

Chapter VI Epic Poetry by David Gaunt, pp. 162-194

p. 168 p. 167 The Iliad and the Odyssey appear to have come down to us substantially as they were known to the Athenians of the sixth century B.C. The Greeks themselves attributed both poems to a single author, although some of them, observing great differences in tone between the two poems, offered the hypothesis that Homer wrote the Iliad in his prime and the Odyssey in old age. D. L. Page offers strong evidence from the vocabulary of the two poems to show that in fact they are more likely to have come from different sources. However that may be, both poems are certainly the products of a poetic tradition very different from anything which has been common in Europe since the introduction of writing. . . Such stories, whatever their period, are traditional, and although they spring in most cases from a kernel of fact (such as the campaign of Charlemagne in Spain in A. D. 777 and the death of his son Roland in the Pass of Roncesvalles), they are not 'historical' in the sense of attempting to give an accurate narrative of what happened so long ago. The bard describes not what happened but, as Aristotle says, the kind of thing that is likely to happen: he is concerned with men, their deeds and their passions, and although he would claim, if questioned, to be telling the truth, it is a truth which has been altered, varied, and refined through the years so as to conform more completely than the reality may have done with the bard's idea of what is convincing.

When the bard is called upon for some such story as that of the Wooden Horse he does not, as it were, play back a tape recording. He draws on two sources: his knowledge of the story as transmitted by his predecessors, and his knowledge of certain poetic formulae which centuries of bardic singing have proved useful and convenient - useful because they cover a wide range of heroic or natural activity, and convenient because they fit appropriately into the hexameter line.

p. 169 It cannot be too much emphasized that the process described above is essentially not the reproduction of a memorized text, but the re-creation, in memorized formulae, of a story known to the singer and remade by him for a particular occasion.

p. 170 It may perhaps be objected that under the conditions described above there can never be any one creative poet to whom an epic may be ascribed: any given poem must be the product of a long period of transmission during which a bard learns from his elders and transmits to his juniors, making only very small contributions of his own. It is certainly true that the formulaic style, with its stiff 'embroidered' quality, must go right back into the Mycenaean period, and it seems likely that bards were singing in this way for centuries before the sack of Troy. This can be seen from the fact that some of the objects described by Homer can be shown to have a Bronze Age provenance: e.g. the curious 'boar's tusk helmet' (cf. Il. x, 261-5)

certainly had Mycenaean and Minoan ancestry, as also did the big shields  
*note πύργος* such as the one described in Il. VIII, 267 ff. The Homeric poems are an amalgam whose origins go back a very long way, and research shows that, with care, we may find in Homer interesting sidelights on the Mycenaean period.