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# Muses and Teachers: Poets' Apprenticeship in the Greek Epic Tradition

**Abstract:** The Greek epic tradition, starting from the Homeric poems and those of the *corpus Hesiodeum*, often speaks of itself by referring to singers (*aoidoi*), but very little information is provided about how the singers learned their art. The main explanation for the phenomenon lies in the principle of poetry's authoritativeness, which is a crucial one for all oral traditions and is especially ensured by the relationship between the poetic message and the divine sphere. But, upon closer scrutiny, certain pieces of information emerge when we read between the lines of some of the main, well-known passages in which the Greek poetic – and particularly epic – tradition speaks of its origins and its first mythical or legendary representations. And these pieces of information bring light both on the evolution of the cognitive processes of the singers and on the growth of Greek epic tradition.

**Keywords:** Greek epic poetry; singers; apprenticeship; cognitive processes.

## 1 An 'Opaque' Tradition

The Greek epic tradition, starting from the Homeric poems and those of the *corpus Hesiodeum*, often speaks of itself by referring to singers (*aoidoi*), i.e. poets, who are certainly portrayed in mythical terms, yet reflect real features and historical developments within this tradition. Much is said about the contents of their songs, their modes of performance, their social prestige, and their relationship with the public; by contrast, very little information is provided about how they learned their art: the tradition is largely reticent, or at any rate 'opaque', when it comes to this particular detail. This becomes even more evident when we compare Greek culture with other ancient, medieval, and modern oral cultures, which seem to display greater transparency concerning apprenticeship into the art of song or storytelling.

To consider only some examples, in ancient India the Brahmins – the custodians of the Vedic texts' tradition, which for centuries remained exclusively oral – were structured as a priestly caste who officiated rites and were responsible for places of worship. Divided by villages, towns, and cities on a hereditary basis, they employed mechanisms for the transmission of knowledge that were not divulged but were socially acknowledged. In the Middle Ages, among the

Germanic and Anglo-Saxon peoples, *scops* or *skalds*, who were in charge of their oral heritage of epic-eulogistic poems, formed an elite selected by the sovereigns and explicitly entrusted with the transmission and performance of such poems. Among the Gaelic-speaking peoples, the Scottish *bardd* and Irish *fili* were organised into guild-like family groups that, from generation to generation, passed down a hereditary form of apprenticeship in their poetic tradition and lore that is explicitly described in the sources. In the modern age, comparative studies on oral traditions around the world have shown that, for certain peoples in Central Asia and Africa, the art of oral poetry is connected to explicit or even vaunted processes of apprenticeship: among the *manaschi* of Kyrgyzstan, the best reciters, while claiming to have discovered a ‘vocation’ for poetry (often through dream apparitions or other signs), usually recall the name of their “great *manaschi*”, which is to say the teacher who first introduced them to the art of epic song through long sessions of reciting *Manas*. Finally, the *griots* of Senegal train in genuine schools or poets’ associations that are set up on a family basis, hierarchically organised, and officially recognised.<sup>1</sup>

The reticence or opacity of Greek culture when it comes to apprenticeship in the art of oral poetry is not limited to the epic tradition, but also applies to lyric poetry, although in this case it is necessary to take account of the fact that the texts have mostly reached us in a fragmentary form. In direct or indirect accounts about lyric poetry and its performers, no mention is ever made of the way in which this skill was acquired. It is only in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC, which is to say well into the Classical Age, that we find a choral lyric poet, Bacchylides, acknowledging that poets have always learned their art from someone (fr. 5 Maehler). However, it is significant that a contemporary of his, Pindar, possibly engaging in a polemic with Bacchylides himself and with the latter’s uncle Simonides, insists in claiming that his poetic wisdom does not stem from anything he has learned, but comes naturally to him, and that apprenticeship is typical of mediocre poets (*Olympian* 2, 86–87).<sup>2</sup>

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1 For this comparative information on oral poetry traditions and the extensive bibliography on the topic, I will refer to my succinct overview in Sbardella 2006, especially 12–16, 83–87, 109–119, along with Knipe 2005 on the Brahmins’ social organisation in ancient India, and van der Heide 2008 on the *Manas* and *manaschi* tradition in Kyrgyzstan; many other useful references on modern oral cultures around the world, in addition to the few provided here purely for the sake of example, may be found in Finnegan 1992 and – specifically on Central Asia and Africa – in Reichl 2000 and Okpewho 1992.

2 On the much-debated interpretation of this passage in Pindar and the subjects involved in his polemic, I will refer to Catenacci 2013 in Gentili *et al.* 2013, 51–53 and 410 *ad vv.* 86–88.

However, there is one piece of evidence that makes this element even more relevant with respect to the epic tradition. The names of great singers transmitted by the Greek epic tradition – from Thamyris to Demodocus and Phemius, from Homer to Hesiod – are all speaking names attributed to figures who, as already noted, belong to the realm of myth or legend. This attests to the fact that, on the one hand, the tradition in question developed over the centuries through generations of completely anonymous poets and, on the other, gradually emerged out of this anonymity by devising representative figures to whom it assigned symbolically charged names:<sup>3</sup> Φῆμιος, from the root *phem-/pham-* of the verb φημί and of nouns such as φῆμη and φῆμις, is clearly connected both to the poet's speaking and recounting and to the social standing the poet acquired through this activity; Δημόδοκος alluded to the respect shown by the whole people, as well as by the aristocratic elite, towards the authoritative figure of the poet; Θάμυρις and Ὀμῆρος, both of which derive from etyma related to public gatherings, bear witness to the epic singers' activity and to their large audience on public festive occasions, directly so in the former case and indirectly in the latter, via the collective term Ὀμηρίδαι; Ἡσίοδος probably comes from the root of the verb ἵημι, "to emit", and αὐδή, "voice, word", which gives us *hesi-wodos*, "he who emits the voice or word" – a way of describing the poet's ability to lend vocal expression to the lore transmitted by the epic tales.

Why, then, did a tradition that sought to throw light on itself through the creation of prestigious and authoritative figures who could be credited with its origins not also care to explain how these epic singers were trained and learned their art? The main explanation for the phenomenon, albeit probably not the only one, lies in the principle of poetry's authoritativeness, which is a crucial one for all oral traditions and is especially ensured by the relationship between the poetic message and the divine sphere. Although a significant research strand traces the origins of the Greek poetic tradition back to the great cradle of the Indo-European peoples,<sup>4</sup> there is a significant difference between Greek culture and the other ancient cultures that had the same ethnic and linguistic origin: from its very dawn, it stood out as a more 'secular' culture which did not include a clergy, such as a priestly class comparable to the Brahmins of Aryan India, the

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<sup>3</sup> Here I will only refer to part of the extensive and consolidated bibliography on the topic: Durante 1976, 186–203; Càssola 1991, XXIX–XXXV; West 1999, 374–376; Nagy 2009, 287–288; Sbardella 2012, 18–20.

<sup>4</sup> Among the most important contributions on the topic, I will recall in particular the monographs by Durante 1976 and Watkins 1995.

Iranian Magi, the Roman *flamines*, or the Celtic druids.<sup>5</sup> The presence of a clergy, who in some of these cultures were also entrusted with the execution and transmission of a significant part of the traditional poetic heritage, ensured the authoritativeness of poetry by connecting it to a body of lore and skills whose custodians were closely and publicly associated with the divine sphere. This was not the case in Greek society, where no one could boast of enjoying a stable and constant relationship with the divine sphere. In the Greek world, poets could only conceive of a relationship with the divine which constituted the best assurance of their poetry's authoritativeness in terms of a temporary encounter that lent them – and other similar figures (such as the *mantis* and the *chresmologos*) – a role as intermediaries between the divine realm and the human one. The divine agent which brought this contact about was the Muse (Μοῦσα, from the same root *ment-/mont-* as the Latin *mens*), a supernatural projection of the social group's collective “memory” to which the poetic message was addressed; and this message was believed to pass from the divine to the human sphere through the poet's physical mediation.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, within this framework the process of teaching/apprenticeship in the art of poetry in its articulate, fully human dimension represented a complicating factor that had to be either glossed over completely or left in the background by emphasising the idea of poetry's divine origin – the only guarantee of the poetic message's authoritativeness. This explains the information's opacity.

## 2 Reading Between the Lines

Upon closer scrutiny, certain pieces of information emerge when we read between the lines of some of the main, widely studied passages in which the

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5 Evidence of priestly figures with exclusive roles does not emerge from either Linear-B tablets or Mycenaean Age iconography, and in 2<sup>nd</sup>-millennium BC Greek society there was no clear-cut distribution between civil, religious, and military functions (see Adrados 1992, 101–102 and 110–115). Even after the later developments in Greek civilisation, as attested from the Homeric poems onwards, the ἱερεὺς, -εῖα was a performer of rituals and custodian of places of worship that in many cases was quite replaceable, through the transfer of his/her priestly functions to other figures. Burkert 1985, 95 concludes that “Greek religion might almost be called a religion without priests: there is no priestly caste as a closed group with fixed tradition, education, initiation, and hierarchy”.

6 The compelling sociological definition of the Muse as a divine representation of the social control exercised over the poet (see Svenbro 1984, 34–48) also helps define the complex mechanism for legitimating the authoritativeness of poetry that connected the poet, as an intermediary, to the two spheres: that of the (divine) origin of poetry and that of its (social) destination.

Greek poetic – and particularly epic – tradition speaks of its origins and first mythical or legendary representatives.<sup>7</sup> These are mostly implicit elements which nonetheless help outline a picture – however summary and patchy it may be – of the learning and apprenticeship processes in which epic singers were involved.

## ***Iliad* 2, 594–600: Thamyris Challenges the Muses**

This passage provides a composite view of the art of oral poetry. The punishment which the Muses inflict on the Thracian singer, and which is both physical (blindness) and intended to deprive him of his art (παῦσαν ἀοιδῆς [...] ἀοιδὴν / θεσπεσίην ἀφέλονται καὶ ἐκλέλαθον κιθαριστύν), is still strongly connected to the basic idea that poetry belongs to the divine sphere – that it is not something independently owned by the poet. However, the challenge which Thamyris throws at the Muses reveals the poet's pride in his own creative ability (the verb εὐχομαι at v. 597 implies the concept of bragging), which entails an awareness that his poetic skills do not depend on the gods but were independently acquired by him.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, Thamyris is described as a wandering poet, who – unlike other Homeric figures (Phemius, Demodocus) – is not engaged in a stable relationship with a local aristocratic elite; hence, he has no need for a specific social group to see recognised the authoritativeness of his poetry, and this enables him to 'carry' his own poetic skill as a technical possession that is not bound to exclusive social relationships.<sup>9</sup> What begins to emerge here is the idea that there is an entirely human level of the oral poetic art's apprenticeship, even though it still powerfully contrasts with the ancient view of the poet as an intermediary who is subjected to divine power. The training/apprenticeship process is only adumbrated, without specifying how it actually occurs.

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<sup>7</sup> For an overall analysis of the most important passages with reference to the poetic tradition of the Archaic and Classical ages as a whole, see the still useful volume Lanata 1963; for a more specific analysis of Homeric epic, see Grandolini 1996, but see also Brillante 2009.

<sup>8</sup> Svenbro 1984, 48–49 detects in Thamyris a form of dependence on the divine sphere which, unlike in the cases of Phemius and Demodocus, manifests itself through the dynamics not of submission, but of protest. While Svenbro does not develop this point any further, protest or rebellion is always associated with some form of self-awareness and claim to independence, for otherwise it would remain unaccounted for.

<sup>9</sup> Significantly, the only other Homeric passage to mention itinerant singers (*Od.* 17, 382–385) includes them – along with other figures (the soothsayer, the healer, the carpenter) – in the category of δημιουργοί, which is to say of craftsmen specialising in a *technē*.

## ***Odyssey* 22, 330–349 and 8, 487–488: Phemius, the Son of Terpis, and Demodocus, a God’s Pupil**

This passage is a complex one, although its development is well-known. The court singer on Ithaca fears that he will fall victim to Odysseus’ violent revenge like the Suitors who have just been massacred, since he is guilty of having sung for them during the hero’s absence. He thus turns to Odysseus and begs him to spare his life with two arguments: he was forced to perform for the Suitors against his will, and he is the custodian of a skill, the art of poetry, which would be lost with his death. The idea of the loss of the poetic ability, which would cease to exist upon the physical extinction of he who possesses it, seems to imply that this skill cannot be transferred via teaching/apprenticeship; and this point is developed further through the claim θεὸς δέ μοι ἐν φρεσὶν οἶμας / παντοίας ἐνέφυσεν, which describes poetic inspiration as the material transfer of the “paths of song” from the divine to the human sphere. And yet, the contextual use of the debated term αὐτοδίδακτος leaves no doubt as to the fact that the skill in the art of song that Phemius boasts about also includes an aspect related to teaching/apprenticeship. This component can partly be understood as a spontaneous drive towards the art of song,<sup>10</sup> but partly also to mean that the epic singer has learned the art on his own, which is to say as the sole custodian of the teaching received (in accordance with the meaning of the prefix αὐτο-, which expresses exclusiveness), in a context in which the singer alludes to a training phase in addition to divine inspiration.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, an element that is usually overlooked in the passage’s overall interpretation is that Phemius’ name is mentioned in an opening, and hence emphatic, position through the speaking patronymic Τερπιάδης (v. 330), i.e. “son of Terpis (i.e. “pleasure, charm” from the verb τέρω)”: this may implicitly indicate the hereditariness of the talent of bringing pleasure to, or charming, others via song that was already possessed by his father, and which to some extent he has learned. If this interpretation is

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**10** This is the view of Lazzeroni 1994, according to whom the attributing to the poet of a natural capacity to learn and his representation as a seer and an intermediary between men and gods constitutes a link with the ancient roots of Indo-European poetry.

**11** In this respect, the interpretation provided by Russo 2007, 191 *ad vv.* 347–348, is essentially correct, as within the singer’s speech it draws a distinction between the technique of song and its narrative content: “il δέ (al v. 347 αὐτοδίδακτος δ’ εἰμί, θεὸς δέ μοι ἐν φρεσὶν οἶμας / παντοίας ἐνέφυσεν) pare connettivo piuttosto che avversativo in quanto Femio descrive due aspetti (o fonti) dell’abilità poetica complementari tra loro: αὐτοδίδακτος allude alla fase in cui l’aedo acquisisce consapevolmente le proprie capacità e la padronanza delle tecniche verbali, ritmiche e musicali che gli consentono di esibirsi con successo nella recitazione, οἶμας / παντοίας ἐνέφυσεν si riferisce ai vari racconti presenti nel patrimonio tradizionale”.

correct, then in this case, too, the passage does not present an unambiguous conception of the art of song's acquisition; rather, like the previous passage, it displays an attempt – which is taken further here – to combine two different conceptions: one entails an educational aspect, which it identifies with initiation in a family context according to an individual and genetic system of the art's transmission from father to son or from one relative to another, which was typical of many oral cultures. Phemius therefore positively stands out in Odysseus' eyes for three good reasons: because he has shown a natural propensity for the art of oral poetry; because he was born into the trade and inherited/learned an exclusive skill from his father; and because he has gained inspiration for the narrative contents of his art from a god.

In the *Odyssey*, the verb διδάσκω is also used with reference to the poet's skills when, in Book 8, before 'provoking' Demodocus into improvising on a theme he has chosen, Odysseus praises his skill by stating that Apollo or the Muse herself instructed him, ἐδίδαξε (vv. 487–498); in the same context, the verb is used shortly before as well, again by Odysseus, in relation to all singers, to whom the Muse οἶμας [...] ἐδίδαξε (vv. 480–481). A detail seems to reveal that here, too, the verb is not used with the generic meaning "to inspire", but rather alludes to the actual teaching/apprenticeship process which characterised the actual training of poets, while transposing it onto the level of the relationship between a human subject (who learns) and a divine one (who teaches): this is the only case in Homeric poetry where the male figure of Apollo is introduced as an alternative to the female one of the Muse.<sup>12</sup> This might be an allusive feature intended to create a greater adherence to the reality of poets' most ancient form of training, which must have occurred through an exclusively male relationship, between a father and his son (as in Phemius' case), or at any rate between a teacher and his pupil.

## Hesiod, *Theogony* 22–28: the Singer Learns from the Muses

Here, in the proem to Hesiod's *Theogony*, the didactic component which manifests itself through the teaching/apprenticeship dynamic, is made fully explicit: at vv. 22–23, the verb ἐδίδαξαν, if taken in its primary semantic meaning of "(they) taught", expresses a process of transmitting the art of song from the Muses to the poet, which enabled a mere shepherd to acquire poetic skills through a genuine form of apprenticeship. The *communis opinio* according to

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12 See also the commentary in Hainsworth 2007, 299 ff. *ad loc.*

which the verb proleptically alludes to the episode of a single epiphany from the goddesses to the poet, in the context of which they “inspired” his song, is probably the result of a textual stratification that only at a later stage led to the creation of a single scene with a single human subject (Hesiod) via the conflation of two different scenes, with two different human subjects:<sup>13</sup> the legendary singer (Hesiod), who in the past learned poetry from the Muses (vv. 22–23), and the rhapsode, who in the present is continuing this poetic tradition and on whom the Muses have bestowed the trade’s attributes (vv. 24–34).<sup>14</sup> The second highly noteworthy element is the collegiality of the Muses, who teach Hesiod the art of song as a group. Apprenticeship here starts to take the form not of a ‘one-to-one’ relationship, but of one within a group: on a purely human level, the neophyte who learns the art of song does so by being in touch with a group of expert singers, each of whom can impart specific skills to him. In this case too, the transposition of the process onto the divine level (the Muses themselves as teachers) represents a way of anchoring the narrative in the more ancient conception of poetry’s divine origins; by now, however, the process of apprenticeship and training has more explicitly become part of the representation that the epic tradition offers of itself.

## Hesiod, *Erga* 650–659: the Competition between Local Poetic Traditions

As we have seen, Hesiodic epic bears witness, in a mythical form, to the process of apprenticeship within organised groups of singers. However, it also presents evidence of contact between different local poetic traditions. In the passage from the *Erga* in question, the anonymous singer, who represents the epichoric tradition of Hesiodic poetry in Boeotia, states that he voyaged to nearby Euboea to take part in an *agon* to celebrate the institution of a local aristocrat’s (Amphidamas) heroic cult. The precise relationship which this passage establishes with the verses from the *Theogony*’s proem previously analysed is evident, as it mentions Mount Helicon as the place in which the poet was initiated into the art of song by the Muses, and where he returns in order to dedicate the material outcome of his victory in the poetic duel to the goddesses. However, no mention is

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<sup>13</sup> Even West 1966, 161 *ad v.* 22, who still interprets vv. 22–23 as standing in continuity with the following scene describing the Muses’ epiphany to Hesiod (vv. 24–34), is forced to admit that “perhaps Hesiod is here thinking not of a single epiphany but of a period of practice”.

<sup>14</sup> As regards this interpretation of the passage and the elements supporting it, I will refer to Sbardella 2016a, which also provides an overview of the extensive bibliography on the topic.

made of Hesiod, as the aim is merely to implicitly recall his authoritative figure.<sup>15</sup> The text does not explicitly state whom the Boeotian singer met in the *agon*, but the significant allusion to the Trojan epic cycle's themes (the Achaeans' departure from Aulis) points to a context in which epic tales on such subjects were also recited.<sup>16</sup> What is described, in any case, is a direct engagement between the representatives of different epichoric epic traditions in which the Boeotian poet proves his excellence, but also listens to other "paths of song" (οἶμαι), which is to say other epic tales and other ways of expressing them. By this stage, the learning of this art and the development of the epic tradition no longer occurs exclusively within epichoric poetic groups, but also through mutual contacts between such groups.

### Pindar, *Isthmian* 4, 37–42: Homer's 'School'

In *Isthmian* 5, the lyric poet recalls Ajax's suicide, caused by a competition over the possession of Achilles' weapons. In the verses in question, Pindar then argues that Homer honoured the hero's memory by teaching posterity (λοιποῖ) to sing his virtue κατὰ ῥάβδον, "according to the sequence of the rhapsode's staff". As I have already suggested elsewhere, the λοιποῖ whom Homer teaches to sing Ajax's glory should be identified as the rhapsodes of the later epic tradition: more specifically, the Homerids of Chios, who claimed to be his direct "descendants".<sup>17</sup> The passage therefore presents the Homerids' organisation as a genuine school for rhapsodes that was emerging in the late Archaic Age (late

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15 In other words, I believe that this passage and others in Hesiod's poetry (*Theogony* and *Erga*) are to be interpreted not as providing real biographical data connected to Hesiod's name, but rather as different stages in the construction of a pseudo-biography by the rhapsodic tradition that looked back to this prestigious name (see Sbardella 2016a and Sbardella 2016b).

16 As rightly noted by Ercolani 2010, 376 *ad vv.* 651–653, "la menzione di Aulide richiama il collegamento con il racconto della guerra di Troia". The idea of an engagement with Homer is only a later tradition that can be traced back to the *Certamen Homeri et Hesiodi*, which according to some scholars was inspired precisely by this passage from the *Erga* (with regard to the whole issue, I will only refer to West 1978, 319 *ad vv.* 650–652); however, this tradition is translating in pseudo-biographical terms – associated with Homer and Hesiod – an engagement between Ionic and Boeotian singers that really did occur and which probably found in late-8<sup>th</sup> and early-7<sup>th</sup>-century BC Euboea one of its most important settings (according to a research strand inaugurated by West 1988 and highly influenced by archaeological finds at Lefkandi, Euboea – with its local hero cults – was already one of the major centres for the Homeric epic tradition's development in the Dark Ages).

17 See Sbardella 2007, 84–85 and Sbardella 2012, 241.

6<sup>th</sup>-early 5<sup>th</sup> century BC), as is also confirmed by other sources.<sup>18</sup> In the context of this school, which traced its origins back to a mythical teacher and forebear, the latter was regarded as the source of both the repertoire of songs performed and of the technique used for their performance: the image projected is that of a multiplicity of poets who learned their art from a single, prestigious figure. In reality, each new rhapsode would learn his trade from many different expert poets according to a system of training within a group that – as we have seen – already emerges from earlier sources, although by this period the group tended to represent and credit itself as a genuine school.

All in all, the picture that emerges from a reassessment of this range of testimonies may be outlined as follows. From its origins, the Greek poetic tradition provides some information – which is never explicitly formulated, but only conveyed through various degrees of allusiveness – about epic singers' training. The elements which emerge, not least by considering the relative chronology of these testimonies, would appear to fall within a specific line of development. Originally, a process of individual apprenticeship was in place based on a relationship between a teacher and his pupil, particularly within the same family (father-son, relative-relative). This process is retrospectively represented in Homeric epic with reference to the earliest phase of the tradition, which in all likelihood can be traced as far back as the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium, when the stable bond between certain poets and noble courts must have favoured a largely 'closed' transmission of poetic skills, insofar as this ensured a socially privileged status. This stage was followed by a more complex form of apprenticeship within a group, which probably became established in the period between the Hellenic Dark Ages and the early Archaic Age, when the loss of stable relations between poets and aristocratic courts brought about more open social conditions for the transmission of the art of song. Finally, no earlier than the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC, some of these groups were organised into genuine schools.

### 3 Formulaic Diction, the Epic Repertoire, and Cognitive Processes

How does all this fit with what we know about the processes of the Greek epic tradition's development? One important research strand which flourished in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has shown that the origins of this tradition,

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<sup>18</sup> For an overview and detailed discussion of these sources – the most notable being the scholia to vv. 1 ff. of Pindar's *Nemean* 2 (III, 29 – 31 Drachmann) – see Sbardella 2012, 5 – 63, 253 – 257.

which was already consolidated in terms of its mythical themes and metrical and expressive structures, can be traced back to the Mycenaean Age during a continental phase in the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium.<sup>19</sup> In terms of epic diction's linguistic features, this phase was characterised by the coexistence of Mycenaean and the Aeolic dialect or, according to other scholars, by the use of an Achaean dialect understood as a mixture of epichoric tongues from the Peloponnesian area. In addition to Mycenaean, this also included Arcadian, and then Aeolic was superimposed on it in the Sub-Mycenaean period (c. 1200–1100 BC).<sup>20</sup> As a consequence of the colonisation of Asia Minor's coastal area over the course of the Dark Ages, the continental phase was followed by that of the transfer of the epic song tradition into a colonial *milieu*: here, epic diction was partly restructured on the basis of expressive elements from the East-Aeolian area, and especially of a predominant Ionic dialectal component. Particularly in the wake of A. Hoekstra's studies,<sup>21</sup> this phase has been described as one marked by the modification of formulaic prototypes, which is to say the most ancient expressive structures of formulaic epic diction, on through a range of innovations connected to specific phonetic, morphological, and lexical features of the Ionic dialect. The most important of these innovations were: the intermittent use of digamma; quantitative metathesis, particularly for the genitive singular of masculine stems and the genitive plural of feminine stems in long -α; and the use of the ephelestic -v. Alongside these major innovations, we find: *diektasis*, or the stretched pronunciation of thematic vowels; the extension of the third person plural verbal ending -σων to athematic radical aorists and passive aorists; and the use of the genitive singular in monosyllabic -ου for second declension stems as the outcome of a bisyllabic form in -οο, which has left some traces in poetic diction, where it occurs alongside the more ancient, Aeolic-Mycenaean form in -οιο. To this we should add the adaptation and enrichment of the expres-

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19 On myth, see the pioneering studies by Nilsson 1932 and Nilsson 1933, which first raised the question of its Mycenaean origins, even before the decipherment of Linear-B documents (1953); among the studies produced after this decipherment, see especially: Page 1959 for an overall historical-philological analysis; Ruijgh 1957 and Ruijgh 1985, Durante 1971 and Durante 1992 on Mycenaean phonetic, lexical, and formulaic traces in Homer's language; Hoekstra 1965, Wathelet 1970 and Wathelet 1979, Janko 1982 and Janko 1992, 8–19 on the stages of the linguistic-dialectal evolution of Homeric formulaic diction; Hoekstra 1981 on the protohistory of the Homeric verse (the hexameter); see now Passa in Cassio 2016, 139–196 for a clear, up-to-date overview of the whole issue.

20 For this second hypothesis, see Ruijgh 1957 and Ruijgh 1985.

21 See Hoekstra 1965 on the diction of the Homeric poems and Hoekstra 1969 on that of certain Homeric hymns; on the systematic extension of the same method to archaic epic as a whole, see Janko 1982.

sive range through the formulaic flexibility mechanisms studied by B. Hainsworth:<sup>22</sup> mobility of formulas, i.e. their free insertion between the various *cola* of the verse; their alteration in terms of metrical structure via morphological innovations or a different verb order; and their expansion through the addition or intrusion of new elements (adjectives, adverbs, articles, verbs, etc.).

In the Dark Ages and early Archaic period, this whole range of innovations in Asia Minor's colonial milieu increased the expressive potential of epic diction: a phenomenon which cannot be measured precisely against the more ancient phase, but which can be evaluated as a whole by considering its indirect effects. Indeed, in continental Greece, where it had first emerged in the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium, the epic tradition continued to exist for some time in parallel to – and perhaps quite independently of – its development in the eastern Aegean.<sup>23</sup> It is highly significant that – roughly between the late 10<sup>th</sup> and the first half of the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC, although it is impossible to establish precise dates – the continental tradition came to almost completely conform to that of colonial Asia Minor in terms of its use of formulaic diction: the epic tradition as a whole, regardless of its local variants, conformed to Ionic diction because the increase in expressive potential which had occurred in Asia Minor was such, on both a qualitative and quantitative level, that it widely established the new, developed form of diction as a model. Some significant local traits endured at a local level, yet these did not prevent a substantial and general degree of standardisation.<sup>24</sup>

Another evident development which occurred over the course of the epic tradition's colonial phase concerns mythical themes. The Trojan epic described the conquest of a city in Asia Minor accomplished by Achaeans from continental Greece and the Aegean islands. The city in question, of course, is Troy, which in the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium – which is to say in the heroic age in Greek collective memory – ruled over the coastal area of Asia Minor and the Hellespont: the very geographical area which, over the course of the Dark Ages, was settled by Greek colonists. This epic is probably rooted in some mythical tales of the 2<sup>nd</sup>-millennium epic tradition, alongside other epics that were already well-established at the

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22 Hainsworth 1968.

23 The main champion of the hypothesis of a parallel, independent development of the continental and other local traditions with respect to the Ionic one is Pavese 1972, 15–169 and Pavese 1974, 57–107, according to whom the later Ionic *facies* of the diction also found in continental areas is merely a superficial phenomenon.

24 The most evident and debated case is that of Hesiodic poetry, which is to say of the epic poems in the *corpus Hesiodicum*, on which see – most recently – Cassio 2009 and Lulli 2016, to which I will also refer for a discussion of textual-critical issues and a bibliography.

time.<sup>25</sup> There is no doubt, however, that it acquired greater prominence and was fully developed in a colonial milieu at the beginning of the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium:<sup>26</sup> here, for understandable reasons related to the creation of a mythical proto-history for the processes of Asia Minor's colonisation, the tale acquired the extension known to us from the Homeric poems and from what we can reconstruct about the other poems of this cycle. Moreover, in this colonial environment the first opportunities emerged for well organized performances of this epic saga within the context of major public festivals that brought together various *poleis* from Asia Minor to celebrate and consolidate their shared identity: the *panegyris* of the Panionion at Cape Mycale is probably one of the most ancient settings in which the Trojan epic saga was extensively performed.<sup>27</sup>

However, within this overall development of the epic tradition an important role was also played by the aforementioned evolution of cognitive processes related to poets' apprenticeship. As far as we know, in Ionic Asia Minor, between the Dark Ages and the early Archaic Age, the most favourable historical and environmental conditions emerged for the formation of groups of singers structured as professional guilds. Here, before anywhere else in the Greek world, civic associations, such as the so-called *phratriai* that were centred on shared cults of common ancestors and found their moment of greatest civic recognition in the major annual festivals (Apaturia), displayed features markedly connected to professional and corporative – as opposed to more genetic – interests.<sup>28</sup> This form of social organisation promoted the formation of professional groups of various sorts, including singers' guilds, which claimed descent from a prestigious mythical figure (the Homerids of Chios from Homer, the Chreophyleioi of Samos from Chreophylus) according to a model of association that was soon exported to other areas of the Greek world. Then, as already noted, over the course

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25 What I am referring to in particular are the Argonauts' epic as a more ancient 'structural' model for the *Odyssey* (see the now classic work of Meuli 1921) and Heracles' feats, with which Homer appears to be at least partly familiar, as an established epic tradition (see especially Sbardella 1994).

26 Remarks of this sort can already be found in Sbardella 2011, 31–37.

27 See the extensive monograph by Frame 2009.

28 See Maddoli 1978, 513–531; the earliest evidence for this phenomenon dates from the 7<sup>th</sup> century BC, which led Roussel 1976, especially 51–61, to adopt the extreme thesis according to which these pseudo-aristocratic groups never had any real genetic basis, but were established as secondary structures within the social order of the *polis*; however, the phenomenon must have emerged even earlier, and Jones 1987, 325 also notes that in Miletus, for example, *phratriai* were the most broadly associative forms of the civic body's organisation, not connected to genetic ties (like *phylai* and *patrai*) or territorial bonds (like *demoi*).

of the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC the enlargement of these groups and their increasingly hierarchical structure led to the formation of genuine schools.<sup>29</sup>

This development of the milieus and methods associated with apprenticeship must also have entailed a development of cognitive mechanisms through what we might describe as the creative hyper-stimulation of singers in group contexts. Those who learned the art from a range of teachers and who had many reference models could more directly experience and adopt the range of innovations that each of these teachers made to the traditional epic repertoire, both on the thematic level and on the formal and expressive one, and could in turn expand these innovations and transmit them to the next generation of poets. So what it is possible to reconstruct in relation to several generations of epic poets, in the period at the turn of the Dark Ages and the early Archaic Age, is an exponential growth of innovative features which were progressively introduced into the structure of epic diction through the dynamics of apprenticeship and emulation typical of organised professional groups. This growth spurt was thus followed, in the same professional groups of singers, by an effort to progressively crystallise the text – first mnemonically, and then also in writing<sup>30</sup> – and to arrange it into increasingly coherent narrative macro-structures intended for wide-scale performances, and typical of the rhapsodic technique.<sup>31</sup> In this phase, which can be placed between the middle and the late Archaic Age, the expressive broadening of epic diction did not come to a halt but was affected by the poets' more limited skill in introducing innovative features,<sup>32</sup> which was counterbalanced by their increased skill in performing a vast epic repertoire, chiefly arranged into fixed narrative sequences.

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**29** On Ionic rhapsodes' guilds and their development, see now Sbardella 2012, 5–63, with an extensive bibliography; on groups of rhapsodes in Boeotia, see Sbardella 2016a and Sbardella 2016b.

**30** On the process which led from the memorisation of the text to its recording in writing, see especially Nagy 1996, 110–112 and Nagy 2002, 9–35, who however tends to regard writing as only coming into play at the end of the whole process – no earlier than the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC – almost as a kind of accidental final act, when in fact its interaction with memorisation processes must have begun long before then through prolonged and complex dynamics (see Sbardella 2012, 55–62).

**31** On these rhapsodic performances, see Sbardella 2012, especially 38–63 for an overview.

**32** Hoekstra 1969 has defined this as the sub-epic phase of diction's development, highlighting how it was largely marked by a decline in poets' expressive innovation skills compared to more ancient phases.

## 4 An Overall Model for the Development of the Epic Tradition (and Epic Diction)

Based on what has been argued so far, in what follows I will propose an overall model for the development of the epic tradition and its means of expression, formulaic diction, which also takes account of poets' forms of apprenticeship and of the transformation of their cognitive processes over time.

1. The origins: 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium, Mycenaean Age (c. 1600 – 1200 BC):
  - place of origin: continental Greece, particularly the palatial kingdoms of the Peloponnese and of central-northern Greece (Boeotia and Thessaly);
  - metrical form: dactylic hexameter and lyric metres;
  - performance method: recitation with a musical accompaniment (although performers could also engage in singing);
  - mythical subjects: epics such as that of Hercules, the *Argonautika*, tales of military expeditions along the eastern Aegean shores;
  - linguistic *facies*: a Mycenaean/Achaean-Aeolic *koine*;
  - formulaic diction: undefinable in terms of extension (only a very small percentage of Homeric formulas can be traced back to this phase), yet probably still limited from the point of view of the expressive repertoire;
  - mnemonic effort: applied to learning and to the use of a set number of traditional expressions (formulaic prototypes);
  - social setting for performances: mostly aristocratic courts;
  - performance material: relatively short song excerpts focusing on individual episodes from mythical epics;
  - singers' predominant social profile: an *aoidos* operating within the social fabric of palace aristocracies;
  - mode of learning: the method of execution and diction were transmitted from one individual poet to another.
2. Development: 1<sup>st</sup> millennium, between the Dark Ages and the early Archaic Age (c. 1100 – 650 BC):
  - place of importation: the Aeolian and Ionic colonies of Asia Minor, with significant interactions between the new colonial tradition and that of continental Greece (perhaps from the end of 10<sup>th</sup> century onwards);
  - metrical form: a probably exclusive use of the hexameter;
  - performance method: exclusively recitative, with the abandonment of musical instruments and a gradual tendency among singers to band into groups for collective performances;

- mythical subjects: Mycenaean-era epics continued to be performed, or new epics, such as the Trojan one, were developed on the basis of 2<sup>nd</sup>-millennium narrative cores;
  - linguistic *facies*: reinforced by Aeolic elements from Asia and later largely adapted to the Ionic dialect;
  - formulaic diction: significantly expanded and made flexible through considerable creativeness with respect to the traditional expressive repertoire (change of formulaic prototypes, adaptation of formulas to make them more metrically flexible, devising of new formulaic expressions);
  - mnemonic effort: considerable, but marked by a substantial element of creativeness, as well as by the conservation of traditional features;
  - social setting for performances: celebrations open to a broad public and whole communities;
  - performance material: extensive song excerpts, encompassing broad narrative sections of epics which would be structured and ordered in the form of poems;
  - singers' social profile: a partially professional and itinerant rhapsode paid for individual performances, yet not making a stable income from his work;
  - mode of learning: the method of execution and diction were learned within groups of singers whereby the individual poet would interact with a range of teachers and then transmit his skills to several poets of the next generation.
3. Crystallisation: the middle and late Archaic Age (c. 650 – 500 BC)
- areas of expansion: broadening of geographical horizons to the whole Greek-speaking world (Asia Minor, the Aegean, continental Greece, colonies in the western Mediterranean), hence a panhellenic dimension;
  - metrical form: exclusive use of the hexameter;
  - performance method: by now strictly defined as rhapsodic and organised into professional groups;
  - mythical subjects: inherited from tradition, yet pushed to their utmost limits in terms of narrative extension;
  - linguistic *facies*: by now formalised, with some remaining local acquisitions (e.g. Atticisms in Homeric diction);
  - formulaic diction: essentially crystallised, with some (mostly degenerative) innovations;
  - mnemonic effort: considerable, yet chiefly of the conservative kind, by now influenced by writing;
  - social setting for performances: celebrations open to a broad public and often involving several *poleis* (*panegyreis*);
  - performance material: extensive sections of traditional epic saga or entire narrative cycles;

- singers' social profile: highly professional and itinerant rhapsodes chiefly operating within structured groups such as guilds or schools;
- mode of learning: the method of execution and diction are by now learned within a school as a genuine *technē*.

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