The Composition of the Iliad

The origins of Homer’s *Iliad*, the earliest work of the Western literary tradition, are shrouded in mystery. Nothing can be said with certainty about its author, and some scholars even question the notion of a single historical Homer. For many centuries, the Iliad had been regarded as a literary poem, adumbrations and occasional remarks aside. However, as evidence was surfacing that our picture of the early text of the Iliad was not complete, some scholars in the early and middle eighteenth century raised new questions about Homer, without outlining any theories or methods of approaching them. The course was set, though, when in 1795 the *Prolegomena ad Homerum* of the scholar F. A. Wolf of the Prussian University of Halle established the framework for the exploration of the early development of the Iliad and the Odyssey. He advocated the application of critical and historical analysis as the only acceptable method of restoring the text, and he denounced incorporating criteria based on poetic taste [5]. Based on his assertion that writing was not used for literary purposes during the time of the Iliad’s composition, he conjectured that the poem was constructed by illiterate poets in separate pieces and did not achieve written form until much later than supposed by the ancients: Herodotus proposes the tenth century, Wolf the sixth. His position set the stage for a division among the scholarship which persists to this day. The ‘Analysts,’ siding with Wolf, point out the incongruities and contradictions in the poem (such as the death of Pylaemenes preceding a scene where he weeps for the loss of his
son) and suggest that the creative force behind the Iliad is a long line of oral poets. The
‘Unitarians’ focus instead on the unity, scope, and elegance of the poem and preserve Homer
either as an oral collector of smaller heroic lays or as an important voice present when the
poem was first recorded. These two dichotomous points of view enjoyed alternating periods of
popularity until about the mid twentieth century. Milman Parry made the most important
contribution of the century when in the late 1920s and early 1930s he found patterns of
epic formulae that are characteristic of oral poetry, serving as aids to memorization and
improvisation within the constraints of epic meter and diction. He subsequently studied
the songs of Yugoslavian oral poets and drew an extensive analogy between their songs and
early Greek oral poetry. For the remainder of the century scholars weighed in on his claims,
agreeing to varying extents but never successfully challenging the central thesis that the
poems bear the unmistakable mark of oral composition. Oralists claimed Parry’s work for
their camp, but Unitarians altered their position to preserve Homer, admitting his extensive
use of oral material and techniques but proposing that this in no way lessens his importance
as an artist. Just as a modern author uses words which are not his creation as the unit of
composition, Homer worked in epic formulae.

M. L. West puts forth a somewhat speculative but rather detailed version of the history
of the poems of Homer [3] that serves as a good outline for discussing many of the issues
surrounding the early Iliad. According to West, an Ionian proficient in oral poetry who lived
around the middle of the 8th century and who gained access to materials and technologies
sufficient for the task compiled and wrote down the poems on multiple rolls of parchment
or papyrus. Some reasons Homer is thought by some to be Ionian are as follows [7]: (i) the
dialect of the poems is chiefly Ionic (with some Aeolic, which was spoken near Asia Minor),
(ii) the Homeridae, who claimed to be descendants of Homer and preserved his poetry, were from Chios, (iii) the eating of fish is spurned in the Iliad as it was Ionia, in stark contrast with its favor in mainland Greece, and (iv) the distant places referred to in the Iliad are roughly centered at Asia Minor. However, because these elements are not necessarily associated with the writing of the Iliad (as opposed to the centuries of oral composition), these arguments do not provide conclusive evidence that Homer lived in Ionia.

Corroborating the eighth century date, the earliest inscriptions of the Greek alphabet (borrowed from the Phoenicians) appear in the mid to late eighth century. Presumably this places the date on the spread of writing around the same time, and it would make sense that a poem long in oral tradition would be recorded in written form soon after resources existed for it. Doubts have been raised about whether materials existed which could have been used for so lengthy a work. West proposes papyrus, but others point out that papyrus was an import and was expensive even as late as the fifth century. Herodotus mentions that the Ionians wrote on parchment (διθερα) in the absence of papyrus, but parchment would have been even more expensive because of the process used to make it. These replies are not persuasive, since the ancients accomplished many expensive and impressive feats. Furthermore Hesiod’s lengthy works were preserved in written form from a date near Homer’s [2].

West then proposes that for the next 200 years the text slowly spread throughout Greece, both verbally and via written copies. However, the text was frequently transmitted only in part, introducing variations, including tag lines added by rhapsodes to enable parts of the poem to stand on their own in a performance (e.g., 609-11 in Book I). Finally, Hipparchus established authoritative versions of the text (and added the book divisions), and from 522 forward they were performed in whole every four years at the Panathenaic games. Cor-
responding to this point in history was an change among Greeks from varying degrees of familiarity with different parts of the Iliad to a general familiarity with the whole. The alternatives to this version of the interlude between the introduction of writing and the late standardization of the text by Hipparchus are less probable. One possibility is that the Iliad remained a loose collection of still-evolving oral poems up until the time of Hipparchus. There are a number of problems with this proposal. First, it seems unlikely that the Greeks would seek to lay down an authoritative version of something which didn’t yet exist as a fixed entity. Also, the widely-accepted linguistic analysis of Janko places the writing of the Iliad and the Odyssey prior to the writing of Hesiod, which is known to be written at the time of composition and well before Hipparchus [2]. More appealing is the idea put forth by Kirk that Homer could have weaved together his masterpieces in purely oral fashion sometime between the ninth and seventh centuries. Then they would have been memorized and transmitted by oral poets in largely fixed form until they were written down in the sixth century. While no one doubts the capacity of oral poets to memorize 15,000 line works, it is argued that the language would have continued evolving until the fifth century. The persistence of such sorts of hiatus as ō έθέν (1.114) which should have been amended with a ξ by later standards, indicates that the Greeks had long been making an effort to preserve a text with outdated grammatical features [7]. Milman Parry and his successor A. B. Lord base the proposal of an orally transmitted largely complete work upon the Yugoslav-Homeric analogy. They set out to establish that (i) bards whose goal is to reproduce the songs passed down to them can do so quite well, and (ii) bards that learn the art of writing lose the art of oral poetry. The first point is based on interviews with the Yugoslav singers, but critics reply that the singers do not understand what is meant by the scholars’ emphasis on
verbatim transmission of the poems, since the concept is not present in their own tradition. Their poems are shorter than Homer’s, and when they are observed reciting poems they have learned from one another, significant differences arise in successive recitations. The second point has also been criticized, because in Homer’s day there could not have been a divide between literate and illiterate society, whereas modern Slavic bards are exposed to a different culture and a different set of values when they become literate [4]. In addition to these refutations, it seems doubtful that there could be a shift in emphasis among Greek oral poets from creativity to strict reproduction [4] (p. 206), and West considers the matter settled [3].

In summary, Homer’s poetry as we have it is most properly considered a transitional form, a written composition produced by a poet in the oral tradition. Whether Homer deserves credit as little more than a transcriber or as an artist whose genius brought a skeleton of earlier lays to life is an issue that seems only approachable in terms of the content of the poem. Some find “large-scale structures spanning thousands of verses,” [2] claiming that these could not have been set up before the poem was written, and others find problems with the text (such as the use of the dual for three ambassadors in book 9), claiming a poet with a pen would have edited these out. This issue is so subjective that it resists real resolution, and complicating it are the emendations during the following centuries that changed the text in ways that are relevant for the discussion (for example the interpolation of book XI, the Doloneia, and the lost verses that Aristarchus edited out). Additional uncertainty comes from inability to assess the limits of the quality of oral poetry. As Fowler argues, Parry’s Slavic poets hardly need to produce Homeric quality poems for the comparison to be made, since they provide only one example in history of an oral tradition.
Nevertheless, we will enumerate some of the specific examples of what we mean by the quality of the poem, as discussed in [4]. The language of the poem must serve to paint a picture of the heroic world, and the various characters set forth a thematic unity which is facilitated by the formulaic vocabulary. Within this homogeneous framework, however, the characters must contrast with one another in role and perspective. Parry points out lines 155-157 in Book I, where Achilles speaks against Agamemnon in a passionate and bitter way. The other Greek heroes never speak this way, and this sets up a contrast between the dutiful Greek commanders and Achilles and highlights the all-important conflict between Achilles and Agamemnon. The discussion between Achilles and Odysseus in book XIX is enhanced by the backdrop of this conflict. Bowra [8] also lists a couple of effective contrasts in the structure of the poem. As the wrath of Achilles begins, Thetis goes from Achilles to Zeus, and in book XXIII Zeus sends Thetis to Achilles and his wrath subsides. Book II begins with a dream which leads to war, and book XXIII begins with a dream which leads to peace. Finally, Parry lists some instances where the poet provides a subtle touch where a longer passage would detract from the flow. To cite his first example, Helen looks in vain for her brothers in the Greek army, concluding with the poignant (3.243–4)

"Ὦς φάτο, τοὺς δ᾿ ἤδη κάτεχεν φυσίζοος α/ιοταλενισχιρχυμα
ἐν Λακεδαίµονι α/υπσιλονλενισχιρχυμθι, φίλ/εταιοτα ἐν πατρίδι γαί/εταιοτα

These features are by no means conclusive, but even some proponents of oral transmission tend to agree, taking the Iliad on the whole, that the hand of a “main composer” is visible in the Iliad [4] (193).
References


