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HOMERIC PAPYRI AND TRANSMISSION OF THE TEXT

When in 1779 Villoison unearthed Venetus A of the Iliad in the library of San Marco, it appeared that just about everything one could wish to know about the text as it existed in the heyday of Alexandrian scholarship was revealed. But it turns out that the scholia, immensely informative though they are, do not tell the whole story. Now we have actual Homer manuscripts of the period, and their texts are not at all what could have been predicted. The capacity of Homer papyri to surprise is no longer what it was when they first came on the scene, but they have lost none of their significance. They give us a direct if fragmented view of the transmission of the Homeric text over the course of a millenium, from the early 3rd century B.C. to the end of antiquity. For any attempt to trace the history of Homer in antiquity it is the ancient manuscripts themselves that constitute the only secure evidential base; they serve as a control on the nature and worth of the medieval tradition and on any reconstruction of the first four or five hundred years. The papyri show us the transmissional process in action. They will form the core of this chapter, which will explore the transmission not just of the ‘authentic’ or ‘original’ text, as problematic a concept as it is elusive an object, but of the text as it actually existed for its hearers and performers, its scribes and readers.1

The general picture is one of a very dynamic, open tradition, with diminution over time in the range of textual variation, offset to some extent by often short-lived incoming new variants. The papyri reveal

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1 Homeric papyri are referred to by their conventional numeration, as listed by Sutton (1991), extending earlier lists by (successively) T. W. Allen, P. Collart, and H. J. Mette; and normally also by their ‘M(ertens)-P(ack)’ number (Pack 1965); revision by P. Mertens forthcoming; in Mertens’ revision the Pack2 numeration will be unchanged; I am most grateful to Prof. Mertens for a preview). By familiar convention ‘papyri’ as a generic term is inclusive of ancient manuscripts written on parchment—inexact but justifiable, and practically unavoidable as long as the pernicious habit of confining the term ‘manuscripts’ to medieval manuscripts persists.
a transmisional watershed in the 2nd century B.C., a sort of textual standardization, delimiting the contours of the text inasmuch as it stabilized the number and sequence of verses and quite drastically cut down current variants. Just what kind of intervention this reflects is unclear. Thereafter the text continued to move in a constant state of flux, but a less volatile one; variants were multitudinous but minor, accretion was virtually confined to simple one-line additions, losses were strictly local and ephemeral. The text was subject to a certain amount of scholarly interference, but the effect of Alexandrian critical activity was slight, at least as far as the constitution of the individual verses was concerned. No discrete channels of transmission are in evidence. The text was much copied (the Iliad always more than the Odyssey), collation was fairly wide-spread (protecting against loss and disseminating accrual), and we have substantial pieces of manuscripts from every century down to the 7th: much activity, little change. Passage through the bottle-neck to the 9th and 10th centuries seems to have entailed overall relatively little loss of what had been current in the Roman period; the medieval tradition is a direct continuation of the ancient, inevitably attenuated but in its totality showing unusually good catchment of ancient readings (better for the Iliad than for the Odyssey), promiscuously distributed. The later minuscule manuscripts add little to what is found collectively in the earlier ones (the earliest extant being 10th cent.), except that extra readings from the Alexandrian scholarly tradition were imported into some.

That is a summary—very summary—outline of the traceable history of the rather Protean thing that is the written text of Homer. Before we proceed further with its shifting constitution, a few words are in order on the changing nature of its physical form. Modern readers, and even post-modern ones, read texts which present them with a succession of words and of sentences. Readers in the 3rd century B.C. faced merely a succession of letters, uninterrupted except by verse-termini:

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\begin{array}{c}
\alpha\nu\delta\rho\alpha\mu\omicron\nu\epsilon\nu\pi\epsilon\mu\omicron\upsilon\omicron\upsilon\sigma\omicron\upsilon\omicron\pi\omicron\nu\omicron\upsilon\sigma\omicron\lambda\alpha\pi\omicron\alpha\lambda\alpha
\\
\pi\lambda\alpha\gamma\chi\theta\eta\epsilon\nu\pi\omicron\omicron\upsilon\epsilon\omicron\nu\omicron\kappa\omicron\tau\omicron\omicron\omicron\lambda\omicron\epsilon\theta\omicron\omicron\rho\omicron\omicron\epsilon\rho\omicron\epsilon\omicron\nu
\end{array}
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This goes deeper than graphic convention. In antiquity the written text is a given sequence of letters, whose articulation is effected by

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2 I do not confine the term 'text' to written text.