

The resilience of orality in cuneiform and the alphabet: Greek and Babylonian epic

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Despite profound semiotic differences in how they conveyed meaning, both Mesopotamian cuneiform and early Greek alphabetic writtenness(es) were anchored in highly oral cultural milieux. Oral modes of learning and communication were essential to the development and propagation of written culture. That interaction is most visible in educational practices: the teaching of cuneiform word-lists and lexical texts that were exported across the Near East, and the Old Babylonian ‘scribal curriculum’, relied on memorisation and oral recitation, though this did not exhaust their intellectual function (Veldhuis 2010, Delnero 2012, Van de Mieroop 2015). So did late-archaic and Classical Greek elite education, where Homeric and lyric written poetry was learnt as a function of performance (Spelman 2019). This is all well understood, if hardly ever compared. But how precisely the writing and composition of those culturally-central texts were anchored in, and influenced by oral composition and performance remains a scholarly crux in both fields.

One obstacle is the difficulty in conceptualising the coexistence of orality, performance and writing, and the prevalence of dichotomic frameworks. In Homeric studies, the idea that writing has a fundamentally transformative power leads scholars to be sceptical that oral poetic expression may be compatible with literate composition (Nagy 2009, Ready 2019). It also underpins ‘scripsist’ views, which downplay oral composition in view of Homeric artistry (recently Friedrich 2019, Lucarini 2019, cf. West 2011). In cuneiform studies, on the other hand, the materiality of the written artifacts that constitute our sources has long hindered the study of oral or oral-derived features (Ballesteros forthcoming, but see Vogelzang and Vanstiphout 1992, Delnero 2015). Comparison between the two fields (recently Lardinois 2018, Waal 2018: 113–19, Ballesteros 2021, Kelly and Metcalf 2021) is likely to be a game-changer, opening up new avenues for conceptualising writing and orality beyond unidirectional and evolutionary frameworks.

In the cuneiform context, epic was most likely composed in writing, as suggested by contextual factors including metapoetic statements (Metcalf 2015: 143–5) and heavy reliance on scribal wordplay. When cuneiform literary texts appear, writing had been in existence for centuries. As for Homer, Milman Parry’s case for the traditionality and oral background of Homeric diction has not been invalidated (Parry 1971, Edwards 1986-1988, Friedrich 2019). The Homeric poems are likely to have emerged as the alphabetic scripts took hold in the Aegean. The contexts of Babylonian and early Greek poetry were thoroughly different, as were the scripts that recorded them. But comparison shows that their performance-directed features are entirely commensurate. In this paper, I offer quantitative and qualitative evidence regarding noun-epithet and other traditional naming expressions in Homer’s *Iliad* and Old Babylonian poetry (*Atra-hasīs*, *Agušaya*). The comparison demonstrates that the oral dimension of ancient epic was eminently resilient to the impact of literacy. Cuneiform and alphabetic texts were indeed anchored in an oral dimension. But the latter was not necessarily earlier than writtenness, or incompatible with its emergence.

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