CHAPTER ONE

SPATIAL MEMORY AND THE COMPOSITION OF THE ILIAD

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In his invaluable work on memory in oral traditions the cognitive psychologist David Rubin has dedicated a chapter to a discussion of imagery. Here Rubin summarizes evidence, first, for the power of imagery in general as an aid to memory and, second, for the particular value of imagery for oral traditions. He also makes an important distinction between categories of imagery. On the basis of neurophysiological evidence he points out that there is a real separation between visual (or object) imagery and spatial imagery: that is, information about what an object is (its appearance) and where it is (its location) are registered in different areas of the brain. It is clear, therefore, that not one but two systems of memory process these complementary data. In oral traditions we find rich evidence for visual imagery of the object imagery kind (in Homer, for example, we find descriptions of treasured possessions, and vivid cameo scenes that are the material of similes); and it is on this aspect of imagery that scholars have, for the most part,
concentrated their energies. The spatial component, on the other hand, is a neglected aspect of visual image—and this is despite the fact that, as we shall observe in my examples below, from both Homer and from other oral epic traditions, the narrative of oral epic has a very real spatial dimension. It is my aim in this chapter to begin a discussion of the functions of spatial memory in the composition of the oral epic songs that we associate with Homer; my observations will emerge, in part at least, from a comparison of the Homeric poems with epic poems in living traditions.

*What is spatial memory? How do we use it?*

Spatial memory is the memory system that encodes information about location, orientation, distance, and direction. In everyday life spatial memory helps us to follow instructions in order to locate sites, such as a petrol station on the highway, or a friend’s house in the suburbs, or to remember how to find things, such as where we last left the car keys. Our ability to remember scenes and the layout of objects within scenes allows us to evaluate routes, to revisit in our mind’s eye places we know, and to identify and “inspect” particular sites without actually travelling to them.

Location may be a richer cue to memory than psychologists have until recently assumed. Eugene Winograd and Vaughan Church draw two important conclusions from their studies of spatial location and memory: their first is that location and memorability are linked; and their second conclusion is that spatial information can cue the recall of associated material. The consequence of this is that, as Ulric Neisser observes, when we visit a once-familiar spot, memories of events and feelings come flooding back to us. It is clear that remembered events and remembered emotions, like remembered objects, are vividly associated with places. We can conclude with Neisser, therefore, that the spatial

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8 For a good general discussion, see Neisser (1989: 67-83).
10 Winograd and Church (1988: 1-7, esp. at 5).
11 Winograd and Church (1988: 6-7); see also Rothkopf, Fisher, and Billington (1982: 126); “place provides productive cues for the recall of other information.”