

## The Beta-tradition



# The Beta-tradition on the origin of the Iliad

Ward Blondé

First version: 2019

All passages from the Iliad and the Odyssey in this book make use of the translations of Richmond Lattimore.

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The Beta-tradition: on the origin of the Iliad

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Redaction (English): EM1292 of Scribendi

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ISBN: 9789402191110

## **Acknowledgments:**

I want to thank my sister, Griet Blondé, for her help with the images. The cover was made thanks to Bart Vliegen of Watch It. I would like to thank Jules Looman from À la carte redactie for commenting on, reviewing, and improving the Dutch version in its final stages. I thank EM1292 of Scribendi for improving the English version.

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# Introduction

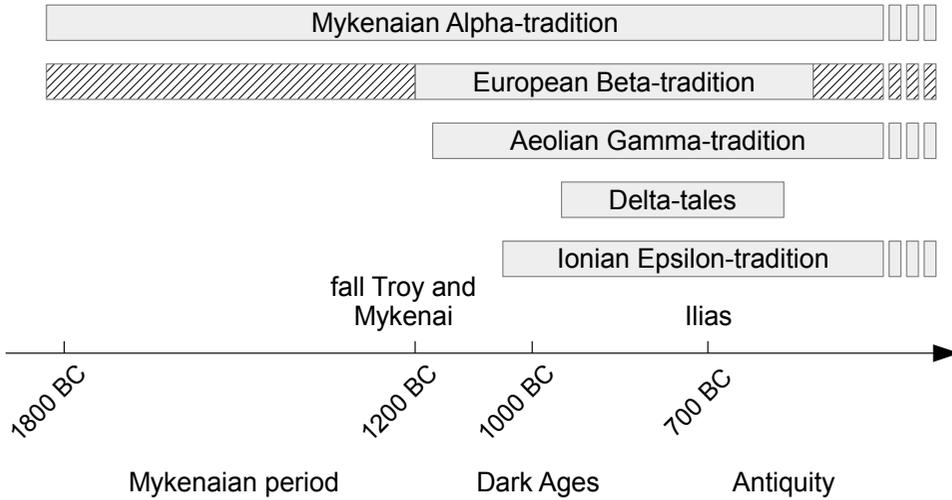
This book on the European Beta-tradition is the second in the series on Homeric traditions. This series consists of five orally transmitted Greek narrative traditions that I have discovered in the Iliad. The first book in the series is *The Alpha-tradition: On the Origin of Greek Stories*, to which I refer from time to time. The entire series of books fits into one overarching theory on the origin of the Iliad. All five oral traditions date back to Greek prehistoric times and are named the Mykenaian Alpha-tradition, the European Beta-tradition, the Aeolian Gamma-tradition, the narrative Delta-tradition, and the Ionian Epsilon-tradition. A speculative timeline showing the oral traditions can be found in Figure 1.

In this book, the following three propositions are proven: 1) there is a consistent oral tradition hidden in the Iliad, which is the European Beta-tradition; 2) the European Beta-tradition is the basis for the creation and further development of the Iliad; and 3) the historical society behind the European Beta-tradition is located in non-Greek Europe.

Therefore, this book is primarily about the European Beta-tradition although the similarities and differences with the Mykenaian Alpha-tradition are also explained. The European Beta-tradition is an oral tradition that, much like the Mykenaian Alpha-tradition, was handed down orally for five hundred to a thousand years before being recorded in the Iliad, around 700 BC; their origins and the routes they followed were quite different, however.

## Reading guide

We can now start researching the European Beta-tradition, which I will simply refer to as the Beta-tradition. In chapter 1, the literary aspects of the Beta-tradition are described. In chapter 2, the archeological characteristics of the Beta-society are systematically examined, and then, in chapter 3, these



**Figure 1:** A speculative timeline of the five discovered Greek oral traditions. The oblique shaded zone represents the European Beta-tradition on non-Greek soil.

characteristics are compared with the archeological characteristics of a series of historical societies, including non-Greek Europe in the second millennium BC. Chapter 4 runs through the Trojan cycle from the viewpoint of the Beta-tradition. Chapter 5 follows the detailed description of the Beta-tradition by means of forty-five oral characteristics and a series of analyzed passages. Chapter 6 describes seven typical scenes that are strongly developed in the Beta-tradition; their discovery leads to a series of new findings, such as those of the catalogue of ships and the archeology of the rampart that the Greeks built at Troy. This is followed by a chapter that shows the age of a number of passages, which is done by uncovering typical scenes. Chapter 8 sheds light on the relationship between the Mykenaian Alpha-tradition and the Beta-tradition. Then, in chapter 9, a theory is presented that, on the one hand, provides an answer to the question of how the Beta-tradition has ended up in Greece and, on the other hand, deals with a series of interesting historical issues, including the fall of the Mykenaian Empire and the arrival of the Dark Ages in Greece. Finally, in chapter 10, conclusions about the Beta-tradition are drawn.

# Chapter 1

## The literary characteristics of the Beta-tradition

In this chapter, the literary aspects of the Beta-tradition are introduced. An answer is given to a number of questions, including the following: What is the content of the Beta-tradition? What are oral traditions? How has the Beta-tradition been discovered? What are oral characteristics and typical scenes?

### **The core content: the battlefield**

The Beta-tradition is about a society of hostile clans led by godfathers who surround themselves with many sons, sons-in-law, and bastard sons all in their attempt to protect the clan. Here, blood feuds play an important role.

The real core of the Beta-tradition is the actions on the battlefield: the battle scenes in which the spears fly, and descriptions of all sorts of often horrible injuries are given. The greatest heroes stand on their chariots while their drivers take care of the reins. Sometimes, these heroes jump off to start hand-to-hand combat using their swords. In the Iliad, we find thousands of verses with such descriptions.

When studying the Beta-tradition, initially, the temptation can be great to reduce it to descriptions of the battlefield. Whoever does this, however, throws out the baby with the bath water, so to speak. At its best, the Beta-tradition is found in the way it focuses on the world outside of the battlefield.

Just outside the battlefield, we find the gods who watch—and even participate in—the battle. At the home front, we find the father and the combat teacher who wait hopefully for the fame their pupil will reap on the battle-

field. But also, the worried woman is there in the bedroom, where the hero himself can appear or—worse—the enemy with burning torches. The focus of the story can go to the moments just before the battle, in which expensive oaths are made and promised gifts are given, or to the spectacle afterwards, such as nightly meetings, mourning for the dead, and feeding the horses. Even more variety can be found in the descriptions of the armor and in the descent of the fighters. Finally, there are themes that are closely related to the development of suspense in the story, such as the reason behind the war and the decisions of Zeus, the supreme god who directs everything.

This brings me to the following proposition: the *Iliad* as a whole is a narrative of the Beta-tradition. From the high-pitched quarrel between Achilles and Agamemnon to the funeral of Hektor, we are close to the battlefield where the Greek and Trojan heroes perish in droves. No excursion in the narrative is far removed from this bloody place, except in short expansions such as the Homeric similes or the peaceful scenes that the god Hephaistos drew on the shield of Achilles.

In addition, the *Iliad* is almost the only work from Greek Antiquity in which we find the Beta-tradition. There is still a parody of the *Iliad*—namely the war between frogs and mice—which was also attributed to the legendary Homer. In this parody, we find similar combat passages, which also are found in passages in the *Odyssey* in which Odysseus fights against the suitors in his palace. Other stories from the Trojan cycle probably also contain passages from the Beta-tradition, but only a short summary of these stories has been preserved. With the Romans, we also find the Beta-tradition in the *Aeneid* of Virgil. However, there is a chance that the *Aeneid* is an imitation of the *Iliad* rather than stemming from an uninterrupted tradition.

## **Oral traditions and typical scenes**

But how is it that a superficial investigation into the Beta-tradition initially seems to lead exclusively to what constitutes its core, that is, the combat passages? This has everything to do with the popularity of the Beta-passages that are not about the battlefield. To put it briefly, these passages away from the battlefield started to lead a life of their own. Under the influence of the Ionian Epsilon-tradition, they ultimately obtained a different appearance. As a result, they are often difficult to recognize as passages of the Beta-tradition.

In the 1930s, the American Milman Parry started the investigation into oral traditions. Tragically, dying at the age of thirty-three in a car accident,

he was never able to experience the successes of his research. His greatest merit has been his comparative research between the oral texts of Yugoslavian bards and the Homeric works: the Iliad and the Odyssey. His research was later continued by Albert Lord, who made several important publications about it.

Although the twentieth-century Yugoslav oral tradition has nothing to do with those oral traditions from prehistoric Greece, Parry established all types of narrative-technical similarities between the oral texts he recorded with his tape recorder and the Iliad and Odyssey. Bards use fixed formulas to present their texts through improvisation. In the oral texts, we find many combinations of a noun with a fixed adjective—called an epithet—that is needed to complete a verse. An example here would be Hektor of the shining helm and the smoothed chariot. Also so-called *typical scenes* are universal for oral traditions. These are scenes that regularly occur, such as ending the day or killing an enemy, and this the bards can easily present by heart. The following is an example of a short typical scene:

*As he dropped, Elephenor the powerful caught him by the feet,  
Chalkodon's son, and lord of the great-hearted Abantes, and drag-  
ged him away from under the missiles, striving in all speed to strip  
the armor from him, yet his outrush went short-lived.  
(Iliad IV 463-466)*

It goes without saying that many variations of these typical scenes are possible and that Elephenor, Chalkodon, and the Abantes can be replaced with other names.

In the context of the Beta-tradition, typical scenes will be further divided into *progressive* typical scenes, *thematic* typical scenes, and *highly developed* typical scenes. Progressive typical scenes are typical scenes that allow the story of the bard to progress to the next chapter. Examples include the gathering of warriors, gathering up the army for the fight, the organization of a duel, the nightly meeting, the start of a new day, and so on. Thematic typical scenes reflect an important theme of the Beta-tradition, such as the warrior in need and the helper or fame for the father. Although progressive typical scenes occur in a specific place in the poetry, thematic typical scenes can be used anywhere. Highly developed typical scenes are typical scenes that are popular enough to appear outside their normal context, such

as bedroom scenes. Gathering up the army for the fight is a progressive typical scene that is also a highly developed typical scene. All other discovered highly developed typical scenes are thematic typical scenes.

The scholars who study the Iliad as a text that has arisen orally are generally referred to as oralists. However, they have never gone so far as to distinguish different oral traditions within the Iliad and the Odyssey. Instead, they assume that the Homeric works originated within the Ionian dialect of the eighth century BC. The theory of the Mykenaian Alpha-tradition has laid the foundation for distinguishing among various oral traditions. This path will continue to be explored in this book. This means that a basic assumption about the Mykenaian Alpha-tradition will be further extended:

- The Iliad and the Odyssey have reached their final forms in the Ionian Epsilon-tradition.
- All narrative content, including that of the Mykenaian Alpha-tradition and the Beta-tradition, was ultimately translated into the dialect and the Homeric verse restrictions of the Ionian Epsilon-tradition.

## **Discovery method**

As with the other narrative traditions, the Beta-tradition has been discovered through the iterative listing of the clusters of oral characteristics, which have been shown to have belonged to the same oral tradition. In parallel, the splitting of the Iliad into base passages that must have belonged to the Beta-tradition is also refined iteratively. The most important factors for classification of two oral characteristics in the same cluster are their occurrence in the same passage and the existence of a conceptual link between them. A concrete example is the erection of a burial mound and the construction of a rampart in front of the Greek ship camp. Both oral characteristics appear in the same passages because they are discussed simultaneously in a meeting and because they are executed simultaneously. They are conceptually linked because in both cases, the events concern the amassment of a large pile of earth. By structuring such clusters systematically, a true oral tradition is exposed over time. The listing of base passages—ultimately after a second iteration—invalidates the paradigm of a strict analysis: many passages are formed by means of different oral traditions (instead of a single one) that have been superimposed as narrative layers.