Many scholars make the claim that the first European epics, as we know them in the Iliad and the Odyssey, were originally transmitted orally over a long period and then committed to writing. This view, however, in the light of recent discoveries and the new spate of studies on the epics needs revision.

Forsdyke states, ‘it is unlikely that such long artistic unities as the Iliad and the Odyssey could be constructed without the aid of writing, and likely that these elaborate works were associated with its introduction. That can hardly be placed later than the ninth century B.C.’

Forsdyke is referring here to the Greek alphabet, derived, as is well known, from the Phoenician. Kenyon, too, holds that the general antiquity of writing in the Homeric age is established and that, while it was employed for the composition and preservation of literature, the normal method of publication was by recital. ‘It is impossible to maintain that writing was practised in the Greek lands in the seventh and eighth centuries, but could not have been known in the ninth, or even earlier. The basis for the old belief is cut away.’

The Homeric poems, according to Lorimer, were both composed not before 750 B.C. and probably about 700 B.C., from varied source material, some of it going back to the Mycenaean age.

On the other hand many elements in Homer refer to the Archaic, the Geo-

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1 Cf. Sir M. Bowra, Homer and his Forerunners, Andrew Lang Lecture, Edinburgh, 1955, p. 5. Bowra states on p. 6 that it is possible, however, that Homer himself was ‘acquainted with writing and that his poetry owed something to it’.


4 H. L. Lorimer, Homer and the Monuments, London, 1950, p. 464. These survivals are listed on p. 452ff: the body-shield, Nestor’s cup, II. X. 632, the boat’s tusk helmet, II. X. 261 (cf. Antiquity, vol. 28, 1954, p. 211 ff. and J.H.S. 1955, vol. LXXV, Plate 11a in Supplement), the metal inlay in Achilles’ shield, the use of bronze, the hexameter (or proto-hexameter) as the vehicle for epic poetry, the geographical knowledge shown of the Mycenaean age, particularly the allusion to Egyptian Thebes and her wealth (the origin of the allusion must be dated to c. 1375 B.C.: the Greeks were out of touch with Egypt after c. 1200 B.C. and Thebes was destroyed by Assurbanipal in 663 B.C.; the first later Greek settlement in Egypt was at Naukratis 615—610 B.C.), and to the battle of the Sangarios against the Amazons in which Priam as youth took part — an allusion to the upheaval in which the Hittite Empire perished. Nilsson, Homer & Mycenae, London, 1933, p. 137 ff. adds: the peculiar spear-head of Hektor’s spear encircled by a ring of metal, II. VI. 320, and the cyanos frieze in the palace of Alkinous, Od. VII. 87.
metric and Orientalising ages as do certain descriptions of works of art. Thus the Homeric poems contain elements from widely different ages, some as far as five hundred years apart. The Hoplite type of armour which is to be noticed in some passages in the Iliad is a sure indication that the poem was in its final form at about 700 B.C. since Hoplite armour makes its appearance in Greece about that time.

The dates given by Miss Lorimer seem reasonable enough although they have not as yet commanded the wide acceptance they deserve. They are about the time when the Phoenician alphabet had already been adopted at Athens, that is, before the end of the eighth century B.C. Allowance must be made for its general diffusion before that time, and still more for the production of the Greek system, which was not, in the developed form presented here, a mere adoption of Phoenician letters. Forsdyke would place the actual introduction of the Phoenician alphabet a hundred years earlier than the eighth century B.C. to account for its 'general diffusion in Ionia and overseas, and popular application as it appears on the common pottery of European Greece at the end of the eighth century B.C.'.

Thus, if we accept Miss Lorimer's dating c. 750—700 B.C. for the final composition of the Iliad and the Odyssey, we must assume that there was already to hand an efficient writing medium whereby to transmit the poems — a medium which had begun its existence about a hundred years earlier than the final composition of the poems. But this acceptance does not do away with the view of an earlier oral transmission by priestly or professional bodies. Miss Lorimer's acute analysis of the two poems makes it impossible to believe that the Iliad and the Odyssey in their complete form (since, as has been seen, she attributes their final composition to c. 750—700 B.C.) were orally transmitted. Writing at that period was already in vogue, if not for publication, at any rate for the composition and preservation of literature as Kenyon has stated.

We have no alternative then but to assume that the Iliad and the Odyssey as such were not orally transmitted (except for publication by recital), and that

5 Nilsson, op. cit., p. 122 ff.: e.g. the use of iron for tools but hardly ever for weapons, the complicated brooch described by Odysseus as a fastening for a garment Od. XIX. 226, and the cuirass given to Agamemnon by King Cinyras of Cyprus, II. XI. 20. The presence of the Phoenicians as traders and the prevalence of their craftsmanship is also to be noted.


7 Forsdyke, op. cit., p. 20.

8 Ibidem, pp. 18—19. The earliest inscription in the Greek alphabet is that on a Geometric jug, c. 750—700 B.C. Thirty-one potsherds excavated on Mt. Hymettos at Athens are slightly later in date than the jug (c. 700 B.C.) and the Greek alphabet is represented on them in its mature form.


10 Kenyon, op. cit., pp. 15—16.
they were preserved by writing. There is of course the possibility that the various strata which make up the Iliad and the Odyssey were orally transmitted before the final composition of the poems, as also the type of source material that is demonstrably much later than the Mycenaean material. Oral transmission from generation to generation is characteristic of an age in which writing is unknown and it is claimed that such an age was that known as the Dark Age in Greece.

Writing in the Eastern Mediterranean has a very long history for all the relations of life. Yet between about 1200 B.C., to which date the latest so far of the Mycenaean Greek Linear B tablets have been attributed, and about 800 B.C., a period of about four hundred years, writing seems to have disappeared in Greece. In other words, between the fall of the Mycenaean kingdoms and archaic Greece there was no writing at all. Wace, however, neither believes that there was a Dark Age in Greece in this interval — an assumption the history books make — nor that writing had entirely vanished.

Finley claims that 'when Mycenae fell, the surviving Greeks, in their new kind of society, had no need for records or for scribes; in fact, on the evidence we have at present, they had no need for the art of writing and they lost it altogether'. By contrast, in the Dark Ages following the fall of Rome at the hands of the northern barbarians, to which the Dark Age of Greece has at times been compared, writing was not lost. Although we have evidence for writing in the Dark Age of Europe we have none for the Dark Age of Greece. Here, however, a problem confronts us.

The Mycenaean centres of civilization in the Peloponnese were destroyed in the 12th century B.C. but that at Athens, it seems, was not. Thucydides, and he is followed by many ancient writers, believed in the tradition that Attica was the original home of the Athenians and that they were not subdued when most of the Peloponnese fell to invaders. Archaeology apparently confirms his view.

Continuity with the past at Athens has been shown by the pottery discovered

11 The central subject of the Iliad, 'the Wrath of Achilles', was gradually enlarged by the accretion round this nucleus of other material. Likewise in the Odyssey, the central theme, the 'Tale of Odysseus' homeward voyage and Vengeance on the Suitors', was eventually enlarged by the 'Telemachy' and the 'Nekyia'. Cf. E. R. Dodds in Fifty Years of Classical Scholarship, Oxford, 1954, pp. 2 & 7.


14 Finley, op. cit., p. 162.

15 Thucydides 1. 20.

16 It is questionable whether these were the Dori an since the destruction of the Mycenaean palaces at Mycenae, Pylos & elsewhere occurred in the 12th century B.C., long before large scale Dorian settlement in the Peloponnese which according to the latest evidence occurred c. 1000 B.C. Geometric pottery (evolved from sub-Mycenaean), cremation, and iron first occur in Attica, a region which the Dori ans never penetrated according to tradition and which boasted of its continuity with the past. Cf. J. B. Bury, History of Greece, rev. by Russell Meiggs, London 1951, pp. 61—3; H. Lorimer, 'Pulvis et Umbra', J.H.S., vol. LIII (1933), p. 161 ff.
in the recent excavations in the Agora dating to the Bronze Age which is supplemented by that found in the Dipylon cemetery. In the latter graves of the sub-Mycenaean period and early Iron Age are followed by later burials 'in an unbroken sequence down through the classical era' 17. Conquest and destruction of civilization, as in the case of the Peloponnesse, does not seem to have been at work at Athens, on a site continuously occupied and, being in the 12th century B.C. Mycenaean, presumably well acquainted with the Mycenaean Greek Linear B Script. Yet, so far no writing has been found at Athens earlier than the Geometric jug attributed to c. 750 B.C. To account for the loss of writing at Athens between Mycenaean times and about 750 B.C. one would have to assume that there was an invasion 18, in spite of both the tradition that there was not and the archaeological evidence which shows no signs of such an invasion and conquest ever having taken place 19.

It is true that there are many examples of scripts being lost. The best example is that of the Egyptian hieroglyphics. This script was lost to the Egyptians themselves for over a thousand years and it was not until about a hundred and thirty years ago when Champollion and others, mainly with the aid of the Rosetta stone, managed to decipher it that it again became known 20. Other examples of scripts, the knowledge of which was lost, are the Easter Island script, the Etruscan and the Maya, to quote a few. Thus it cannot be denied that the knowledge of useful arts may disappear.

In Egypt, however, the hieroglyphic script and Egyptian language gradually fell out of use when supplanted in turn by the Greek script and language on the establishment of the Macedonian Ptolemaic Dynasty at the end of the 4th cent. B.C., and later in the 7th century A.D. by the Arabic script and language (except for Coptic which continued in a script derived from Greek). The same fate befell Etruscan when Latin supplanted it. In the case of the other scripts conquest probably wiped them out altogether without any replacement by another script and language. In Greece the same language, Greek, spoken in Mycenaean times was not replaced by another when the Mycenaean civilization fell. This then is a definite element of continuity. During the Dark Age it is hard to believe that writing was entirely lost. The Greeks were not at the time utterly isolated from the world around them — they were not wholly without contact with Asia Minor for instance and could not have been without knowledge of the use and value of writing in their contact with their neighbours. That the busy eastern Mediterranean had the use of writing between 1200 and 800 B.C. (the evidence from Cyprus supports this) whereas the Greeks had not, is not quite credible!

The possibility exists, although the evidence so far is lacking, that writing did in fact carry on in the so-called Dark Age and that the adoption of the

Phoenician alphabet about 800 B.C. or earlier was merely a change over from one script to another — from a cumbrous syllabic script unsuited to the Greek language to one that, with alterations such as the insertion of vowel letters in a consonantal North Semitic alphabet, provided an excellent medium for the propagation of the first known European literature. One need only think of the change-over in comparatively recent times made for Turkish by Kemal Ataturk from the cumbrous Arabic script to the Latin alphabet, the descendant, incidentally, of the Greek alphabet.

The Cypriot material is interesting in this connection. Here, in an island cut off from the main centres of Greek civilization by distance, yet having communication by trade with mainland Greece, a more insular view prevailed than in mainland Greece, which switched over to the Phoenician alphabet. The Cypriot Greeks went on for centuries — till the 3rd century B.C. — using a script derived from the so-called Cypro-Minoan script. The latter was closely allied to the Mycenaean Linear B and was probably derived from the Minoan Linear A script.

It may be argued, as has often been done, that no written literature existed before the Homeric poems owing to the absence of literary texts, letters and juridical texts from Mycenaean sites. Webster, however, suggests that they may have been stored in places that have not survived or (as the script itself suggests) have been written on material other than clay. The probability that the Mycenaean kings corresponded with each other and with other powers is very high, as the likeness of the script in different Mycenaean centres, the Hittite records and the Bellerophon story show ... Whether the conditions under which oral poetry was recorded in Ugarit, Bogaz-Keuy and elsewhere, also obtained in Mycenae is less clear, but script and material were there.

That such literature did exist in Mycenaean times (and could have been written down as suggested above) is proved by several agreements between the 8th century B.C. Iliad and Odyssey and the Mycenaean tablets although in the nature of things there are disagreements too — to be expected when one considers the long interval between the Mycenaean Age and the final composition of the poems.

Chadwick was the first to notice the dactylic character of the language of the tablets. A tablet from Pylos begins ἄγεται Πενελόπου τόντες and another

21 Cf. W. F. Albright, The Archaeology of Palestine, Penguin, 1956, p. 195. In the Phoenician alphabet archaic forms of 'm' and 'k' are found till the ninth century B.C. when later forms, the prototypes of the Greek ones, appear. Thus the Greek alphabet cannot have been introduced before the ninth century B.C. Albright's view is that it was borrowed from the Phoenician in the late ninth or more probably early eighth century B.C.


Webster has noticed other parallels, for example the close parallel in phraseology in some of the tablets with certain descriptions in Homer 27, and the correspondence between the Lists of Gifts on the tablets and those in Homer 28.

Apart from all these there are agreements in subject matter: in the gods and deified elements, the heroic names, land tenure and social structure. The main difference, however, is that the structure of society is on a vaster scale in the tablets than in Homer 29; the slave economy, for instance, is on a greater scale than Homer suggests, and massed chariots were used in war 30 as contrasted with their use in Homer where they are used simply as vehicles to convey a warrior to the battlefield in order to engage in a duel with an opposing champion.

If our inferences are correct, all these can only lead to one assumption, that there was a written literature in Mycenaean times which has not come down to us, that it left its mark on epic literature, that in the gap between Mycenaean times and the completion of the Iliad and the Odyssey as we know them, some form of transmission existed. Was it an oral or written one?

Wace is of the opinion that the discovery and excavation of an inhabited site in Greece of the Late Bronze to Early Iron Age period (the so-called Dark Age of Greece) would go far to solve the problem since so far all knowledge of that period is from tombs. Tablets found on such a habitation site would throw light on the script and language situation of the time 31.

At Enkomi in Cyprus four tablets of the so-called Cypro-Minoan script have been found 32. According to Schaeffer 33 this Cypro-Minoan script was used profusely at Enkomi in the late Mycenaean period (c. 1400—1200 B.C.) and was still known there in the early Iron Age (1200—1000 B.C.) Sittig has interpreted one of these tablets as Greek 34, but the important fact to notice is that the Cypro-Minoan script is also found in the early Iron Age, hence the expectation that Mycenaean Linear B tablets which also are in Greek may eventually be found in Greece or elsewhere on an Iron Age site 35. Actually in

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26 Bowra, op. cit., p. 35 aptly remarks that the uncontracted words of Mycenaean Greek 'fall more easily into a dactylic rhythm than do the contracted words of a later age' and that in classical times the iambic was close to ordinary speech.

27 T. B. L. Webster, ibidem, p. 10, e.g. the description on a Knossos tablet which reads 'chariots at Kydonia, scarlet, fitted with wooden pole, leather breastwork, horn guide-rings' is to be compared with that of Nausikaa's wagon in Od. VI. 69 as 'wagon, high, well-wheeled, fitted with a basket'.

28 Ibidem, p. 11.


30 Only once does Homer betray knowledge of this use — in Nestor's speech in Iliad IV, 301.


35 Cf. Lorimer, op. cit., p. 126: 'The paucity of inscriptions in the early Iron Age can be easily explained by the hypothesis that inscriptions were mostly recorded on some perishable substance, probably wood'.
Cyprus a syllabary derived from the Cypro-Minoan and the Greek alphabet, derived from the Phoenician, overlapped.

An original oral composition of poetic or other literature is not denied but the claim here made is that it was within a short period written down for preservation whatever methods were used for publication.

Milman Parry's argument in favour of oral composition is based on the recurrent epithets, formulaic phrases and descriptions of scenes and situations 'designed as a safeguard against a possible breakdown in improvisation'. But these may simply have been memory aids for public recitation. As Kenyon states, 'could they (i.e. the Iliad and the Odyssey) have been carried in the memory of the poet during the process of composition? And are we to picture the poet, after completing his 'magnum opus' as assembling a corps of rhapsodists around him, and reciting his work over and over to them until they had committed it to memory? It is difficult to believe. And if there was one original author's copy, why should not each rhapsodist, or at any rate each school of rhapsodists, have possessed one also? It seems easier to believe this than the contrary.' Kenyon's conclusion then is that written copies of the epics existed to assist the rhapsodists who recited them.

The implication to be drawn from the assumption of a continuous oral transmission over a period of centuries is inevitably that society is in a fairly primitive stage in which writing is unknown. This could not have been the case with the Homeric poems nor, before their final composition, with their central themes or additions made round those themes, whether we adopt the views of the Analysts or Modern Unitarians or not. The rhapsodists, whatever variations they introduced into the text or whatever recurrent features they used for recital to the masses at the Games or Festivals, must have had a key version in writing. Opera and drama, it may be noted, are produced orally on the stage but are controlled by a written version of the specific production whatever the variations introduced into the story by different composers. Is not the same applicable to the Homeric poems or their possible precursors? The main background and some of the characteristics of the Homeric poems come from a period of high civilization when writing was known and the ultimate and final composition of both epics dates from a time when a new form of writing had become widespread.

What happened in the interval? Are we to assume oral transmission for centuries, for example of such a definitely Mycenaean passage in the Iliad as the Catalogue of Ships, the oldest piece of Greek verse we have — or its

36 Cf. Ventris and Chadwick, op. cit., p. 65.
38 Kenyon, op. cit., p. 14 ff.
39 Cf. E. R. Dodds in Fifty Years of Classical Scholarship, Oxford, 1954, p. 11: T. W. Allen 'held that Homer worked on the basis of a pre-existent verse chronicle and that the Catalogue of Ships, which was certainly not composed for our Iliad, is the oldest piece of Greek verse we possess'. Cf. Huxley, op. cit., p. 22: 'the state of affairs in the Catalogue is earlier than that reflected by the Pylos tablets and the differences between the two provide confirmation of the historicity of the Catalogue'.

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written transmission? A comparison readily occurs to mind. The oldest Hebrew poem of any length preserved in the Old Testament is the Song of Deborah 40. We know that when this song was composed (12th century B.C.) writing was well-known in the Near East and it must have been transmitted via writing 41. Unfortunately we cannot as yet make the same definite assertion about the transmission of the Catalogue of Ships. It was most probably written originally in the Mycenaean Greek Linear B Script but that it reached the author or authors of the completed Iliad via oral transmission is by analogy a matter of great doubt.

We may never find evidence for writing in Greece during the Dark Age, in spite of Wace's optimism, but the possibility of its existence during that period cannot be ruled out; it may have existed on perishable material such as papyrus and skins, if not on clay tablets 42. Like the continent of Africa once, the period is dark only because unknown.

41 Cf. Albright, op. cit., p. 190 ff. for the early date of writing in Palestine; ibidem pp. 132 & 220. The Gezer calendar, late 10th cent. B.C., is the earliest important Israelite inscription.
42 Lorimer, op. cit., p. 124 suggests that papyrus and skins were used concurrently with clay. Cf. S. Marinatos, 'Some General notes on the Minoan Written Documents', Minos vol. 1, p. 40. Marinatos believes that many clay seals found in Crete which show traces of thin threads were used on papyrus letters or documents.
Cf. Ventris & Chadwick, op. cit., p. 31: 'even Linear B still contains a fair proportion of complex signs, of a dozen strokes or more, which perhaps reflect a calligraphic use of the script on other more perishable materials.'
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