"Life of Homer" myths as evidence for the reception of Homer

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Classical Inquiries

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For example:

This inquiry centers on the surviving texts of ‘Life of Homer’ narrative traditions, to which I refer simply as Lives of Homer. These Lives, I argue, can be read as sources of historical information about the reception of Homeric poetry. The information is varied and layered, requiring diachronic as well as synchronic analysis.

The Lives portray the reception of Homeric poetry by narrating a series of events featuring ‘live’ performances by Homer himself. In the narratives of the Lives, Homeric composition is consistently being situated in contexts of oral performance. In effect, the Lives explore the shaping power of positive and even negative responses by the audiences of Homeric poetry in ad hoc situations of oral performance.

§1. This inquiry centers on the surviving texts of ‘Life of Homer’ narrative traditions, to which I refer simply as Lives of Homer.[1] These Lives, I argue, can be read as sources of historical information about the reception of Homeric poetry. The information is varied and layered, requiring diachronic as well as synchronic analysis.[2]

§2. The Lives portray the reception of Homeric poetry by narrating a series of events featuring ‘live’ performances by Homer himself. In the narratives of the Lives, Homeric composition is consistently being situated in contexts of oral performance. In effect, the Lives explore the shaping power of positive and even negative responses by the audiences of Homeric poetry in ad hoc situations of oral performance.

§3. The narrative strategy of each of the Lives can be described as a staging of Homer’s reception. This staging takes the form of narrating a wide variety of occasions for Homeric performance. A premier occasion, as we shall see, is what can best be described as a pan-Hellenic festival.

§4. The Lives of Homer, especially as represented by the Herodotean Vita (= ‘V1’) and by the Certamen (‘The Contest of Homer and Hesiod’ = ‘V2’), highlight the performances of Homer at pan-Hellenic festivals. The background for such highlighting is the overall pan-Hellenic significance of performing Homeric poetry. To appreciate more fully this significance, I will concentrate on the testimony of the Lives concerning the reception of Homer in two areas: (1) the Aeolic and Ionic cities of Asia Minor and outlying islands, and (2) the island of Delos, retrospectively figured as the notional center of the future Athenian Empire.
§5. My use of the word 'aetiology' in the title pertains directly to the point I have just made about pan-Hellenic festivals as the premier occasion of Homeric performance. By 'aetiology' I mean a myth that directly motivates a ritual. [3] Two relevant and most prominent examples of rituals are sacrifice and festival, both of which I view here strictly within the context of ancient Greek history. Both concepts, sacrifice and festival, are conveyed by the word theia, which means not only 'sacrifice' but also, metonymically, 'festival'. The second meaning is clearly attested in Plato Timaeus 26e, where theia actually refers to a pan-Hellenic festival: in this case, the referent is none other than the premier festival of Athens, the Panathenaia.[4] In the days of Plato, it was on this occasion, the Feast of the Panathenaia, that the Homeric Iliad and Odyssey were formally performed in Athens.[5] I signal from the start the relevance of the Panathenaia and, more generally, of the word theia, to my overall argument.

§6. My describing the Lives of Homer as aetologies converges with the general direction of my argumentation, which is, to show that the narratives of these Lives are myths, not historical facts, about Homer. To say that we are dealing with myths, however, is not at all to say that there is no history to be learned from the Lives. Even though the various Homers of the various Lives are evidently mythical constructs, the actual constructing of myths about Homer can be seen as historical fact.[6] The claims made about Homer in the Lives can be analyzed as evidence for the various different ways in which Homeric poetry was appropriated by various different cultural and political centers throughout the ancient Greek-speaking world.

§7. Here I need to highlight again my main point about the Lives: all the claims about Homer, in all their varieties, specifically picture Homeric poetry as a medium of oral performance, featuring Homer himself as the master performer.

§8. For analyzing diachronically as well as synchronically the reception of Homer as reflected in the Lives, I propose to build a model for the periodization of this reception. Such a model needs to account for the accretive layering of narrative traditions contained within the final textual versions of these Lives. I posit three periods of ongoing reception: pre-Panathenaic, Panathenaic, and post-Panathenaic. By 'post-Panathenaic', I mean a period of Homeric reception marked by the usage of graphein 'write' in referring to Homer as an author. This usage needs to be distinguished from the usage of the Panathenaic and pre-Panathenaic periods, when Homer is said to poiein 'make' whatever he composes, not to graphein 'write' it.

§9. The post-Panathenaic period is exemplified by sources like Plutarch and Pausanias, in whose writings Homer is already seen as an author who 'writes', graphei, whatever he composes.[7] The Panathenaic period, by contrast, is exemplified by Plato and Aristotle, in whose writings we still see Homer as an artisan who 'makes', poiein, and who is never pictured as one who 'writes', graphei.[8]

§10. I translate poiein as 'make' in order to underline the fact that the direct object of this verb is not restricted to any particular product to be made by the subject—if the subject of the verb refers to an artisan. In other words, poiein can convey the producing of any artifact as the product of any artisan. It is not restricted to the concept of the song / poem as artifact or of the songmaker / poet as artisan. To cite an early example: in Iliad VII 222, the artisan Tukhios epoîeisen 'made' the shield of Ajax. By contrast with the verb poiein, the derivative nouns poïêtos and poïësis are restricted, already in the earliest attestations, to the production of songs / poems. I stress the exclusion of artifacts other than songs / poems or of artisans other than songmakers / poets. The noun poîêma has likewise been restricted, though not completely; in the usage of Herodotus, for example, poîêma still designates artifacts other than song / poetry (1.25.1, 2.135.3, 4.5.3, 7.85.1). As for the compound noun formant-poîos, it is not at all restricted to song or to poetry.[9]

§11. In what follows, I will track usages of poiein 'make' and graphein 'write' with reference to Homer in the Lives of Homer.[10] In what I reconstruct as the pre-Panathenaic and the Panathenaic periods of Homeric reception as narrated in the Lives, we shall see Homer pictured not as an 'author' in the sense of a 'writer' but simply as an artisan who makes songs / poems that become activated in performance. To the extent that these songs / poems are attributed to him, Homer is an 'author', but the authorization of this 'author', as we shall see, depends on the performance, not on the written text, of his songs / poems.[11] Moreover, as we shall also see, the performer must be Homer himself.

§12. In making this point, I disagree with the theory of Barbara Graziosi concerning Homer as an 'absent author' in the Lives.[12] According to her interpretation of the Lives, the stories of Homer in contexts of written composition are to be viewed as evidence for such an 'absent author': just as an artisan who epoîeisen 'made' a vase (as signaled by countless vase inscriptions reading 'epoîeisen plus name of maker' on the vase) potentially becomes the 'absent author' of the vase, so also Homer becomes the 'absent author' of the songs / poems that he 'made'.[13] This interpretation does not square with portrayals of Homer in contexts of performance. In such contexts, as portrayed in the Lives, the performance of the composition requires the real or notional presence of Homer for the purpose of making the performance authoritative. In the narrative logic of the Lives, Homer simply cannot be an 'absent author'. So we shall see, Homer is an 'author' only to the extent that his real or notional presence authorizes the occasion of oral performance. In the narrative logic of the Lives, Homer embodies the ongoing fusion of the composer with the performer.

§13. In the case of other 'lives of poets' traditions, we see analogous patterns of narration. For example, in Herodotus 1.23, Arion 'makes' (poiein) dithyrambs, which are actualized when he 'teaches' (didaskei) them in Corinth; similarly in Herodotus 6.21.2, Phrynichus 'makes' (poiein) the drama called 'The Capture of Miletus', which is actualized when he 'teaches' it in Athens.[14]
§14. I need to add that oral composition can indeed be metaphorized as written composition in the post-Panathenaic period, and to that extent we may think of Homer as a ‘writer’. Nevertheless, as we are about to observe, the Lives simply do not metaphorize oral performance as a performance of written texts.

§15. My point remains that the Lives require the real or notional presence of Homer for authorizing the performance of Homer. This narrative requirement holds up even in relatively late contexts—in what I reconstruct as the post-Panathenaic period of Homeric reception as narrated in the Lives. Even in such late contexts, where the poems attributed to Homer are described as his writings, the narrative still requires the notional performance of these poems, and the model performer must still be Homer himself. As we shall see, even in post-Panathenaic contexts where the poems of Homer are pictured as texts written by Homer the writer, they must still be authorized by Homer the performer. Accordingly, although I concentrate on the reception of Homeric poetry as actual performance in the pre-Panathenaic and Panathenaic periods, the reception of Homeric poetry as notional performance in the post-Panathenaic period is also relevant.

§16. What follows is an inventory of twenty-five examples in the Lives of Homer where the words poieîn ‘make’ or graphein ‘write’ refer to the making of Homeric song / poetry. In numbering the 25 examples, I place the sign "#" in front of each numbered example.

#1. V1.69–72
καὶ ὅποιο ἐκάθητο ἄρκιοτο πάντα τὰ ἐπιχώρια διεκαράτο, καὶ ἱστορέων ἐπινοότατο. εἰκός δὲ μὲν ἦν καὶ καὶ μνημόσυνα πάντων νοθεραθον
And wherever he [= Homer] [15] went in his travels, he would see thoroughly, one by one, all the local things. He would make inquiries and thus find out. It is likely that he was having memorable parts written down (graphein) concerning all these things.

§17. In all of V1, this passage is the only case where graphein refers—however indirectly—to the making of Homeric poetry. The exceptional nature of this case—and the indirectness of the wording—may be due to the fact that the reference here involves not some event that is actually being narrated but merely an inference made by the narrator about events still to be narrated. In terms of the inference, Homer must have written down—or, to be more accurate, Homer must have had someone else write down (note the middle voice)—all the things he saw that were memorable to him.

§18. At this phase of the narrative, Homer is not yet blind—and he is not yet a songmaker. Born in Smyrna and raised by his unwed mother (V1.17–31), Homer has been adopted by a man called Phemios, a professional teacher of grammata ‘letters’ and of ‘other kinds of mousikē’ (V1.36–38: ποιός ὁ γράμματα καὶ τὴν ἄλλην μουσικὴν διδάσκοντας πάοιος). [16] After Phemios dies, Homer inherits the teaching legacy of his adoptive father (V1.50–52). By implication, then, Homer himself becomes a teacher of grammata ‘letters’. Then, he joins a man called Mentes in embarking on a sea journey and gets to see the places that Odysseus had seen once upon a time, in the final phases of that hero’s homecoming in Ithaca (V1.61–90).

As Homer’s sightseeing comes to a close, he proceeds to travel back to Smyrna, but, before arriving, he stops over at the city of Colophon, where he falls ill and becomes blind (V1.90–92); the narrative accepts this version of Homer’s blinding, as opposed to a version claimed by the people of Ithaca, who say that Homer was blinded on their island (V1.84–87). Only after Homer comes back to Smyrna, already blind after his illness in Colophon, does he formally embark on a career of songmaking, poieîn (V92–94: ἐκ δὲ τῆς Κολοφώνος τυφλός ἐκὼ διδαχῆται ἐς τὴν Σμύρναν καὶ ὑμῶν ἔπειτα τῷ παῖς ‘leaving Colophon, he arrives in Smyrna, now blind, and that is the way things are as he now tries his hand at the making of poetry (poieîn)’.

§19. By implication, the narrative of V1 views Homer’s mnemonic sequencing of memorabilia during his journey in the realms of Ithaca and beyond as a process distinct from the process of actually composing a narrative based on these memorabilia. The narrator’s inference is implying a distinction between the process of composing and a previous process of remembering things to be put into a composition that has yet to happen. In effect, the narrative here is postponing the actual process of Homeric composition for later occasions, for later moments in the life of Homer. In terms of the narrator’s inference, the occasion of writing is not being linked directly with the occasions of Homeric composition, which are still just waiting to be narrated in V1. Throughout the narrative of V1, in fact, the act of composing is nowhere linked directly with the act of writing.

§20. By contrast, as we are about to see in all the other relevant passages taken from V1, the act of composition is everywhere linked with the act of performance. Nowhere in V1 do we ever see Homer in the act of writing down what he is actually composing.

#2. V1.113–114
... τοὺς ἴδε τοὺς ἐς θεοὺς πεποιημένους αἰτῦ... 
... the hymns to the gods that had been made [poieîn] by him [= Homer]... ‘

This reference concerns Homer’s ‘making’ (poieîn) of hymnoi ‘hymns’ in an Aeolic city by the name of Neon Teikhos.

#3. VI.119–122
ἐξείδικνον δὲ οἱ Νεοτειχεῖς μέχρις ἐπὶ ἐμοῦ τὸν χώρον ἐν ὑπατίσαν τῶν ἑπτῶν τὴν ἐπιδείξεων ἐποίησε, καὶ κάρτα ἐκέβοντο τὸν τόπον.
Even as recently as my own time, the people of Neon Teikhos used to show off the place where he [= Homer] used to sit and make (poieîn) performance (epideixis) of his verses. They venerated greatly this site.[17]

§21. At Neon Teikhos, Homer formally performs his compositions by 'making' (poieîn) what is called his epideixis 'performance'. Here we see that performance itself, even as a process, is something that can be 'made'. It is not just the composition that is being 'made'. In the narrative logic of V1, the 'making' of Homeric verse is a combination of two processes, composition and performance.

#4. V1.133-134

poieîn καὶ τὸ ἐπίγραμμα τὸδὲ, τὸ ἐπὶ καὶ νῦν ἐπὶ τῆς στήλης τοῦ μνῆματος τοῦ Γορδίου ἐπιγράφατο;

He [= Homer] made [poieîn] also this epigram, which even to this day is found inscribed on the stele of the memorial of the man from Gordion [= King Midas].

Homer here 'makes' (poieîn) an epigram, to be inscribed on the tomb of King Midas of Phrygia.

§22. In the narrative of V2 as well (V2.261–264), we shall see another reference to Homer's ‘making’ (poieîn) the poem that becomes the Midas epigram.[18] In both references, the inscribing of the epigram is not being connected directly with the actual composition of the epigram. The physical process of inscribing the epigram is viewed as independent from the mental process of Homer's ‘making’ (poieîn) the poem. [19] Elsewhere in the Lives, we find two passages where it is said explicitly that Homer also composed an epigram for his own tomb on the island of Ios, which was inscribed on that tomb only after he died (V2.333 and V5.48-49). [20]

#5. V1.141–146

κατιξὼν δὲ ἐν ταῖς λέξεσις τῶν γεγονότων ἐν τῇ Κύμῳ ὁ Μελησιγένης τὸ ἔπος τὸ πεποιημένον αὐτῷ ἐπεδείκνυτο, καὶ ἐν τοῖς λόγοις ἔτρεψε τοὺς ἀκούοντας καὶ αὐτοῦ θυμωρίᾳ καθειστήκεισαν. γνοὺς δὲ ὃς ἀπεδείκνυτο αὐτῷ τὴν ποίησιν αὐτοῦ τῶν άμειῶν καὶ ἕις συνήθεις ἔλεγκας τοὺς ἀκούοντας, . . .

'Melesigenes [= Homer] used to sit in the leskhai of old men in Cyme and perform (epideiknnai) the verses [epos plural] made [poieîn] by him. With his words he gave pleasure to his audiences [akouontes]. And they became his admirers (thaumastai). But he, knowing that the people of Cyme accepted (apodekhesthai) his songmaking (poeîsis) and that he was attracting (helkein) his audiences into a state of familiarization (sun-ētheia) . . .'

§23. In Cyme, Homer 'performed' (= epideiknnai = 'made an epideixis of') the verses or epos (plural) that he had 'made' (poieîn). His audiences (akouontes), hearing him perform, 'accepted' (apodekhesthai) his songmaking (poeîsis). The reception by the audience is correlated with their familiarization (sun-ētheia) to the songmaking; this familiarization is in turn correlated with Homer's 'drawing power' or 'attraction'. [21] The reception of Homer is conveyed by saying that his audiences in Cyme became overall thau mastai 'admirers' of Homer. We shall encounter this usage again.

#6. V1.198–200

. . . ἀ γε πεποιημένα ἐλή αὐτῷ τῶν ἔπων ἀναγράμματα καὶ ἀλλα ποιῶν πρὸς ἐκεῖνον ἀναφέρειν ἀδεί . . .

. . . and that he [= Thestorides] should write down the verses [epos plural] of his [= Homer's] that he [= Homer] had made [poieîn] and other verses that he [= Homer] was about to make [poieîn] and attribute them to him [= Thestorides] always . . .

§24. In Phocaea, Homer's rival Thestorides, whose profession is described as the teaching of grammata 'letters' to youths (195), makes Homer an offer: Thestorides will provide Homer with housing and general sustenance if Homer agrees to the writing down of the verses or epos (plural) that Homer had 'made' (poieîn) and is 'making' (poieîn)—and if Homer agrees to 'attribute' (anapherein) these verses to Thestorides. In the logic of the narrative, Homer's own composing—past, present, and future—does not depend on the writing down of his compositions.
§25. In Phocaea, while being provided with housing and general sustenance by Thestorides, Homer 'makes' the Little Iliad and the Phokias; afterwards, Thestorides has it all written down. The narrative treats the act of Homer's 'making' (poieîn) and Thestorides' writing down (graphesthai) as separate events. Afterwards, Thestorides sails away from Phocaea, intending thereby to appropriate the poetry of Homer somewhere else, in the absence of Homer. But Homer refuses to let himself become an absent author, as we are about to see.

§26. In the narrative that ensues (V1.210ff), Thestorides sails to Chios, where he goes about performing (epideiknunai V1.215 and 222) the verses or epos (plural) of Homer in Chios as if they were his own. Meanwhile, back in Phocaea, Homer finds out about this misappropriation and angrily resolves to make every effort to travel to Chios in order to set things straight (V1.224–225). After experiencing many adventures while trying to make his way to Chios (V1.225–275) and even after arriving on the island (V1.276–232), Homer finally starts 'making' (poieîn) new poems there (V1.335). Thestorides hears about the presence of the composer and, to avoid being exposed as a pseudo-Homer, that is, as an unauthorized performer who claim the compositions of Homer, he abruptly leaves Chios (V1.336–338). Throughout this narrative, the 'scripted' performances of Thestorides are being contrasted with the 'unscripted' compositions of Homer. Also, Thestorides is described as a teacher of grammata 'letters' (V1.185, 223), whereas Homer becomes, once he is finally established in the city of Chios, a teacher of epos (plural) 'verses' (V1.341).[22] It is important to note that the scripted performances of Thestorides are unauthorized, and only the unscripted performances of the genuine composer are authorized.[23]

§27. Homer is now on the island Chios (feminine) in the house of a man called Chios (masculine), and he is making (poieîn) these playful poems before he moves to the city of Chios (feminine). These are the poems where Thestorides to leave Chios.

§28. Once Homer moves to the city of Chios and becomes established there, his reception is conveyed by the idea that his audiences throughout Chios become overall thaumastai 'admirers' of his (V1.342). We have seen this expression earlier, in a similar context of referring to Homeric reception.

§29. Homer is now in the city of Chios, having established himself there and having many 'admirers' (thaumastai). Homer is being described as composing the Odyssey in Chios (V1.347), 'making' (poieîn) special things take place inside the plot of the Odyssey. For example, Homer 'fits' (en-harmozein) into his songmaking (= poieîs V1.349) the name of his own friend Mentor, and thus he 'makes' (poieîn) it happen that Odysseus places Mentor in charge in the hero's household.[24]

§30. Still in the city of Chios, Homer is described as composing the 'big' Iliad, 'making' special things take place inside the plot of the Iliad. Specifically, Homer 'makes' the verses or epos (plural) about Erektheus and Athens take place inside the Iliad; also he makes verses about the leader of the Athenians, Menestheus, thereby glorifying or 'praising' him as well.[25]
in Chios and having genuine fame for his songmaking (poiēsis), many people came to visit [aphikneisthai] him. Upon encountering him, people kept on advising him to visit Hellas.

§31. As a consequence of Homer’s poiēsis ‘songmaking’— and here poiēsis refers cumulatively to all the instances of Homer’s ‘making’ (poiēn) of verses just narrated—Homer’s fame in Ionia and throughout Hellas in general has already become widespread. At this point in the narrative, Homer is still in Chios. Only now does the narrative finally introduce the theme of Homer’s traveling to the rest of Hellas. And yet, though Homer is described as by now eager to make a tour of all Hellas (V1.376–377), he implicitly stays in Chios for a longer period as he continues to make verses that center on the glorification of Athens (V1.378–399).

§32. With the telling of these two further contexts, Homer has at long last finished his glorification of Athens by way of ‘making’ (poiēn) verses. He can now finally leave Chios and set sail to tour the rest of Hellas (V1.400), and he arrives at Samos as his first port of call (V1.401).

§33. Here the narrative of V1 maintains the status of Chios as a definitive setting for Homer’s glorification of Athens.

#12. V1.394

. . . ἐς δὲ τὴν Ὀθωναίαν τόδε ἐποίησεν . . .

. . . inside the Odyssey he made [poiēn] these verses . . .

#13. V1.399

. . . ἐποιήσας δὲ ἐς τὴν ποίησα ταύτα . . .

‘. . . having made (poiēn) these verses take place inside (en- of em- poiēn) his songmaking [= poiēsis] . . .’

§34. So far in V1, we have seen various aspects of Homeric composition being aetiologized by way of narrating Homer’s life and times. In this last example taken from V1, the narrative aetiologizes Homer’s inherited traditions as well, specifying that they are Aeolic rather than Ionic in origin. The significance of this specification in V1 can be explained in terms of a pre-Panathenaic outlook.[28]

§35. Having now finished with V1 (= the Herodotean Vita), we turn to V2 (= the Certamen).

#15a. V2.15–17

Κολοφώνιοι δὲ καὶ τόπον δεικνύουσιν, ἐν ἦς φασιν αὐτὸν γράμματα διδάσκοντα τῆς ποιητικῆς ἀρχέσοθα καὶ ποίησαν πρῶτον τὸν Μαργίτην.

The people of Colophon point to a place where they say that he [= Homer], while he was teaching letters (grammata), began his songmaking (poiēsis) and made [poiēn], first of all, the Margites.[29]

§36. Here too in V2, as in V1, the word poiēn ‘make’ is still being used instead of graphein ‘write’ in referring to the process of Homeric composition. Nevertheless, the Colophonian version of the Life of Homer, as reflected here in this set of passages taken from V2, stems from what I describe as the post-Panathenaic period of Homeric reception. Although the reference here to the actual composition is still being made by way of the word poiēn ‘make’, Homer is pictured in V2 as a teacher of grammata ‘letters’—not epos (plural) ‘verses’. By contrast, as we saw earlier, V1 pictures Homer as a teacher of epos (plural) ‘verses’.

#15b. V2.55–56

Having made [poiēn] the Margites, Homer went wandering around [perierkhesthai] from city to city, performing in the manner of rhapsodes.[30]

§37. The narrative here picks up where V2.15–17 (= #15a) left off. After ‘making’ the Margites in Colophon, Homer goes to other cities, performing his poetry (it is not specified what he performs in what city). The process of poiēn ‘making’ Homeric poetry is correlated with the multiple events of ‘performing’ it at multiple occasions of performance. The performance is designated
by rhapsōidein 'perform in the manner of rhapsodes' (for the same verb, see also V2.286, where Homer is shown performing his poîemata in Corinth).\[31\]

§42. Taking this detail as a point of reference, I reconstruct the overall narrative sequence of V2 as follows:

From time to time Hesiod would make [poieîn] his question by way of two verses.

§38. On the occasion of the actual 'Contest' of Homer and Hesiod, Hesiod is pictured at one point as 'making' (poieîn) a 'question' in the process of performing two of his verses. Again, the process of composition is being correlated with the event of performance.

§41. The place where Homer is composing the epigram of Midas is expressed by way of the word poieîn 'make'—not graphein 'write'. Nevertheless, as we are about to see in the next example, the framing narrative reveals traces of a mentality dating to what I describe as the post-Panathenaic period.

Receiving from them [= the sons of Midas] a silver phialē he [= Homer] dedicated it in Delphi to Apollo, writing an epigram [epigraphein] on it 'Lord Phoebus! I, Homer, have given you a beautiful gift, / with the help of your impulses of wisdom [epiphrosunai].\[32\] And may you grant [opazein] me fame [kleos] forever.'

§39. Here again in V2, as also in V1, the process of Homer's composing the epigram of Midas is expressed by way of the word poieîn 'make'—not graphein 'write'. Nevertheless, as we are about to see in the next example, the framing narrative reveals traces of a mentality dating to what I describe as the post-Panathenaic period.

After this he [= Homer] made [poieîn] the Odyssey, 12,000 verses, having already made [poieîn] the Iliad, consisting of 15,500 verses.

§40. In this particular context, the process of Homer's composing an epigram is no longer separated from the process of inscribing an epigram, in that Homer himself is said to 'inscribe' a poetic inscription. To be contrasted are other contexts where the two processes are still being separated.\[34\]

§41. The place where Homer is composing the Iliad and Odyssey is not made explicit here by the narrative. It is implied, however, that this place is actually Delphi. I find it pertinent here to highlight a revealing detail: Homer had personally dedicated his epigram to Apollo at Delphi, and then he is said to go 'from there' to Athens (V2.276–277: παραγενόμενον δὲ Ἀπόλλωνι, ἔρχομαι δὲ τῷ αὐτῷ θόλῳ), and we see a connection to Delphi in the next two verses.

§42. Taking this detail as a point of reference, I reconstruct the overall narrative sequence of V2 as follows:

A) Homer starts his career of poetry in Colophon (2.15), having 'made' (poieîn) the Margites (2.17).

B) Having 'made' (poieîn) the Margites in Colophon, he now goes wandering around other cities, performing poetry wherever he goes (2.55–56).

C1) He goes to Aulis, in Boeotia (2.54–55). At Aulis he competes with Hesiod (2.54–55).

C2) Alternatively, he goes to Chalkis, in Euboea (2.68), where he competes with Hesiod and is defeated by him (2.68–211).

D) He now goes wandering around other cities, performing poetry wherever he goes (2.255).

E) He performs the epic called the Thebaid (2.255–257) and the epic called the Epigonoi (2.258–260). The venue seems to be Thebes.

F) He 'makes' (poieîn) the Iliad (2.260–270). The venue seems to be Phrygia, though the narrative does not specify that Homer actually went there.

G) He goes to Delphi, taking with him the phialē he had received as compensation for 'making' the Midas Epigram, and he dedicates it, having composed his Delphi Epigram to be inscribed on it (2.270–274).

H) He 'makes' (poieîn) the Odyssey, having already 'made' (poieîn) the Iliad (2.275–276).

I) He goes from Delphi ('from there') to Athens, where he performs a riddle as he enters the building of the city council or bouleutērion (2.276–285).\[35\]
J) He goes to Corinth, where he ‘performs in the mode of a rhapsode’ (rhapsōidein) his ‘poetic creations’ (poiēmatα) (2.266–287: ἐκέλευθε δὲ παραγεγραμμένος εἰς Κόρινθον ἔγραψε δύο τὰ ποιήματα).

K) He goes to Argos (2.287–315), where he ‘speaks’ (legein) [36] verses that are taken from the Iliad (2.288: καὶ λέγει ἐκ τῆς ᾿Ιλιάδος τὸ ἐπι τὸ δόξα).

L) After staying a while in Argos, he sails over to Delos (2.315–322), where he ‘speaks’ (legein) [37] the Homeric Hymn to Apollo (2.317 λέγει ἤμων εἰς Ἀπόλλωνον).

M) After being celebrated in Delos with special honors that compensate him for his songmaking, Homer goes to the island of Ios, where he fails to understand a riddle and dies in a fit of depression (2.322–338)—but not before he ‘makes’ (poiēin) an epigram for his own tomb. In the passage that tells about Homer’s composition of this epigram, we see the last attestation of poiēin ‘make’ with reference to the life of Homer as narrated in V2:

#19. V2.333

... poiēte ὑπὸ τοῦ τοῦρου αἴτοι ἐνυγγυεῖα ... 

... he [= Homer] made [poiētein] his own tomb’s epigram ... 

§43. Having now finished with V2 (= the Certamen), we turn to the remaining Lives, starting with V3:

#20. V3a.75–83

εἰς μέντοι οὗ καὶ Κολοφωνίων αὐτὸν ἀποδεκυνόντας πιερᾶντας, μεγάλη τεκμηρίᾳ χρώμενοι πρὸς ἀπόδεεν τὸ ἐπί τοῦ ἀνδρίσεως ἐνυγγυεμένων ἐλέγεμι· ἔχει δ’ ὑμῖν ὁ ᾿Ομήρος σὺ γὰρ κλέος Ἐλλάδος πάνα / καὶ Κολοφωνίων πάτρα θήκας εἰς άιδαν. [80] // καὶ τάδε ἄντιβλεπτι ψυχὴ γεννήσας κούρας / διόσσας ἡμῖν ἐχάριτα-margin. // ἦμεν δ’ ἄν καὶ νάστον Ὀδυσσηός πολύπλαγκτον / ἢ δὲ τὸν λείαντον Δαρδανίδων πόλεμον.

But there are those who attempt to demonstrate that he [= Homer] was a Colophonian, using as their greatest evidence for demonstration the elegy inscribed [epigraphein] as an epigram on the base of his statue. It goes like this: “Son of Meles, Homer, you have made glory for all Hellas / and for Colophon your fatherland—glory that will last for all time. // And you have been begotten with your godlike spirit these daughters, / having written [graphein] two columns of writings about heroes. // One of them has as its hymnic theme the return of Odysseus, with all its many detours. / The other is about the war of Troy, fought by the sons of Dardanos.”

§44. In this case, we see an explicit equation of Homer’s composing with Homer’s writing. As I have been arguing, this mentality is typical of the post-Panathenaic period. I note with interest that this example comes from traditions attributed to the Colophonians. Earlier on, we saw another explicit equation of Homer’s composing with Homer’s writing, again in a Colophonian context (#15).

§45. The following final five examples exemplify the latest period of Homeric reception and will be discussed only briefly. From here on, we see Homer in the act of ‘writing’ (graphein), and I therefore now translate poiēma and poiēsis simply as ‘poem’ and ‘poetry’.

#21. V3a.98

ἐνυγγυεῖα δ 계 ποιήματα δύο, ἑλλάδα καὶ ᾿Οδυσσείαν

He [= Homer] wrote two poems [poiēmatα], the Iliad and the Odyssey.

#22. V5.19–34

αὐτοῦ δ’ αὐτοῦ θετέων ἔξω τῆς ᾿Ιλιάδος καὶ τῆς ∼ 20 ᾿Οδυσσείας, ἀλλὰ καὶ τοῖς ὦνοις καὶ τὸ λοιπὰ τῶν αὐτῶν ἀναφερομένων παραγόταν ἡγεῖτο ἀλλότρια καὶ τῆς φύσεως καὶ τῆς δυνάμεως ἕνεκα, τινὲς δ’ αὐτοῦ φανε τίνι καὶ τὰ φέροντα δύο γράμματα, τὴν τὰς Βατραχομυομαχίαν καὶ τὸν Μαργίτην. τὰ δε ποιήματα αὐτοῦ τὰ ἁλκή σποράδην πρότερον ἀδύνατον Πεισίστρατος Αθηναίων συνετέλον· δ’ ὡς δηλοὶ τὰ φέροντα παράγοντα παράγονταν ἐν ἑκάτον αὐτοῦ τοῦ Πεισίστρατου. ἐχει δ’ ὁδόν: // τρίς γαὶ ταυρανθήνοντα τουσσωμάκις ἐξεχόμενον. [39] / δέρων Ἐρεχθέας καὶ τρίς ἐγγέγονον, // τὸν μέγαν ἐν μοιχῳ Πεισίστρατον κε τὸν ὄμοιον / βάρος παράγον τό πρὸν αἰδόμενον. // ἡμερῶν καὶ κείνον ὁ χρόνος ἔναν ἑ τοῦτον / εἶπεν Ἐρεχθέας Σμύρνων ἕπειρεν εἰς οἰκίαν ἐποδίδοντον.

Nothing of his [= Homer’s] is to be accepted as canonical except for the Iliad and the Odyssey. Even the Hymns and the rest of the poems [poiēmatα] attributed to him are to be deemed as belonging to other authors—to judge on the inherent nature and power [of the poetry]. But some say that two of the other attested writings [grammatα] do belong to him [= Homer]: the Battle of Frogs and Mice and the Margites. In any case, the poems [poiēmatα] of his [= Homer’s] that are genuine used to be sung on many different scattered occasions [= sporadēn], but then Peisistratos of Athens put them together and organized them. And a proof of this is the epigram in Athens that is inscribed on the statue of Peisistratos himself’ [what follows in Vita 5.29–34 is also found in Vita 4.11–16 and in Greek Anthology 11.442]: // Three times was I tyrant [= of Athens], and three times was I expelled / by the people of Erekhtheus [= the Athenians]. Three times did they bring me in [as tyrant], // me, Peisistratos, great in counsel. ] was the one who took Homer / and put him all together. Before that, he used to be sung in a scattered state [sporadēn], // You see, he was our golden citizen [polite], / if it is true that we the Athenians colonized [= made an apoikia] of Smyrna.
The Iliad and the Odyssey are poems [poiêmata] that are undisputably his [= Homer's]. But he wrote [graphēn] the Iliad not on any single occasion, nor according to the sequence in which it is composed. Rather, he himself would write down [graphein] each rhapsōidia, performing it in the course of his touring the various cities in order to sustain his livelihood, and then leave it behind. [38] Later on, it was put together and organized by many, especially by Peisistratos, tyrant of the Athenians. Other poems [poiēmata] attributed to him are: the Amazonia, the Little Iliad, the Nostoi, the Epikēkhdiles, the Ethiepaktos or Iamboi, the Battle of Mice and Frogs, the Battle of the Spiders, the Battle of the Cranes, the Ceramis, the Exile of Amphiarao, some playful verses, the Capture of Sicily, the Ephialtaia, the Cycle, the Hymns, the Cypria.

§46. Here I have reached the end of my survey of poiēn 'make' and graphein 'write' in the twenty-five examples I have taken from the Lives of Homer. Seeing that the Lives vary significantly in their orientation, I now proceed to offer a summary.

§47. V1 is pre-Panathenaic in outlook (though not in date of composition), with major accretions deriving from the Panathenaic period. By contrast, V2 is Panathenaic, with major residues deriving from the pre-Panathenaic period—and with minor accretions from the post-Panathenaic period.[40] As for the rest of the Lives, V3–12, they are post-Panathenaic in outlook, with major residues deriving from the earlier periods, mostly from the pre-Panathenaic.

§48. The narrative of V1, reflecting the pre-Panathenaic period of Homeric reception, concentrates on the shaping of Homer's songmaking career in Aeolic and Ionic cities of Asia Minor and outlying islands. The narratological sequencing of the cities is significant. First in the narrative is Cyme, explicitly described as an Aeolic city (V1.3), mentioned in first place because it is recognized as the city of origin for Homer's genealogy—and the city where he is actually conceived (V1.3–17).[41] Second is Smyrna, an Aeolic daughter city of Cyme (V1.18–19). Smyrna is recognized as the city where Homer is born (V1.17–31).[42]

§49. As we have already seen (#14 above), the narrative of V1 goes out of its way to stress that the origins of Homer are Aeolic, not Ionic (V1.517–522). This way, V1 avoids the idea that Athens initiated a mythical 'big bang' event known as the Ionian apoikia 'migration', launched by Athens as the metropolis of the Ionian cities. The classic formulation of this Athenian idea—or ideology—is given by Herodotus (1.147.2): ἐνεὶ δὲ πάντας ἠκόντες, ὅσοι ἀπ' Ἀθηναίων γεγόνασι καὶ Ἀτταύρων ἄνουσα ὄρθον Ἰωνίας are all those populations who originate from Athens and who celebrate the festival [heortē] of the Apatouria. Such an ideology is indicative of a Panathenaic outlook. By contrast, the outlook of V1 is distinctly pre-Panathenaic.

§50. Despite its persistently pre-Panathenaic outlook, V1 contains an accretive element that seems at first sight to be Panathenaic in its motivation. The accretion involves the sequencing of the last two major Ionic cities mentioned in the narrative of V1, the island-states of Chios and Samos. As we have already seen, V1 pictures Homer as 'making' the Iliad and the Odyssey in the city of Chios (V1.346–398). Also, Homer plans to launch his songmaking tour of all Hellas from Chios (V1.374–377). Moreover, Samos becomes a transitional stop before Homer's intended arrival in Hellas, and, in this context, his starting point in Hellas is specified as Athens (V1.483–484). Thus the theme of Homer's presence in Samos prefigures the Panathenaic theme of Homer's presence in Athens. In the end, however, a pre-Panathenaic outlook reasserts itself: after Homer's extended tour of composing and performing in Samos (V1.399–484), he leaves the island and arrives at another transitional stop, the island of Ios (V1.484–485), which turns out to be his terminal stop, since this is the place where he dies, ambushed by a riddle (V1.485–516). So, according to V1, Homer's personal appearance in Athens never happens. What had started off as a Panhellenic accretion now ends up as a pre-Panhellenic or even anti-Panhellenic correction.
§51. From the standpoint of V1, any performance of Homeric poetry in Athens can only take place after Homer’s death. Now, then, are we to imagine such a performance? I propose that the answer involves (1) Athens (V2), (2) Chios, and (3) Homer. The performance of Homeric poetry known as the Homeridai, whose very name indicates that they are descendants of Homer. Here I return to the fact that the narrative of V1 maintains the status of Chios as a definitive setting for Homer’s glorification of Athens. This association of Chios and Athens fits the world view of the Panathenaic period. We have already seen in V1 that the original songmaking for the Panathenaia, the premier festival of Athens, is pictured as taking place not in Athens but in Chios, where Homer makes the Iliad and the Odyssey. Here is where the Homeridai, linked with Athens as well as Chios, are relevant. As we learn from incidental references in Plato (Ion 530d7 and Republic I 599e) and Isocrates (Helen 10.65), Athenians considered the Homeridai of Chios to be the normative authorities on Homeric poetry. By implication, the city of Athens had appropriated for the festival of the Panathenaia a version of Homer that depends on the Homeridai of Chios.

§52. Despite these strong links between the Homeridai and the Panathenaic version of Homeric poetry, Homer has no sons according to the narrative of V1: he fathers only two daughters in Chios (V1.343–345), one of whom dies unmarried, while the other is married off by her father to a man called Chios (on whom see §8). Again I see here a pre-Panhellenic or even anti-Panhellenic correction, consistent with the overall outlook of V1.

§53. This pre-Panhellenic outlook of V1 is in sharp contrast with the Panathenaic outlook of V2. In that narrative, we find an explicit reference to the Homeridai as the surviving descendants of Homer: Χῖος δὲ πᾶντα τεκμήρια φέρουσαν Ἰονὸν εἶναι τόπον οὗτοι αὐτοὶ ἀυτοί, ὧν ἐποίησαν τοὺς Κοινοὺς πολίτες, the people of Chios, on the other hand [= in rivalry with other claims by other cities], adduce proof for their claim that Homer is their very own citizen (polites), saying that there exist surviving members of a lineage who originate from him [= Homer], called the Homeridai.” This reference makes it explicit that the tracing of the Homeridai back to Homer is a Chiote tradition—and this tradition aetiologizes the Chiotes’ claim to the poet Homer by way of the Homeridai. There is also another such reference in Strabo (14.1.35 C645). Moreover, as we learn from Harpocrates (s.v. Ὄμηρος), Hellanicus of Lesbos (FGH 4 F 20) and Acusilaus of Argos (FGH 2 F 2) both say that the Homeridai were a gens ‘lineage’ in Chios that was named after Homer himself (Ὅμηροι, Ἰονὸν ἐν Χίῳ, ὅπερ Ἀκουσίλαος ἐν γὰ, Ἐλλάνικος ἐν τῇ Ἀλκαντίδοι ὑπὸ τοῦ ποιητοῦ φησιν ὠνύμαθεν). According to another version, the author of the Little Ilid was not Homer but another poet, left unnamed by Aristotle (Poetics 1459a). This ‘other poet’ is identified by most sources as Lesches, from the city of Pyrrha in Lesbos (see for example Pausanias 10.25.5). According to another version, the author of the Little Ilid is actually the pseudo-Homer whom we already encountered in V1, Thestorides of Phocaea (scholia to Euripides Troades 822).

§54. The Homeridai exemplify a transition from the pre-Panhellenic era of Homeric reception in Athens. Their repertoire corresponds to the two epics of the Panathenaia, that is, the Ilid and the Odyssey alone, to the exclusion of other epics. In other words, their repertoire corresponds to what Homer is said to be composing in the city of Chios according to the narrative of V1—and it does not correspond to the repertoire of Homer's glorification of Athens that Homer had ‘made’ in the city of Phocaea (V1.203). Narratives reflecting the Panathenaic period of Homeric reception attribute only the Ilid and the Odyssey to Homer, assigning other epics to other authors. For example, from a Panathenaic standpoint, the author of the Little Ilid was not Homer but another poet, left unnamed by Aristotle (Poetics 1459a). This 'other poet' is identified by most sources as Lesches, from the city of Pyrrha in Lesbos (see for example Pausanias 10.25.5). According to another version, the author of the Little Ilid is actually the pseudo-Homer whom we already encountered in V1, Thestorides of Phocaea (scholia to Euripides Troades 822).

§55. By contrast with V1, V2 shows Homer performing in Athens (V2.276–285) and in other major cities of Hellas proper, especially Corinth (V2.286–287) and Argos (V2.288–314). Homer’s long-awaited songmaking tour of Hellas, which failed to take place in V1, is now fully realized in V2. On the other hand, V2 omits the adventures of Homer in Aeolic and Ionic cities of Asia Minor and outlying islands, especially Chios and Samos. In Athens (V2.281–285), V2 shows Homer performing what seems to be the ‘same’ riddle that V1 had shown Homer performing in Samos (V1.425–429). The interchangeability of Samos and Athens in framing the contexts of this riddle reinforces a point I made earlier, that the theme of Homer in Samos prefigures the Panathenaic theme of Homer in Athens.

§56. In V1, the fatal visit of Homer to Ios had taken place just before his intended tour of Hellas (V1.484–485). In V2, by contrast, Homer’s visit to Ios happens after he actually completes his successful tour of Hellas, where he visits Delphi (V2.2.271–276), Athens (V2.277–285), Corinth (V2.286–287), and Argos (287–314). Before Homer reaches Ios, however (V2.322), he stops over at the island of Delos (V2.315–322), where he performs the Homeric Hymn to Apollo (V2.316–319). Here once again the authorization of and by Homer is made explicit in his performance. Specifically, Homer ‘speaks’ (legein) the hymnos to Apollo (V2.316–317): καὶ σταθεὶς ὑπὸ τοῦ ἱεροῦ λέγει ἤμισυ εἰς Ἀπόλλωνα); then, once Homer ‘speaks’ (legein) the hymnos (V2.319: ῥηθένοις δὲ τοῦ ἱεροῦ), all the Ionians who are gathered at Delos and celebrating a pan-Hellenic festival (πανηγύρισ, V2.316, 321) respond by making Homer their ‘common citizen’, their koinos politês (V2.319–320: οἷς μὲν ἴκεις πολίτην οὕτως πολίτην ἐποίησαν,) [54]

§57. We see here at Delos the crowning glory of Homeric reception, from the standpoint of the Athenian Empire: each and every polis of ‘Ionia’ claims Homer as an authorized member of their own community, while the polis of Athens claims to be the metropolis or mother city of all Ionian cities. Elsewhere, I argue at length that the word koinos ‘common, standard’, as applied to Homer and Homeric poetry, reflects the Athenian Empire’s appropriation of Homer as a spokesman for the Athenian Empire, explicitly at the pan-Hellenic festival of the Delia in Delos and implicitly at the pan-Hellenic festival of the Panathenaia in Athens. If my argument holds, then the status of Homer in Delos as the koinos politês ‘common citizen’ of all Ionian cities exemplifies most perfectly the Panathenaic period of Homeric reception.
§58. In the Panathenaic period, the various appropriations of Homer by various Aeolic and Ionic cities of Asia Minor and outlying islands become merged and unified into a singular appropriation of Homer by Athens as the metropolis of 'Ionia'. In the Panathenaic period, Homer must be coeval with the Ionian apoikia 'migration', when the cities of 'Ionia' were notionally being founded by Athens as their metropolis. This dating of Homer, implicit in the Panathenaic version of V2, contradicts the earlier dating of Homer as claimed in the pre-Panathenaic version of V1.

§59. According to V2, Homer is claimed by many cities, and it lists them in this order: Smyrna (V2.9–12), Chios (V2.13–15),[56] and Colophon (V2.15–17).[57] This triad of cities represents the basic Panathenaic pattern.[58] Retrospectively, all three cities are Ionic, since there is ample historical evidence to show that Smyrna switched its identity from an Aeolic to an Ionic city.[59]

§60. From the standpoint of a Panathenaic outlook, as represented by V2, the recessive pre-Panathenaic traditions of Homer the Aeolian had to be covered over by the dominant Panathenaic traditions of Homer the Ionian. The Aeolic cities that had claimed contact with Homer had to be shaded over in order to achieve the proper highlighting for the rival Ionic cities. Only Smyrna, which had been transformed from an Aeolic into an Ionic city, could retain its pre-Panathenaic prestige as a Homeric city.[60] Other Aeolic cities, like Cyme, receded in importance.[61] From a Panathenaic point of view, the birth of Homer could be imagined as happening in Smyrna (V3a.25–38), even if Homer was conceived on the island of Ios.[62] This Panathenaic version may be contrasted with the pre-Panathenaic version of V1, where Homer is born in Aeolic Smyrna (V1.17–31) and conceived in Cyme (V1.3–17).

§61. In the post-Panathenaic period, by contrast, the prestige of Athens as the metropolis of 'Ionia' became devalued while the older prestige of the various Aeolic and Ionic cities of Asia Minor and outlying islands could be revalidated. The rival versions of the various cities tend to be hierarchically arranged in the individual narratives of the post-Panathenaic Lives, though different Lives may privilege different versions at different points in their narratives. The post-Panathenaic Lives can bypass the Panathenaic period and revert to the pre-Panathenaic period, recapitulating many of the rival versions stemming from the Aeolic and Ionic cities. The dominant phase, in all the attested Lives except V1 and V2, is the post-Panathenaic. Even in the post-Panathenaic Lives, however, as also in the Panathenaic Life of V2, we find that the three Ionic cities of Smyrna, Chios, and Colophon—in that order—take pride of place in their claims on Homer.

§62. I conclude by signaling one last time the relevance of the word thusia to my argument. In referring to a premier occasion of Homeric performances, the festival of the Panathenaia (Plato Timaeus 25e), the ritual dimension of this word brings to life the ritual dimension of these performances. If I have succeeded in arguing that the Lives of Homer once served as myths that motivated or aetiologized the performances of Homer, it would follow that the Lives themselves, as myths, likewise bring to life the ritual dimension of these performances. In earlier work, I had argued that words of myth as told by Homer cannot be separated from the ritual implicit in performing the words of Homer: 'myth implies ritual in the performance of myth'.[63] Now I am saying that the same dictum applies to the myths being told about Homer, not only to the myths told by Homer.

Bibliography


Notes

These video recordings were originally shown at an international conference held at Baku, 27-28 November 2015. The title of the conference was Müqayisəli ədəbiyyat və mədəniyyət: Ədəbiyyatın və mədəniyyətin başlanğıc məyarları, Comparative Literature and Culture: Starting points of national literature and culture. Special thanks go to Rahilya Geybullayeva and Sevinj Bakhshyova for making it possible for Gregory Nagy and Olga Davidson to post the video recordings in Classical Inquiries. Thanks go also to Claudia Filos for her expert videography.

[1] I offer the following system for referring to these Lives, as printed by Allen 1912:

\[
\begin{align*}
V1 &= \text{Vita Herodotea, pp. 192–218} \\
V2 &= \text{Certamen, pp. 225–238} \\
V3a &= \text{Plutarchean Vita, pp. 238–244} \\
V3b &= \text{Plutarchean Vita, pp. 244–245} \\
V4 &= \text{Vita quarta, pp. 245–246} \\
V5 &= \text{Vita quinta, pp. 247–250} \\
V6 &= \text{Vita sexta (the 'Roman Life'), pp. 250–253} \\
V7 &= \text{Vita septima, by way of Eustathius, pp. 253–254} \\
V8 &= \text{Vita by way of Tzetzes, pp. 254–255} \\
V9 &= \text{Vita by way of Eustathius (Iliad IV17), p. 255} \\
V10 &= \text{Vita by way of the Suda, pp. 256–268} \\
V11 &= \text{Vita by way of Proclus, pp. 99–102}
\end{align*}
\]

Also relevant is a detail in Michigan Papyrus 2754, originally published in Winter 1925, which supplements what we read in the Certamen about a universalized reception for Homer. There is now also another system for numbering the Lives, introduced by West 2003. There is a new edition of Vita 1 and Vita 2 by Colbeaux 2005.


The epigram of Homer for his own tomb, as given at V1.515–516 (also V2.337–338, V3a.73–74, V4.24–25, V5.51–52, V6.63–64, V10.54–55 and 220–221), is also attested in Greek Anthology 7.3.153 and in other sources as listed by Allen 1912.198. The attribution to Homer is merely a variant. As the title of the epigram in Greek Anthology 7.153 makes clear, the composition is attributed to either Homer or Kleoboulos of Lindos. Sources that claim Kleoboulos as the author of the epigram include Plato Phaedrus 264c and Diogenes Laertius 1.6. The reassigning of the epigram from Homer to Kleoboulos reflects an outlook that restricts Homer to the authorship of the Iliad and Odyssey. As we shall see, a pattern of restriction is characteristic of a Panathenaic outlook.

On the conceptual separation of mentally composing an epigram and physically inscribing it, see Nagy 1999b:14, 35–36.

On the implications of reception inherent in the word apodekhomai, see Nagy 1990:217, 221. In a future project, I will examine the usage of sunêthia in the sense of ‘habituation to anomalies’. On the comparable rhetoric of ‘habituation to anomalies’ in the Life of Ferdowsi traditions, see Davidson, in this volume.

This distinction between teacher of epos (plural) and teacher of grammata ‘letters’ seems to elevate Homer from his former status as teacher of grammata in Smyrna—a status he inherits from Phemios in...
V1.50–52, as we saw above. This is not to say, however, that the word grammata implies, in and of itself, a distinction between ‘written’ and ‘oral’. As we also saw above, at V1.37–38, even the undifferentiated usage of grammata includes the performing arts, mousikē. In V2.16 as well, Homer himself is again described as a teacher of grammata.

[23] More below on Thestorides as ‘author’ of the Little Iliad.

[24] This kind of usage, where Homer ‘makes’ (poiein) it happen that characters should do or be what he wants them to do or be in the plot of the narrative, is evident also in Plato, especially in the Hippias Minor (for example, 364c).

[25] On aineîn / epainēn ‘praise’ as a rhapsodic equivalent of ‘perform’, see Nagy 2002:27–28; also pp. 11, 33, 44. The actual ‘praise’ of Homer is both subjective (Homer as laudator) and objective (Homer as laudandum). On the objective praise of Homer, see especially V2.205–206, where all the Hellenes ‘praise’ (epainēn) Homer for his performance.

[26] I note with special interest here the privileging of ‘Ionia’ in the forefront of ‘all Hellas’.

[27] Here and elsewhere, the idea of ‘come to visit’ (aphikneisthai) implies the idea of ‘come as an audience’. See also V1.55–57.


[29] On Homer as the author of the mock epic Margites, the prime testimony is that of Aristotle Poetics 1448b30.

[30] Compare the wording of V4.8–10: περιιὼν δὲ τὰς πόλεις ὤψε τὰ ποιήματο. ὤψετον δὲ Πεισίστρατος αὐτὰ συνήγαγεν ‘[Homer], going around the cities, was singing his poiemata; later, Peisistratos collected them’. On the ‘Peisistratean Recension’ as a charter myth that aetiologizes the unity of Homeric poetry, see Nagy 1996b:93–105: in terms of the myth, Peisistratos unified Homeric composition by putting together and organizing what had been scattered in a multiplicity of performances.

[31] On Homer and Hesiod as ‘performing in the manner of rhapsodes’ (rhapsōidein), see also Plato Republic 10.600d–e.

[32] In Odyssey 5.437 there is a comparable context of epiphrosunē in the sense of an ‘impulse of wisdom’ that is given to a mortal by a helping divinity.

[33] The usage here of opazein ‘grant’ is comparable to what we see in the coda of a hymnic prooimion, as in Homeric Hymn 31 to Helios 17.

[34] Cases in point are V2.333 and V5.48–49.

[35] I note that Homer’s songmaking here is described as ‘improvisation’ (σχεδιάσαι Vita 2.279). We may compare the setting of Homer’s performing his riddle in Athens, the bouleutērion, with the setting of Homer’s performing his corresponding riddle in Samos, the phrētērē (Vita 1.421). As we will see later, the phrētērē is the place where the phrētoreis of Samos hold their meetings.

[36] I note the use of legein here in the sense ‘perform poetry’.

[37] Again I note the use of legein here in the sense ‘perform poetry’.

[38] On rhapsōidia as a unit of Homeric performance corresponding to one of the twenty-four ‘books’ of the Iliad and Odyssey, see Nagy 1996a: 68, 79, 181–183.


[40] A case in point is the mention of Hadrian’s consultation of the Pythia at Delphi in V2.33–43.

[41] When Herodotus (1.149.1) lists the twelve cities of the Aeolic dodecapolis, the first to be mentioned is Cyme.

[42] Strabo 14.1.37 C646 emphasizes the special claim of Smyrna on Homer; he notes that the Smyrnaeans in his time have a bibliothēkē and a quadrangular stoa called the Homēreion, containing a neōs ‘shrine’ of Homer and a xoanon ‘wooden statue’ of him.

[43] On the Homericidal as transmitters of Homeric poetry, see Nagy 1996a:62–63, 188n4. West 1999 argues that the name of Homer, Homēros, is merely a back-formation derived from Homēridai, and that Homer is a ‘fictional person’ (p. 372). West (p. 374n31) cites four of my books in order to make the point that I too regard Homēros as a fiction—or, rather, as ‘a mythical, prototypical author’—and then he adds: ‘It is not clear to me whether he [Nagy] regards the Homēridai as prior’. Here is my clarification: in matters of symbolic filiation, it is not a question of chronological priority. Rather, it is a question of logical priority—in the logic, that is, of the myth. For example, the Asklepiadai of Cos trace themselves back to Asklepios, counting nineteen generations from Asklepios to Hippocrates (Soranus Vita Hippocratis 1). The ancestor is a matter of myth, but the filiation is a matter of history. For the name Asklepiadai to be functional in its historical context, the myth of ‘Asklepios’ as the prototypical healer must be a foregone conclusion. West (p. 374) actually discusses this example of Asklepios and the Asklepiadai, apparently without realizing that it can be used as a counterargument to his argument about Homer and the Homēridai. For the name ‘Homēridai’ to be functional in the historical context of the Panathenaia, the myth of ‘Homer’ as a proto-
where Chios, as the home of the Homeridai, becomes the centerpiece of Homeric poetry.

[44] This is not to say that Homer was 'invented' in Athens, as West 1999 argues; I agree with the counter-argument of Graziosi 2002:76.

[45] The Panathenaic outlook of V2 needs to be correlated with the problem of determining the possible role of Alcidamas in shaping an intermediate phase of the text that has come down to us as the Certamen. For background on this vast problem, see O'Sullivan 1992.

[46] In arguing that the Homeridai of Chios had no ancestor called Homeros, West 1999:372 mentions only the testimony about the daughters of Homer in the Herodotean Life of Homer (= V1), without mentioning the testimony about the 'sons of Homer' in the Certamen (= V2), as quoted here.

[47] On the other hand, there may well have been different aetiologies involving the name 'Homeridai' at different times even in Chios: see for example the version reported by Seleucus, again by way of Harpocration (s.v. Homēridai). This antiquarian version may be pre-Panathenaic in derivation but post-Panathenaic and even anti-Panathenaic in its application.

[48] For a brief analysis, see Nagy 1996b:38; there is a more extensive analysis in Nagy 1990a:19 (n10), 78–79; see now also West 1999:372, who does not mention my analysis in his discussion.

[49] See also Allen 1912:127 (citing the Tabula Iliaca) and 129 (with a survey of various attributions, including all the references by Pausanias to Lesches).


[51] The differences between the wording of V2.281–285 and V1.425–429 reflect, I propose, oral poetic variations in formula. The two different contexts that frame the two different versions reflect, in turn, oral poetic variants in theme.

[52] As for venues in Hellas other than Athens, the Homeridai are not the only mediators of Homeric performances. Besides the Homeridai of Chios, there are the Kreophyleioi of Samos. See Nagy 1996a:179, 226–227 (see now also West 1999:381–382). The fact that Samos is an intermediate point in the narrative of V1—intermediate, that is, between Chios and the eventuality of pan-Hellenic reception—is relevant, I propose, to the role of the Kreophyleioi of Samos as alternative mediators of Homer. It is also relevant to the fact that the maritime empire of Athens was preceded by the maritime empire of the tyrant of Samos, Polycrates (for a survey of various theories about the role of Polycrates in the making of the Homeric Hymn to Apollo, see again West pp. 381–382; also pp. 369 and 372).

[53] In V3a.61, Homer goes from Delphi to Thebes, where he attends the festival of the Kronia, described as an agōn mousikos (V3a.62).

[54] Compare V2.13, where the people of Chios claim that Homer is their own politēs. I agree with O'Sullivan 1992:102n234 that politēs means not 'native son' but merely 'citizen' in such contexts.


[56] To repeat, the Homeridai are mentioned in this context (V2.14–15) as surviving descendants of Homer in Chios.

[57] The main claim of Colophon for possession of Homer is the Margites, which is supposedly Homer's first composition (V2.17).

[58] This pattern is reflected in the poetry of Pindar (F 264 /189a SM), who reportedly refers to Homer as both Chiete and Smyrnaean (V3b.7–8); in the words of Simonides F 19 W (via Stobaeus 4.34.28), Homer is a Smyrnaean (see also V3b.8).

[59] Smyrna was Ionian by the time of the twenty-third Olympiad (Pausanias 5.8.7), that is, by the end of the eighth century. Cf. How and Wells 1928 I 124, who add: "[Smyrna], lying more than ten miles south of the Hermus, and having Phocaea on the coast between it and Cyme, belonged naturally to the Ionian sphere." The 'Ionization' of Smyrna is evident in Homeric Hymn 9 to Artemis, where Ionian site Klaros is ostentatiously linked with Smyrna and the river Meles (connected with Homer's 'first' name, Melesigenes) in describing the territorial domain of the goddess (verses 3–6). On 600 BCE (the date of the destruction of Smyrna by the Lydians) as a terminus ante quem for Homeric Hymn 9, see Graziosi 2002:75. For more on the capture of 'Aeolic' Smyrna by Colophon, see the quotation of Minnemus F 9 W by Strabo (14.1.4 C633). On all matters related to the 'Ionization' of Smyrna, I am indebted to the advice of Douglas Frame. For an essential discussion of the Ionian Dodecapolis and its role in the making of Homeric poetry, see Frame 2009.

[60] The persona of Peisistratos, in an epigram attributed to him (V4.11–16 = V5.29–34 = Greek Anthology 11.442), claims that the Athenians even founded Smyrna: εἰπέρ Αθήναις Σμύρναν ἐπικλησαμέν (V4.16 = V5.34). I propose that there are two chronological layers involved in the Panathenaic appropriation of Homer: an earlier layer, where Smyrna is the focus of Athenian claims, and a later layer, where Chios, as the home of the Homeridai, becomes the centerpiece of Homeric poetry.

The story of Homer’s conception in Ios was accepted by Aristotle (F 76 Rose, via V3a.25–26, V3b.10, and V6.13–14). The same island of Ios, as we have also seen, is commonly figured as the place of Homer’s death.

Nagy 1989:xi.

Tags: Certamen, Herodotus, Homer, Lives of Homer, Plutarch, Proclus, reception, Suda

One Response to “Life of Homer” myths as evidence for the reception of Homer

Bill December 19, 2015 at 7:43 pm (Edit)

Dr. Nagy,

Does paragraph #9 imply that originally the Greeks knew Homer composed his epics and hymns orally but eventually they forgot and assumed he write his famous epics and hymns?

Bill