

Notopoulos, James A., "Studies in Early Greek Oral Poetry", pp. 1-77 in Harvard Studies in Classical Philology, Vol. 68. Cambridge, Harvard University Press, Oxford University Press, 1964.

Catalogue of Ships

+ p.24 Since this passage comes from the Catalogue of Ships, the most historically authentic Mycenaean document in the Iliad, as Page and others have shown, Thamyris of Thrace, which we know to be connected with Orpheus, is our first historical bard in the Mycenaean tradition, and Thrace and Pylos are our earliest fixed centers in the oral atlas.

Thamyris

p. 24 The oral bard works with his memory. Since Pylos was destroyed ca. 1200 B.C., we have a rough date for Thamyris. He is the first of our wandering bards. When the Muses met him, he was journeying from Oechalia, a city in the Pylos district now known to us from the Pylos tablets.²⁸ If the bard fresco from the Pylos palace is really that of a bard, we have a further detail for positing Pylos historically as a center of Mycenaean poetry.²⁹ The fact that Thamyris was a bard from Thrace singing in Pylos implies the existence of an early oral koine capable of being understood in Thrace and in Pylos. Whether or not the three other bards mentioned in the Homeric poems - the bard with whom Agamemnon left his wife when he went to Troy, Phemius of Ithaca, and Demodocus of Phaeacia - have as good a case for being historical as Thamyris is uncertain. At any rate, Plato spoke of Thamyris and Phemius as historical persons.³⁰ The case for positing oral centers in Thrace and Pylos in Mycenaean times looks good; for Argos, Ithaca, and Phaeacia probable but not capable of proof. The strong case made for Mycenaean poetry by Page and Bowra on the basis of memory of Mycenaean artifacts and cities long destroyed by the time of Homer is solid, though we cannot identify the centers which fashioned this oral diction.

Changing Attitudes of Literary Critics

3.50 p.47 ↓ The old Homeric Question in the form it once took is dead, except for those who have not heard of Parry, or if they have, proceed as if he made no difference. The new question which challenges our times is centered on the effect of Parry's work will have on literary criticism. It is not easy for minds long nourished by great traditions of literary criticism going back to Aristotle to see the problem with fresh eyes. The literature on Homer is so entwined in our teaching that it requires a new generation whose introduction to Homer starts with Parry instead of Wolf, Lachmann, Wilamowitz, and the rest. Furthermore, even if we conceptually understand Parry's oral work, it takes, as Parry himself realized, an intimate knowledge of field work with oral poetry to understand the factors at work in oral verse-making. That is why Lord's The Singer of Tales, which has advanced Parry's work, is a sine qua non propaedeutic in understanding Homer in the post-Parry era. Analogies from it must not be confused with proof; yet it is the most suggestive way to reappraise the Homeric problem. There is a tendency to depreciate Balkan oral poetry; surely, the Achilles of the ninth book of the Iliad is to be found nowhere in comparative oral literature. Yet in Homeric scholarship, where one theory is exchanged for another, entering a laboratory of field work has its value.