

Minna Skafte Jensen, *Writing Homer. A Study Based On Results from Modern Fieldwork*. Scientia Danica. Series H, Humanistica 8, 4. Copenhagen: The Royal Danish Academy of Sciences and Letters, 2011. Pp. 440. ISBN 9788773043615. DKK 375.00 (pb).

It is unusually refreshing when the putative interpolation at *Odyssey* 11.602-4 — the one in which the dead Heracles is suddenly presented as one of the immortal gods — is suggested to have arisen as the singer's self-correction triggered by the expression of criticism on the face of the scribe who took the poem down in dictation; or when the brevity of the books in the second half of the *Odyssey* is explained as due to the fact that the singer realized he was approaching the end well before time but had to proceed with the dictation 'in order to fulfil his contract' (313-14, 346-47). The vividness with which Minna Skafte Jensen approaches these and similar Homeric issues, resulting as it does from her intimate acquaintance with living oral traditions (the 'modern fieldwork' of the title), is the most conspicuous feature of this book and the main source of its strength, as well as of some of its weaknesses.

The main thesis of the book can be summarized as follows. The *Iliad* and *Odyssey* originated in the late sixth-century BCE Athens as prize-winning performances at the Panathenaic competition. They were subsequently dictated to a scribe (or scribes), having been significantly expanded in the process. Transferred from the tablets on which they were originally written down to papyrus rolls, they underwent some minor editorial changes and thus assumed their final form. The manuscripts were deposited in one of the temples on the Acropolis as prestigious objects not accessible to the general public. "Homer" to whom the archaic and classical sources refer is the Homeric tradition as a whole, first and foremost the poems of the Epic Cycle. While these poems continued to be extemporized by the rhapsodes at various performance arenas all over the Greek world, the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* had not been widely known until the fourth century BCE, when they became firmly established as the principal school texts and the cultural property of the educated elite.

Jensen builds her argument step by step. As a basis for her reconstruction of the circumstances in which the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* hypothetically originated, she establishes a comparative framework by selecting six well-documented oral epic traditions – the Nyanga *Mwindo Epic*, the Tamilnadu *Brothers' Epic*, the Telugu *Epic of Palnadu*, the Arabic *Sirat Bani Hilal*, the Tulu *Siri Epic*, and the Karakalpak *Epic of Edige* — to serve as a control group accompanying the discussion through the rest of the book (Ch. 1). As next step, she confronts the oral-formulaic theory in its classical form with the results of the study of oral epic traditions that have accumulated since the 1930s, when the theory was first formulated (Chs. 2-4). Application of the fieldwork experience of living oral traditions to the historical context and poetic practices of late archaic and early classical Greece comes next (Chs. 5-8). Finally, Jensen methodically recreates the unique historical moment of the recording of the Homeric poems (Chs. 9-11). In a five-page Conclusion she suggests, in particularly strong terms, that 'the entire history of archaic and classical Greek literature be rewritten with the purpose of reaching a fundamental reappraisal of the early reception of the Homeric poems that distinguishes between the two senses of "Homer" as either the poet(s) of the two transmitted epics on the one hand, or of a comprehensive epic performance tradition of mythic hexameter poetry on the other' (394).

Jensen is an accomplished scholar of both oral poetry and Homer, and the consistency with which she employs the evidence supplied by the former to throw light on the latter is truly remarkable. Such verdicts as 'not supported by fieldwork experience of how oral traditions work' (247, of G. Nagy's influential evolutionary model) are applied *sine ira et studio* both to the theories of the opponents and to those of the scholars with whose views she essentially agrees (see esp. 216). She demonstrates that, rather than being universal characteristics of oral poetry, such cornerstones of the theory of oral-formulaic composition as formulaic economy and probably even formula itself, are idiosyncratic to Homer (50-63), and arrives at the conclusion that composition-

in-performance is the only common denominator of oral epics all over the world (75). On the same grounds, she questions the currently popular idea of transitional texts by emphasizing that '[i]n epic traditions, interaction in the sense that literate singers use their ability to write as an aid in their traditional craft ... seems to be very unusual, if it exists at all' (194).

But the method has its limits. Not everything about oral poetry as practised in the modern world can be indiscriminately applied to ancient societies. Thus, Jensen takes it for granted that the rhapsodes were in every respect identical to the traditional poets extemporizing their songs at the time of performance as portrayed in modern fieldwork. Indeed, oral theory makes no provision for such phenomena as memorization and verbatim repetition, composition-in-performance being the only model available. This is why Jensen does not believe that the rhapsodes' repertoire could include the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, whose text was presumably fixed once and for all in the late sixth century BCE (see esp. 308, n. 77). This, however, is to ignore the ancient evidence, which unequivocally testifies to the fact that the rhapsodes were associated with memorization of the written text and that they did specialize in performing the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.¹

Jensen is too rigorous a scholar not to recognize that in the case of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* we can only speak of fixed texts and that the variants that can be observed are trivial (see esp. 222-24). At the same time, her methodological principles do not allow her to envisage an oral transmission that does not proceed through composition-in-performance. This is why she chooses to see the rhapsodes as extemporizing the poems of the Epic Cycle, and the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* as being kept hidden in the state archives. It seems, however, that in the case of Homer the evidence relating to the modes of transmission practised in the ancient world may sometimes prove more helpful than the modern fieldwork experience. As this evidence shows, in the case of texts that were held in especially high esteem memorization was indeed the standard model of transmission. Shaul Shaked's assessment of the transmission of the Avesta saves me many words here:

Oral transmission has a number of advantages over the scribal presentation of a sacred text. Although it is more precarious, and is perhaps more liable to loss of material when the schools of transmission are dispersed under pressure of conquest and assimilation to alien cultures, when the system works well the careful memorization of a text seems to guarantee a higher degree of fidelity in transmission than can be the case in a chain of copying. This is demonstrated by the transmission of the Vedas, by the transmission of pre-Islamic Arabic poetry, and by the transmission of the Avesta.²

The *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were unlike the other epic poems circulating in ancient Greece, in that they enjoyed the unique status of canonical texts. The question why and how they acquired this status is

¹ Memorization: Xen. *Symp.* 3.6; written texts: Xen. *Mem.* 4.2.10; the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*: Pl. *Ion* passim. For recent discussions see H. Pelliccia, 'Two Points About Rhapsodes', in M. Finkelberg and G. G. Stroumsa (eds.), *Homer, the Bible, and Beyond. Literary and Religious Canons in the Ancient World* (Leiden: Brill 2003), 97-116; M. L. West, 'Rhapsodes', in M. Finkelberg (ed.), *The Homer Encyclopedia* (Malden, MA-Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell 2011), 745-46.

² Sh. Shaked, 'Scripture and Exegesis in Zoroastrianism', in Finkelberg and Stroumsa (n. 1 above), 65-66. Cf. also David Shulman, personal communication: 'The best guarantee of the reliability of the Vedic text is the fact that it is stable — in purely oral recitation — all over the subcontinent. This is established by overwhelming evidence; if you record a Vedic reciter in Kashmir and one in Tamil Nadu, 3000 miles away, the text will be identical (and both reciters may have only "oral" literacy). I think there is no economical explanation of this situation other than the notion of reliable oral transmission over many centuries.'

not our concern here.³ Suffice to say that this is the most likely reason why the model of oral transmission through composition-in-performance does not apply in the case of the two Homeric epics. Yet this is not to conclude, together with Jensen, that from the moment they were fixed in writing the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* ceased being orally transmitted at all. I suggest we turn once again to Shaked's reconstruction of the transmission of the Avesta, which both agrees and disagrees with Jensen's reconstruction of the history of the dictated text of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*:

It seems likely that not only its structure and scope were fixed before, but that there existed copies of the text [of the Avesta] in two written shapes: one, as a private aide-mémoire for individual transmitters; and one, perhaps, as a ceremonial book in the royal treasury, where prestigious documents of various kinds, including the official annals of the kingdom, were regularly preserved. It may be assumed that such a book in the royal archives, if it existed, was not very often consulted.⁴

Note that while the second part of the above description fits in perfectly with Jensen's scenario as to what happened to the Panathenaic text of Homer, the first part corresponds closely enough to what ancient Greek sources tell us about the rhapsodes. Note also that the model of transmission thus emerging is practically identical to the long-established scholarly view of the rhapsodes as possessors of their own copies of the Athenian text of Homer, the text that they memorized in order to perform.

We will probably never know whether the poet who dictated the *Iliad* was indeed the Homerid Cynaethus, whether Onomacritus whom Herodotus mentions was indeed the scribe who wrote down and edited it,⁵ or whether the three small statues of scribes in the Acropolis Museum were indeed meant to commemorate the historical moment of the recording of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* (302-12, 363-88). But Jensen states her case clearly and eloquently, and her argument commands respect even when one disagrees with it. For everyone interested in oral-formulaic theory and the history of the text of Homer, her book is an obligatory reading.

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Adam Schwartz, *Reinstating the Hoplite. Arms, Armour and Phalanx Fighting in Archaic and Classical Greece*. Historia Einzelschriften 207. Franz Steiner Verlag. Stuttgart 2009. 337 pp. 64 €. ISBN 978-3-515-09330-9.

In this book, based on a Ph.D. dissertation supervised by Mogens Herman Hansen and Gorm Tortzen, Adam Schwartz sets out 'to assess the military function and fighting style of the Greek hoplite phalanx in the period from c. 750 to 338 B.C.' (12-13). Justifying the necessity of the enterprise by the frequency of wars in ancient Greece, the agonal aspect of Greek culture, and the claim that 'war played an absolutely central role in Greek history and culture' (12) (issues, by the way, that are not followed up in the conclusion), he undoubtedly succeeds in attaining this relatively narrowly defined aim. This is a thorough, clearly focused and meticulously executed study, which despite some deficiencies will no doubt rank high among books on ancient warfare.

³ For an overview see e.g. Margalit Finkelberg, 'Homer as a Foundation Text', in Finkelberg and Stroumsa (n. 1 above), 75-96; for Homer and the Epic Cycle see ead. 'Homer and His Peers: Neanalysis, Oral Theory, and the Status of Homer', *Trends in Classics* 3 (2011), 197-208.

⁴ Shaked (n. 2 above), 66.

⁵ The hypothesis was first formulated in Minna Skafte Jensen, *The Homeric Question and the Oral-Formulaic Theory* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum 1980).