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Have We Homer's Iliad (Again)?

In the very fertile field of Homeric Studies there were published this year dozens of books and monographs, and hundreds of journal articles and reviews; there were conducted numerous conferences, where countless scholarly papers were presented -- a sum total of pages many times the length of the Iliad and Odyssey combined. And this has gone on year after year for the last century, and, though with somewhat less prolificacy, for the twenty-five centuries before that. There is a present danger that we as Homeric scholars will fail to keep up with all the new discoveries and insights in our field as a whole. This seems almost inevitable, and we recognize it. But there is another more sinister danger, I think: that this inundation of new material will cause us to drift away from what we already know; that we will forget what we have so painstakingly learned. I propose to provide a gentle reminder of something that I think we once knew but seem to have forgotten.

It has to do with one of the most fundamental issues in Homeric studies -- the centerpiece of all "Homeric Questions": what is the relationship between our eclectic scholarly editions of Homer's epics (let's say, the OCT) and the historical performances of these epics by a Greek bard on (let's say) the island of Chios in (let's say) the 8th century B.C.? To put it in the language most familiar to Homerists: is this (OCT) a more or less reliable record -- though passed through many hands -- of a performance orally delivered by a historical Homer and transcribed by a scribe in the 8th century and thereafter for the most part, except for some surface corruption, fixed in its form? Or is this (OCT) the final product of a long evolution of a fluid oral and textual transmission, attributed to a mythic figure or "culture hero" -- a "symbol" of oral tradition that we can call, for the sake of shorthand, "Homer" -- but actually shaped by generations of mouths and hands, slowly "crystallized," and not really fixed until the late Classical or even Hellenistic period? Albert Lord's "oral dictation" model was challenged early on by Geoffrey Kirk's "evolutionary" model, and the debate continues, with refinements and shifts in terminology on both sides.

The "evolutionary" model seems to be the one in vogue. One often hears tossed about such phrases as "the fluidity of the tradition," "multi-forms," "multiple versions of the Iliad/Odyssey," etc. when speaking not only about the pre-Homeric and Archaic periods but about the Classical and Hellenistic periods as well, long after the traditional date ascribed to Homeric composition. But it is the "oral-dictation" rather than the "evolutionary" model that gets us closer to a real historical performance, by a real poet whom we can call by the name "Homer," and I lean in that direction because of what I see as four prominent features of the narratives of our epics as we have inherited them: 1) the overarching unity in plot and structure of the epics as a whole; 2) the presence of many metrical, dictional, factual, and larger narrative inconcinnities of the sort that have become so familiar to comparatists who work with unedited transcriptions of oral performances; 3) the absence of variant recensions of our Iliad and Odyssey; 4) the absence of organic forms and formulaic phrases that can be dated linguistically to a period much later than the late 8th century.