh 1927.

[18] Subvocalisation: Carruthers 2008, 214–15 and 427–28.

[19] See on this Svenbro 1993 and Day 2010.

[20] See Lavigne 2011.

The inscription scripts a dialogue: the reader (who addresses his voice to the 'masterful/artistic/articulate voice of the stone') asks who made the attached votive dedication. The stone then answers, not in the voice of the dedicator, but in its own voice, which is of course brought to life by the voice of the interlocutor, who also happens (at this moment at least) to be the reader. In the complexity of its game, this inscription seems precociously to evoke some strategies of Hellenistic epigram, but it is in fact much older: it dates to Pindar's active working life, about 500–475 BC, perhaps a little before the birth of Herodotus, Halicarnassus' most famous son. All of the mentioned themes and ideas point to a society quite different, in its attitude to writing, reading and textuality, from our own: one in which writing (although already by the early 5th century it had been a well-established part of Greek life for at least three centuries) still held a different place in a culture whose natural ways of thinking and traditions were overwhelmingly defined by the protocols and ideology associated with oral tradition. These ideas are not somehow more 'primitive' than our own; they are simply different. In the world of this epigram, literacy and literature adapt to oral culture; not vice versa. Our theories of the early history of Greek texts should reflect this.

Thus, I think we can say, of early epigrams and written texts alike, that one of their most salient features is what we might call their *vocality* (a term pioneered by Ursula Schaefer, a German scholar of mediaeval literature in Old English).[21] The text encodes an utterance expressed in its own internal time by a speaker whose voice is brought to life in the present time by the reader's voice. This idea, put forward most forcefully in Jesper Svenbro's book *Phrasikleia*, has been applied not only to epigram but to lyric texts as well. It is, I think, clear that this vocality is one central part of how early Greek culture defined its notion of text and textuality. I would even go so far as to say that for Pindar as for Plato, a text is first of all an *entextualised voice*: a human voice rendered at least notionally fixed and permanent through the use of writing.[22] "At least notionally," since of course we have to be aware of the systematic and ongoing action on the text of the processes of textual variation which are typical, and indeed essential to, any manuscript culture. I think that this is in fact compounded and made more complex in 6th and 5th-century Greek literary traditions by the fact that writing co-existed with older, oral modes of cultural transmission. Early Greek texts, and especially poetic texts—prose was largely different, since from the very beginning it tended to define itself as something *essentially* written—were almost inevitably transmitted *simultaneously* in oral performance and as scripts for such performance. Prose oratory at first sight looks closer to poetry in the sense that it too was intended for performance,

[21] Schaefer 1992.

[22] I have explained this in detail in Agócs 2022.

and in fact most ancient Greek and Roman speeches seem to have been composed and published *after* the fact with an eye to posterity; it is clear that their writtenness was not primary in the same way it is, for example, to Herodotus' prose work—whose prose texts were, it is clear, also designed with voiced public reading in mind.[23] What defines poetry's relationship to its own textuality is a simultaneous effective transmission in oral and written form. This applies to parts of poems as much as it does to complete works, and as Gennaro Tedeschi has observed, it was a defining feature of the Greek poetic tradition within its literary system well into the fifth century BC.[24]

It is also important to recognise that the vast majority of poetic compositions, authored and anonymous, produced in the early song culture were never written down at all. In assessing what remains to us from the 6th and 5th centuries BC, we have to remember that what was written down was, even in Hellenistic times, the very small tip of an enormous iceberg of lost oral song. Indeed, wherever we are lucky enough to have a text, it's incumbent on us to explain why, in the circumstances of contemporary culture, it was inscribed at all. Already in 1900, in his "Textual History of Greek Lyric Poetry," Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, the mortal god of early 20th-century German classical philology, said that we can take it as proven that the reason the Alexandrians had only nine canonical lyric poets is because that was exactly the number of important textual corpora that they possessed.[25] I don't think things were anywhere near as simple, even when we consider the written record alone, but it is clear that the vast bulk of archaic and classical song was never ever transcribed. It didn't have to be: it was socially embedded in practices, rituals and traditions. These songs, and indeed whole corpora of songs mentioned but not quoted in our sources, were performed, re-performed and transmitted within specific oral traditions, and most often associated with certain communities, sanctuaries or rituals. This is true, I think, even of substantial amounts of song and poetry ascribed in the later tradition to named poets, whose texts did not survive—artists like Terpander of Lesbos, the great early archaic composer of *nomoi*, or Xenokritos of Epizephyrian Locri, famous for his paeans, or Tynnichos of Chalcis, a supposedly illiterate and talentless poet mentioned in Plato's *Ion*, who composed one song for Delphic Apollo so beautiful that Aeschylus declared himself unwilling to try to match it.[26] Or if a song or corpus of songs was transcribed and transmitted in writing, this was done within its

[23] One might say somewhat flippantly that oratory is prose aspiring to the condition of speech: text that pretends it, like Moliere's Monsieur Jourdain, has been speaking prose all its life without knowing it.

[24] Tedeschi 2020.

[25] Wilamowitz 1900.

[26] On Tynnichus: Pl. *Ion* 534d = fr. 707 *PMG* and Aesch. T114 Radt; the others: Ps.-Plut. *De Mus.* 1131f–1135a.

own local frameworks of consumption and use, and perhaps on media other than papyrus, rather than within the Panhellenic networks of papyrus manuscript consumption and distribution that flowed into the Alexandrian canon. Theodora Hadjimichael's recent book *The Emergence of the Lyric Canon* is especially helpful in its description of these processes.[27]

It is natural that very little of this material survives.[28] A handful of fragments in Page's *Poetae Melici Graeci* (*PMG*), most of them in fact very late, preserve small pieces of these anonymous traditions—these are classified by modern scholars as *carmina popularia* ('folksongs') or *carmina convivalia* ('drinking songs'). The song of the Elean women to Dionysus is one such piece (871 *PMG*); the famous 'Harmodios song' (893–896 *PMG*), a drinking song from early fifth-century Athens, another. Very little work has really been done on this material in comparison with its importance, partly because of the attraction most professional scholars trained in literary approaches feel towards works that carry a stamp of authorial attribution, and hence a powerful added cargo of date, context and authenticity. But these fragments are an important piece of proof that the oral tradition, the unwritten song culture, continued down to the Roman world and beyond. This, of course, should be no surprise to living Greeks, knowing as they do the continuity of Greek folkways from Antiquity to the present as evidenced, for example, in the much-studied funeral laments of traditional village culture: but it is important to remind foreigners, and foreign classical scholars especially, of these facts. It was not, as folksong cultures in Europe today are, either a product of conscious preservation by cultural nationalists or a walled-in isolate preserved by illiteracy and deprivation within a larger culture of literacy. Rather (to put it somewhat brazenly) I think the creation of 'literature' in its modern sense, as a defined corpus of authoritative and canonical texts, to form eventually the basis of the autonomous academic discipline of literary criticism, begins with the separation of a canonized body of texts out of this enormous background of what was, essentially, an undifferentiated folk culture or at least a shared culture of the Greek states, in which social elites and the common people participated equally, even if of course often differently. Aristotle's *Poetics*, as I have already said, offers us our first real hint of this new world where literary and popular culture function on different levels.

It is hard, though, to find direct evidence in the archaic and classical sources for the kind of simultaneous transmission that I'm talking about. To a great extent, this is because the processes of canonization had by at least the middle of the Hellenistic period (the second century BCE—the time we think of as the age of Aristarchus and the Golden Age of textual and literary criticism

[27] Hadjimichael 2019.

[28] For an introduction to this unwritten element in the Greek song culture, see John Herington 1985, Yatromanolakis 2009 and Lambin 1992.

in the Alexandrian Mouseion) been far too efficient and successful in creating the body of carefully-policed and mediated written texts transmitted to us through the long Roman and Byzantine manuscript tradition. But this very success is also a historical mirage of a kind that occurs often enough in our Classical sources, and which obscures earlier states of the text in which variation played a much more pronounced role. This is perhaps easiest to grasp if we approach it through the textual tradition of the Homeric poems. The *Iliad* is particularly well-attested on papyri beginning in the early third century, around the time when the Greek kingdom in Egypt was being established by the first Ptolemies in the aftermath of Alexander's conquests. But there is a striking difference between the early or (as they are called) the 'wild' papyri, and the later, post-Aristarchan so-called Vulgate texts, as the Oxford scholar Stephanie West showed in her brilliant first book.[29] The early papyri are especially rich in what papyrologists call 'plus-verses'. These are generally highly formulaic additions to what we think of as the main or Vulgate text familiar from the mediaeval tradition, often drawn from what for us are other parts of the same poem—precisely what we would expect if we were reading a text transcribed multiple times in a variety of different places and performance traditions. In these traditions, the scribes or copyists themselves seem to have been able to function creatively, or at least additively, within the traditional epic diction, the *Kunstsprache*, of the poems.

We can take the levels of variation found in the early Homeric papyri as evidence for the mnemonic function of an oral formulaic style even in a period when the poems had already been transmitted in writing for centuries. This was after all a culture, like some Islamic cultures today, in which the memorisation of culturally-authoritative text (there the Qu'ran, in ancient Greece the Homeric epics) was an everyday phenomenon: a cultural achievement that intelligent and educated people might be expected to achieve as a foundation-stone of their acquired cultural knowledge. So we have to take account of memorized and internalized text as well as written text. A variety of different texts, rhapsodic, memorized and so on, thus seem to have been worked together by the scholars of the Alexandrian Mouseion to form a single canonical text. And by the time we reach the late second century BC, the textual variation has largely ceased. What we have instead is pretty much the Homer text transmitted to us in the mediaeval Homeric Vulgate. In this later tradition, the variants, most often ascribed to named Alexandrian scholars, are relegated to the scholia: the marginal notes that survive as excerpts from the grand *hypomnemata*, 'commentaries', in which the Hellenistic textual critics and their successors expressed their doubts about certain passages.

These scholiasts talk about what the Poet can and cannot, could or could not have 'written', as though there were a real possibility of getting back to

[29] West 1967.

Homer's original intention. But there was evidently no autograph or even very early copy of either of the monumental Homeric epics in circulation, at this time or earlier. There was literally nothing for the Alexandrians to go back to, except the complexity of a highly developed manuscript tradition, made even more complicated and variable by the impact of an existing performance tradition. And this is what I most want to emphasise here—the fact that, typologically speaking, the variation seen by us in these early or 'wild' Homeric papyri is quite different, in its quantity and its nature, from *both* the creative reworking of epic themes we find in a tradition based on composition and recomposition in performance—where each performance of an epic song is essentially a different text—and from the characteristic variation based on scribal error and misreading of older scripts familiar, for example, from the mediaeval traditions of the classical Greek and Roman authors. What we find in the early Homer papyri, as, for example, in some early manuscripts of mediaeval vernacular poetry, seems to reflect a situation where frameworks and modes of oral, performed diffusion were still for some time having a direct effect on the state of the written text.

This apparent dynamic of expansion or interpolation—that is to say, the creative re-working of the text within the bounds of its own compositional and poetic tradition—is what stops, then, as the post-Aristarchan period begins in the history of Homer's text. I have of course spoken about Homer in the modern way as the fictional poet of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*: a poet who, since he didn't exist, had, like Voltaire's God, to be invented. These epics clearly emerged, perhaps in the late 8th to early 7th centuries, out of much older traditions of sung epic storytelling. Some other products of this tradition were also transcribed at a later date: these were originally ascribed to Homer in the tradition, but later reattributed to become the poems of the Epic Cycle. The process of restriction and canonization was already clearly underway by the time of Herodotus, who in book II makes an argument about how the *Cypria* ascribed to Homer could not have been 'written' by him, on the grounds that it contrasts the *Iliad*'s narrative on a relatively minor detail of Paris' abduction of Helen.[30] I am a firm believer in the theory put forward by Milman Parry's collaborator Albert Lord, and later defended by Richard Janko among others, that the Homeric poems cannot have been transmitted orally for any very long period of time, and that each epic must go back to a single early act of transcription that established the basis for the rest of the tradition.[31] But these in turn, being subjected to the stresses of a semioral, semiliterate transmission and constant rhapsodic reperformance, began rapidly to acquire variants and to develop traditions of their own: locally-based traditions that could at the same

[30] Hdt. 2, 116–117.
[31] Lord 1960.

time be recognised as forming part of the broader Panhellenic tradition of epic ascribed to Homer, a figure who emerges, as Barbara Graziosi has argued, as the father or patron saint of epic song in the sixth century BC.[32] Why the epics were ever transcribed in the first place, when they are clearly too long ever to have been performed in public on a single occasion even by squads of skilled rhapsodes, is a question we will probably never really be able to answer.[33]

In any case, it is clear that no modern editor, however brilliant, will ever be able to reconstruct a state of the Homeric text that corresponds to the one true authorial text. By the 5th century BC, we can be sure that no such text existed, except perhaps as an ideal type at the very distant origins of the song tradition. The nearest sensible goal is to try to restore the text more or less to its Alexandrian state, which is perfectly possible on the basis of the Vulgate and the commentary tradition, while trying our best to feel our way towards a vague understanding of the pre-Hellenistic tradition that will always be overshadowed by the impenetrable 'fog of war' in our sources. In that period ideas of authenticity and authorship were in any case very different and more flexible, and no one then would have felt the lack of such an archetype. The boundaries of authorship and of works were by no means fixed then, or were differently fixed, and the whole notion of textuality was also subtly different in its emphases and significance.

We can arguably see this in the ruins of the large corpus of epic song from mainland Greece that was transmitted to the Hellenistic under the name of Hesiod. The *Works and Days* in particular reads like a kind of primordial miscellany cobbled together from passages of hymn, argument, allegory, beast-fable, *gnome* and instruction. The apparent loose associativeness of its construction would perhaps be seen as typical of the early wisdom poetry if we had a larger corpus of similar poems. But the most interesting evidence for this kind of simultaneous written and oral transmission of early Greek poetic texts comes from the traditions we moderns call 'lyric' (to the archaic and classical Greeks, they were of course nothing of the kind). In closing, I want to share a few examples, all of which touch simultaneously on the interconnected questions of textual variation and authorship.

The first example I would like to mention is the *Theognidea*: the two books of elegies ascribed to the 6th-century poet Theognis of Megara. Theognis, famously, is one of the earliest poets to proclaim the authorship and authenticity of his own work, in the famous poem (lines 19–38 in the corpus) in which he declares that a mysterious 'seal' (*sphragis*) lies on 'these verses' (the elegy itself, or the whole collection?) which will guarantee their textual stability and his lover Kyrnos' future fame—no one, he says, will be able to add anything or take anything away, and all will see that the verses are his own:

[32] Graziosi 2002.
[33] See Ford 2007.

Κύρνε, σοφιζομένωι μὲν ἐμοὶ σφρηγὶς ἐπικείσθω
τοῖσδ' ἔπεσιν, λήσει δ' οὔποτε κλεπτόμενα,
οὐδέ τις ἀλλάξει κάκιον τοὐσθλοῦ παρεόντος·
ὧδε δὲ πᾶς τις ἐρεῖ· "Θεύγνιδός ἐστιν ἔπη
τοῦ Μεγαρέως· πάντας δὲ κατ' ἀνθρώπους ὀνομαστός".
ἀστοῖσιν δ' οὕπω πᾶσιν ἀδεῖν δύναμαι.

Kyrnos, by my cleverness let a seal lie
upon these couplets, and any theft will immediately become apparent,
nor will any man add anything worse to the good that is present here,
and all will say: "These here are the couplets of Theognis,
the Megarian: he's famous throughout the whole world."
But I can't even win the liking of all my fellow Megarians.

This 'seal', whether a physical wax seal on a papyrus roll or set of tablets, or a metaphorical marker of authenticity, did not, however, stop Theognis' corpus from later acquiring a vast quantity of other material. Many, most recently Ewen Bowie,[34] argue that perhaps the first 300 or so lines of the *Theognidea* preserved for us in the Byzantine manuscript tradition reflect the work of the Megarian singer; the rest is a combination of traditional material with re-used quotations from known authors, including the Athenian sage Solon, five passages from whose elegies, which are known from quotations in other authors, are re-attributed to Theognis, sometimes with subtle grammatical modifications that make them more general. The tone and content of Theognis' verses are overwhelmingly gnomic and ethical—and it is just this sort of material that we find the Theognidean corpus has ingested from other traditions. We have many examples of *gnomai* or proverbs taken from the archaic and classical lyric poets going on to live their own lives in the tradition quite independently of their original poetic contexts. And while Theognis' corpus is famously, and rightly, seen as voicing the resentments and class prejudices of sixth-century Megarian aristocrats, it is also interesting to find that his corpus includes so much Solonian material. As we imagine it today, archaic Greek elegy was mainly a form of sympotic poetry, and it is easy to imagine a large body of material floating free in the oral tradition, carried easily from place to place by visiting friends from out of town, and ready for collection and ascription in any number of various local textual corpora which could then be transcribed or copied into larger anthologies, and eventually, as Theognis' were, into authorial corpora. It seems clear that the complex corpus of short elegies ascribed to Theognis formed itself gradually in this way, with gradual accretions

[34] See Bowie 2022. On Solon and his text, see Blok and Lardinois 2006 and Noussia-Fantuzzi 2010.

of Megarian and non-Megarian material. In fact, it seems likely that the decisive finalisation of our Theognidean corpus took place not in sixth-century Megara, but in late fifth or early fourth-century Athens, where the aggressively aristocratic voice of these elegies probably appealed to wealthy and highly literate Athenians opposed to what they saw as an overly-radical local form of democracy. Here, however, I want to emphasise how easily lines, couplets and even whole songs could slip from one textual corpus to another in the elegiac tradition. Simultaneous oral transmission was the vehicle that made such striking textual mobility possible.

A second example is a fragment of Alcaeus preserved in Athenaeus' *Deipnosophistae* (fr. 891 *PMG*), a collection of sympotic lore that dates to the 3rd century BC, preserves an anthology of so-called *carmina convivalia* or 'Attic skolia' (drinking-songs, essentially) that contains a wide variety of material, and which seems to date again from the mid- to late 5th century. Much of the material it contains is older, and a lot of it is directly relevant to Athens and its historical memory. But some of it comes from other lyric traditions. The symposium was a great melting-pot of songs and song-traditions: a place where all sorts of different songs could be performed. Aristotle mentions the singing of 'skolia' by 'Alcaeus and Anacreon' at Attic symposia, by which he must mean whole songs, many of which must have been transmitted orally. One of Athenaeus' skolia, in fact, consists of a single Alcaic strophe. A papyrus from Oxyrhynchus (P. Oxy. 2298) has revealed that this text in fact belonged to a lost song of Alcaeus. Separated from its original poem, it survived, somewhat modified but without losing all its Aeolic characteristics, as a separate Attic skolion. Much the same thing seems to have happened with another of Athenaeus' skolia, which seems to transpose the opening of Pindar's famous lost *Hymn to Pan* into a slightly different metrical and contextual frame.[35]

These examples provide rare but suggestive clues to a reality that is for the most part hidden from us, not because it was somehow esoteric, but because the frames of reference that characterised it were so natural as to require no ulterior commentary. The frames of reference and underlying principes that defined it were for the most part implicitly, rather than explicitly defined in theoretical discourse. I think we should heed these suggestions, and press them in our reading of the sources, as much as we are able. They point to a world in which the production, diffusion and consumption of poetry (or 'song') was still largely dominated and determined by the exigencies and occasions of an oral performance culture about which we know very little, and also in which the underlying aesthetic and cultural principles expressed in particular poetic choices are accesible to us only through the poems themselves in the traditional language of bardic or lyric self-reflexivity.[36] The image of that culture

[35] *Hymn to Pan*: see 887 *PMG*. For detailed discussion see Fabbro 1992 and 1995. On the *Hymn to Pan* see Lehnus 1979.

[36] On the emergence of 'poetics' as a discipline concerned with poetry, but necessarily external

reflected in our interpretations is largely owed to our corpus of surviving poetic texts. We can read them in isolation, or according to the terms of our own literary system, but it makes sense, extrapolating from the evidence we have with the help of comparative material drawn from mediaeval and modern oral and semi-oral cultures, to try at least to interpret them on their own terms, according to the poetics, sometimes openly expressed but often implied, of the texts themselves. Here we have mostly addressed the differences between their textual culture and our own. We have seen that, for Pindar and his predecessors and contemporaries, the written text did not in any way constitute the fulness or plentitude of the poetic work, which by nature had to be interpreted in performance, through the media of music, voice and dance (the visual and auditory experience of the choral spectacle being at the heart of the work's social function and meaning); that the written traditions of early Greek lyric poetry were themselves part of a living performance culture and drew upon the present and past of that song culture when they set about defining their place in poetic tradition; and that written poetry both interacted constantly with the oral tradition and was acted upon in significant ways. All of this raises a whole range of questions about how we can and should read these texts that need to be taken account of if we are to make any progress in really understanding how they communicate and what they are trying to tell us. The question, I suppose, is finally whether there is any value in trying to understand the (often only implied) aesthetic beliefs and experience of past cultures, and whether these dead worlds have anything still to teach us. It is my feeling that they do.

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to, and distinct from, the craft of poetry-making, see Ford 2001 and Lanata 1963.

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