

CHAPTER 6

SING, MUSE

EARLY POETS

“HOMER, HESIOD,
ARCHILOCHUS, AND
SAPPHO



The Greeks believed that the nine Muses, daughters of Apollo, helped them to write poetry. This statue base shows three of the Muses.

Imagine that you have to memorize a story, with lots of characters and suspense and a complicated plot. The story is so long that if you start to tell it right now, you will finish tomorrow at around this same time. While you are telling it, you might close your eyes for long periods to help the details come to mind. In fact, if you are blind, you might find you have an advantage over sighted people: not only are you less distracted by the world around you, but you've always had to rely on your memory. So you already know some tricks about how to remember things.

If you sing something, and especially if the song has a strong rhythm, it's easier to memorize. Three-year-olds can sing the ABC song even before they know what letters are for.

Repetition also helps. Many people can sing "Take Me Out to the Ball Game," but the part that they know is just the chorus—hardly anyone knows the rest of the words because the chorus is the part repeated most often.

“Poet” comes from *poetes*,
which means “maker.” }

In ancient Greece, few people could read (even fewer could write). So it's only natural that an ancient Greek would think that a great poet, one capable of inventing and then reciting an exciting, beautiful poem 16,000 lines long, might well be blind. To make it easier to remember, the poem would probably be sung, or at least chanted to a strong rhythm, and it would help if it had lots of repetition. Melody was so tied with poetry that the Greek word *mousike*, from which we get the English word music, means both “music” and “poetry.”

So the Greeks thought that Homer, the poet they said composed the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, was blind. It's possible that he was, but there's no way of knowing that for sure, or even whether both poems were written by the same person and what his name really was.

If a blind poet named Homer really did compose the *Odyssey*, he put what appears to be a self-portrait in his story. In the description of a dinner-party, a blind poet is led in to take a seat and entertain the guests:

The herald came near, bringing with him the
excellent singer
Whom the Muse had loved greatly. . . .
She had deprived him of his sight, but she gave him
the sweet singing art. . . .
The herald hung the clear lyre on a peg placed over
His head, and showed him how to reach up with his
hands and take it down.

In any case, the author (or authors) of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* was not the first Greek poet. He was, however, the first whose poetry got written down. Most people think that the *Iliad* (the earlier of the two books) was written in

66 Homer, *Odyssey*, about
725 BCE

THE ALPHABET

The first two letters in the Greek alphabet are *alpha* and *beta*—that's why we call the group of letters used in a language an “alphabet.” Writing came to Greece in the ninth century BCE. The Greek alphabet is similar to the Roman alphabet, which is used in most of Europe and the Americas.

GREEK		ROMAN	
UPPERCASE	LOWERCASE	UPPERCASE	LOWERCASE
A	α	A	a
B	β	B	b
Δ	δ	D	d

Although nobody knows what Homer looked like (if he even existed), he's easy to recognize in ancient portrait busts. He is always shown with blank, staring eyes (since he was thought to be blind), a high, balding forehead, and a beard.

about 750 BCE. And just as you would suspect, both poems have a strong rhythm and repetition.

Poetry must have seemed like magic. Not only the audience, but sometimes even the poet himself thought that it was impossible to compose something so beautiful and to remember it so well without divine help. The Greeks thought that poets were aided by the nine Muses, daughters of Apollo (god of the arts) and a nymph named Mnemosyne. An early poet named Hesiod gave the Muses credit for his great verses in his book *The Theogony*:

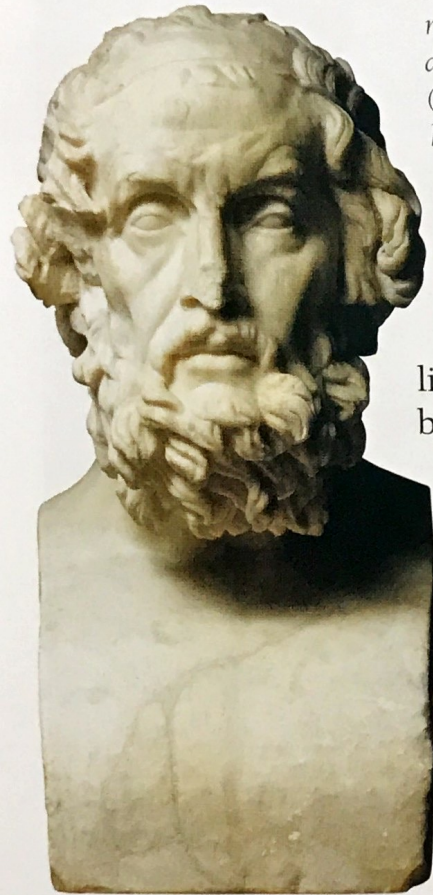
YOU SPELL THAT WITH AN "M," AS IN MNEMOSYNE

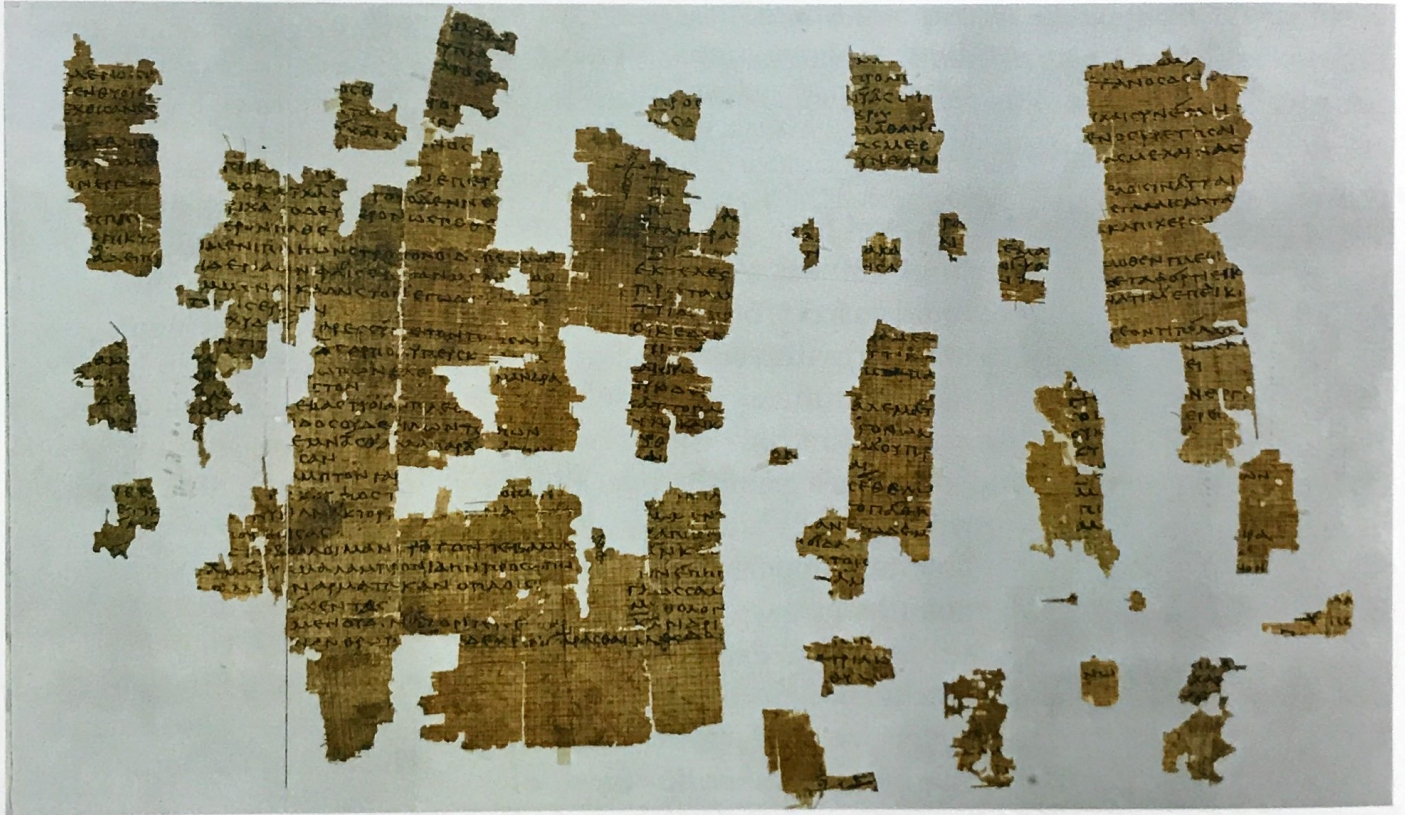
Mnemosyne (the first "m" is silent) was the name of the Muses' mother and is the Greek word for memory. A mnemonic device is a trick to help you remember something. To help you with the names of the nine Muses use the mnemonic device "MUP, ETC., ETC." It gives you a clue to Melpomene, Urania, Polyhymnia, Erato, Terpsichore, Clio, Euterpe, Thalia, and Calliope.

“ Hesiod, *The Theogony*, about 700 BCE

One day the Muses taught me glorious song. . . .
They plucked and gave to me a laurel rod,
A sturdy shoot, a truly wondrous thing,
And into me they breathed a voice divine
To celebrate the future and the past.
My orders were to celebrate the gods who live
Eternally, but most of all to sing
Of them themselves, the Muses, first and last.

But why did the ancient Greeks admire poets so much? Most ancient Greeks had very little free time, since they had a lot of work to do. But they didn't work every minute. When they were through with their work for the day, many of them probably played a game or made music. They loved sports, and music was popular.





Much of Sappho's poetry exists today only on scraps like this second-century CE papyrus. Since many Greeks lived in Egypt, starting especially in the late fourth century BCE, much of what we know of Greek literature comes from there. Sometimes the poems were written on linen that was later used as mummy-wrappings, and when archaeologists unwind the cloth, they find works of literature on it.

Storytelling was also a great way to pass the time. People who could memorize long tales and tell them well were probably as well treated as the poet mentioned in the *Odyssey*. Hearing these stories was an important way that Greeks learned about their history (or an entertaining version of it). They could be proud of the great Greek heroes, like Achilles. They could feel united against enemies, remembering that they all shared a great Greek heritage.

Not all poems were about warriors and their brave deeds. One poet questioned whether honor was really that important. Losing a shield, for example, was not only expensive but a disgrace, because when soldiers surrendered to an enemy, they handed over their armor, including their shields. But a poet named Archilochus had a different point of view:

Well, some barbarian's glad to have the shield
I had to leave behind—a nice one, too—
Thrown underneath a bush. But I'm alive!
I got away—the hell with that old shield!
I'll get another some day just as good.

66 Archilochus, untitled poem,
about 650 BCE

A poem could be a curse, as in this one by Sappho, the Greeks' favorite female poet:

You will die and be still, never shall be memory left
of you
After this, nor regret when you are gone. You have
not touched the flowers
Of the Muses, and thus, shadowy still in the domain
of Death,
You must drift with a ghost's fluttering wings, one of
the darkened dead.

Many poets wrote about love and loneliness. This one is also probably by Sappho:

The moon has gone, the stars have set, the night is
halfway done,
And here I lie as time goes by—alone, alone, alone.

Epitaphs were usually in verse form, too. The poet Simonides wrote a short but moving tribute to the Spartans who died fighting the Persians:

Go tell the Spartans, stranger passing by,
That here, obeying their commands, we lie.

It might seem that nowadays, poetry isn't as important as it was for the Greeks. But we probably hear more poems than the Greeks ever did. We call them "songs" because they're set to music, but so was most Greek poetry. Our songs serve the same purposes that Greek poetry did. Our national anthems make us feel united. We sing special songs on special days: "Happy Birthday to You," "Auld Lang Syne," and many others. Love songs tell people we care about them. Marching songs help encourage soldiers to be brave. Greek poetry was used in the same ways.

“” Sappho, untitled poem,
about 600 BCE

“” Sappho, untitled poem,
about 600 BCE

{ *epi* + *taphos* =
“upon” + “a tomb”
An epitaph is a tomb inscription or short statement commemorating a dead person.

“” Simonides, epitaph for
Spartan soldiers, early fifth
century BCE