

# Introduction

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This volume presents the results of a collaborative project developed at Brown University under the auspices of the Program in Ancient Studies. The object was to improve our knowledge of one important means by which pre-modern societies commemorated the past and transmitted such memories over time. For this purpose, we invited comparison across a wide variety of different cultures in which traditions of epic – oral or written – existed, or indeed continue to exist. Given, on the one hand, our sparse knowledge of many such traditions and of the circumstances in which they emerged, continued, and were eventually fixed, and, on the other hand, the fact that oral poetry is easily lost to history or altered profoundly in transmission, cross-cultural investigation seemed all the more important – and one of few promising ways to truly enhance our understanding (Raaflaub 2005). We believe that the chapters in this volume confirm this expectation impressively.

Nevertheless, comparisons are invidious in more senses than one. For how is one to be sure that the objects being compared are in fact comparable? The title of a recent book by Marcel Detienne – *Comparing the Incomparable* (2008) – underscores the dilemma. Take the very category of “epic”: is there a single definition that can embrace the varieties of narrative poetry (and prose) produced in the several societies under consideration, from Sumer to South Africa? At least some of the contributors to this volume have raised doubts about the applicability of this term to such diverse materials, as though they formed part of a single worldwide genre.

The notion of “oral” epic is equally problematic. What survives from antiquity is texts, that come to us in written form. To what extent is it safe to infer that these compositions are the culmination of an earlier (or ongoing) oral tradition? Some ancient societies were very bookish, after all, and the profession of scribe was a noble one. Besides, even if one can safely infer that there was an oral phase of transmission, what form did it take? The legacy of Milman Parry’s researches, and those of others

who investigated still living epic recitals or performances in the area of the former Yugoslavia and elsewhere, has generated the concept of oral composition: that is, epic poetry composed in the process of performance (Parry 1971; Lord 1960/2000; Foley, this volume). The poet, on this account, has available a large set of stock themes and stock expressions, most notably the formulae characteristic of Homeric epic, such as “wide-ruling Agamemnon” or “swift-footed Achilles.” Parry argued that these formulae were part of a larger system that emerged over the centuries to facilitate the poet’s task. Thus, major figures in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, like Achilles, Agamemnon, and Odysseus, have a set of formulaic epithets in various metrical shapes – and what is more, only one such epithet for each metrical unit. Thus, the poet, in mid-line, can reach for the formula, or combination of formulae, that will fill out the balance, and saves additional time because he does not have to choose among alternatives. It is like having a whole set of clothes (or set per season) in the closet – shirt, trousers, jacket, etc. – but only one of each: getting dressed is immensely simplified. On this model, it was concluded that oral epic poetry was not normally memorized and reproduced verbatim – the very idea of an exact repetition was often opaque to the poets who were interviewed by Parry – but was always created anew. And yet each version, as we would describe it, created in a specific performance on a specific occasion, was understood to be the poem itself: our notion of a fixed text simply is inapplicable to such a poetic process.

Nevertheless, there are other traditions of oral poetry in which every effort was made to hand down the original with strict fidelity. The religious compositions of India are a case in point, in which huge swaths of verse were memorized exactly, and transmitted faithfully from generation to generation (see Fitzgerald, this volume). There are passages of some length in the Homeric poems as well that are repeated word for word; so it is clear that the Greek bards were capable of reciting from memory – unless we suppose, on no very good grounds, that these passages reflect the introduction of writing and a more precise textual consciousness that accompanied it. Then again, the question of how oral traditions are fixed in writing is itself problematic (see, for example, Grethlein, this volume). Did the poets dictate to scribes trained in stenography? Did they themselves become literate? Was fixation a sudden or a gradual process? Was the process uniform in different parts of the world?

Finally, we come to the question of history. What do we mean by “history” in relation to epic? Several answers suggest themselves. Most basically, epics generally tend to present themselves as narratives of heroic events that occurred some time in the past. It may be a very remote past, preceding the time of composition by centuries, and identified, in some cases, as pertaining to another epoch, in which humans communicated directly with their gods and were much stronger or more just than they are today; or it may be a fairly recent past, as little as a generation prior to the poet’s own time. How faithfully do the poems recall the events they purport to describe, and the world in which they are imagined as occurring?

Some critics have supposed that oral poetry is capable of preserving material from a distant time, whether by the careful training in mnemonic techniques so as to maintain the integrity of the poem, or by virtue of the formulaic technique of oral

composition championed by Parry, in which the very metrical constraints, and the tools developed to meet them, served to fossilize, as it were, certain archaic elements – whether of language or content. An example of the latter is the reference to bronze armor in the Homeric epics: bronze had long been superseded by harder materials, such as iron in swords and other weapons, but the poets preferred to retain, rather than try to update, the handy set of formulae at their disposal, which involved bronze as opposed to the metrically different word for iron. But allowing for such instances, and assuming that the references to bronze were not rather a deliberate archaizing technique on the part of the bards, intended to endow their poems with a patina of antiquity, to what extent can we assume that the specific events recounted, and the social conditions, structures, and relations that form their background, reflect a long past period rather than the contemporary world of the poet? These questions have prompted intense and ongoing debates, for example, concerning the *Iliad*, the Trojan War, and “epic society” (Latacz 2004; Ulf 2003; cf. Grethlein, this volume) or the Vedic Hymns, the *Mahābhārata*, and India’s early history (Fitzgerald, this volume).

This brings us to a second aspect of history in relation to epic: the epics as historical testimony to the time in which they were composed, or were finally set down in the form in which they have reached us. To return to the example of Homer: do the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* reflect the Mycenaean society in which they are ostensibly set, back in the late Bronze Age, when Mycenae was a great capital, or do they rather represent the social world of the late eighth century or even later, when the epics very likely took the form in which we know them today? Arguments have been brought forward, themselves based on comparative research, that historical memory in non-literate societies rarely extends back more than three generations, the time of the grandfathers or at most great-grandfathers; anything beyond that is lost or remembered only in grossly distorted anecdotal form, and the historical time-frame of oral poetry, like any other non-literary medium, is constantly moving, as new social arrangements evolve and the old ones inevitably recede beyond the reach of unaided memory (Vansina 1985). This is a matter of on-going debate, which is reflected in several of the contributions to this volume. If, as is perhaps plausible, we take epic to be constituted from mixed influences, bearing some traces of a faraway past but also mirroring the contemporary world of composition, how might one distinguish between the two, so as to recover evidence for the one or the other? Here again, the comparative approach has much to offer, especially since in many cases, unlike in that of the Homeric epics, we have reliable information about the events ostensibly remembered in the poems and the conditions prevailing at their time, and can judge accurately the extent to which the memory of such events has been distorted. Such distortion affects, of course, only the actual events presumed to have occurred in the historical past, for the epics, precisely to the degree that they are not an exact record of the past, may reveal much about their own time.

There is also a third historical dimension to epic poetry, and that is the record of its subsequent reception – the time since the composition and the period in which it was later read (or sometimes heard) and interpreted. Indeed, in some cases epics are

themselves instances of reception, as they adopt and recast materials from earlier epics, as Virgil, for example, did with Homer (for another example, see Marks, this volume). If the bards were likely to import into their descriptions of a remote past elements, even very basic social features, of their own world, what makes us imagine that we ourselves are immune to similar influences from our own environment? Tracing the record of reception helps alert us to the possibility of such time-bound readings, and hence induces in us a healthy skepticism about our own ostensible objectivity in this regard.

When we were developing our project, we were aware not just of the very great differences in the historical epics we proposed to investigate, but also of the disparities in methodology and approach that characterize the several disciplines devoted to the study of these materials – for here too the issue of our own contemporary history enters into the picture. We sought therefore from the beginning to provide some common focus to our undertaking by setting out a series of questions the contributors were invited to address. Of course, these were meant as guidelines and suggestions, rather than as a rigid format in the nature of a questionnaire. And yet, we believe that this procedure had a positive effect which, we hope, is evident in the coherence of the chapters that follow.

Among other things, we requested that the authors consider to what extent the poetic traditions they were analyzing fit the categories of “oral,” “heroic,” or “epic.” Contributors were asked to discuss to what extent the contents of their epics were bound up with formulaic patterns, whether large or small, and how they imagined the process of fixation in writing that the epics underwent – if indeed they did so at all – and again, how the processes of oral and written transmission related to one another.

A second set of questions looked to determining what we know, or believe we know, about the historical events described in the epics under consideration, independently of the poems themselves. What is more, contributors were asked to reflect on how this knowledge might affect our interpretations of the poems and their relation to history.

Thirdly, the authors were requested to reflect on what we know about the historical circumstances and social conditions in which the extant poems themselves were composed, and to consider whether this has a bearing on the historicity of the epics. Here too, very different results could be expected for many of the traditions under investigation, in many cases influenced by the very shape and assumptions of each person’s own discipline. There was, as expected, a most lively interaction over these matters among contributors, which again is reflected in the chapters of this volume.

A fourth set of problems concerns our knowledge about the patterns and reliability of oral transmission of historical events generally (whether in prose storytelling or in poetry or song). Is epic poetry equally vulnerable to the distortions that students of memory in predominantly oral societies have observed in popular narratives of past events, or does it have some special, perhaps still unrecognized means of preserving historical information? Furthermore, can we point to any differences in the ways that the foregrounded action of the epics – the heroic duels and battles and quarrels and the like – and the social background to these events are transformed over time?

One may doubt that a historical Agamemnon and Achilles really quarreled as they are shown to do in Homer's *Iliad*, but does the social institution of local "kingships," for example, look back to the Mycenaean Age, or does it rather reflect the poet's own world, or one not long past? Related to this question is the problem of the extent to which the narrative patterns characteristic of epic impose constraints on how the past is represented in them. This raises the additional issue of whether such narrative patterns do inform epic poetry generally, or vary from one culture to another, in response, perhaps, to differing ideologies and values.

Fifth, and finally, we asked the contributors to contemplate what the social, political, religious, or ideological function of such poetry might be. Were the epics intended to help stabilize the societies in which they were composed? Or did they represent, perhaps, alternative or partial visions, in the service of parties marginal to or excluded from the dominant social group? Do the epic narratives themselves change as the tradition in which they are embedded is appropriated by different interests within the society, or as one cultural form gives way to another?

The chapters that follow treat epics, or what may, on certain descriptions, be classified as epics, from an exceptionally wide range of cultures, from ancient Sumerian, Hittite, Hebrew, and Indian texts, to the classical epics of Greece and the self-consciously literary imitations of the Roman poets, through the various medieval traditions in western Europe, the Slavic world, and Persia, and on to epics or comparable poetry composed in the former Yugoslavia, South Africa, Egypt, and Central America. There is no need here to provide a summary of the individual chapters, since Dean Miller, the author of a wide-ranging study, *The Epic Hero* (2000), has kindly contributed a final commentary, bringing together the themes that inform the several chapters and offering some provocative final questions and conclusions. Readers will each have questions of their own, as they reflect on the problems of epic and historicity that are addressed here, and some may find cross-cultural patterns that have escaped the editors and the authors themselves. This book, like others in the series of which it is a part, is conceived as a starting point for comparative research, intended to open up new paths for exploration. But the materials that it presents are fascinating in their own right, and we are confident that readers will enjoy this overview of epics round the world, and the picture they provide of the times – whether ancient, contemporary, or indeed our very own – that they represent.

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After initial collaboration between editors and authors, early versions of most of the chapters in this volume were presented and discussed in a workshop at Brown University in early December of 2006. This workshop, under the auspices of the Program in Ancient Studies, had the purpose of enhancing a common focus in all contributions, to foster intense interaction and collaboration among contributors, and to facilitate the creation of a coherent book rather than a volume of collected essays.

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advisors, enabled the Program in Ancient Studies to organize lecture series, conferences, and workshops with stellar international participation. More recently, the Sandstroms decided to offer their own support to our activities. In appreciation of their continuous enthusiastic support, this workshop bore their name: we are truly thankful to them. Thanks were owed to many others as well for their generous contributions: in the first place, to the Program in Ancient Studies, the Department of Egyptology and Ancient Western Asian Studies, the Program in Judaic Studies, the Herbert H. Goldberger Lectureship Fund of Brown University, the Cogut Humanities Center, and the Royce Family Fund for Teaching Excellence, but also to the Program in Medieval Studies, the Classics, English, and History Departments, and the Departments of Comparative Literature, French Studies, German Studies, Hispanic Studies, Italian Studies, and Slavic Languages. The publication of this volume has been facilitated by contributions of the Program in Ancient Studies and the Royce Family Fund for Teaching Excellence.

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