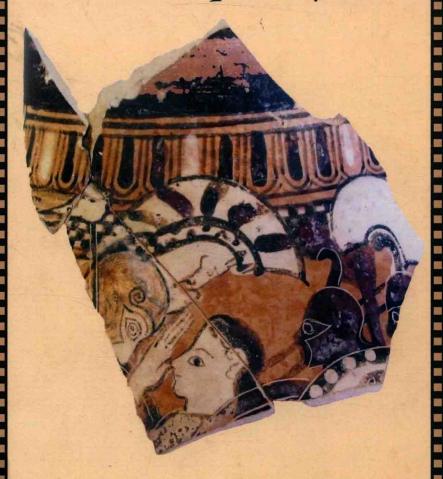# Device and Composition in the Greek Epic Cycle

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Introduction

THE *AETHIOPIS* WAS an epic poem in five books whose subject was the death of Achilles. Its narrative began immediately after the death of Hector and included two major movements. The first featured a newly arrived Trojan ally, the Amazon princess Penthesileia, who routed the Achaeans but fell at the hands of Achilles. The second featured the Ethiopian prince Memnon, also a newly arrived Trojan ally, who similarly perished, after brief success, at the hands of Achilles. Each of these movements had its own sequel or pendant. Appended to the first was the story of how Achilles was mocked by Thersites, murdered him, and traveled to Lesbos to be purified of blood-guilt; and appended to the second was the story of how Achilles stormed the walls of Troy and died at the hands of Paris and Apollo, followed by an account of his funeral and the argument over his arms.

This poem, though it is not extant and leaves behind only a handful of verse fragments, has exercised an outsized influence on the study of Homer over the past century. Even the existing summary, bare though it is, leaves no doubt about its tightly organized narrative, its careful balancing of episodes, and its methodically graduated dramatic form. The colorful figures of Penthesileia and Memnon cannot fail to excite the imagination. But what has provoked most discussion is the poem's much-debated relationship with Homer's *Iliad*. The poem clearly shared with the *Iliad* several of its most moving motifs surrounding the death of Achilles, particularly the hero's intervention in battle after the fall of a dear companion (Patroclus in the *Iliad*, Antilochus in the *Aethiopis*). Indeed, the seeming correspondences are close enough to have inspired a scholarly debate as to whether one of these poems does not imitate the other.

Yet there is a great deal about the *Aethiopis* that contrasts with the Homeric poem in content, form, and theme. To name but a few: The exotic barbarian allies Penthesileia and Memnon have no counterpart among the realistically depicted foes of the Achaeans in the *Iliad*. Homer never mentions purification of blood-guilt, while this ritual was central to a major episode in the *Aethiopis*.

The *Iliad* treats Achilles' mortality as a given, indeed makes it into a central theme, and never acknowledges the widespread mythological theme of the hero's immortalization or special afterlife. Yet this was a central motif in the *Aethiopis*, where Eôs obtained immortality for her son Memnon from Zeus, while Thetis was depicted rescuing Achilles from the funeral pyre to the White Island for a special afterlife.[1] The *Aethiopis* appears to have had a relatively simple narrative structure, since it resolves clearly into two renditions of a single narrative pattern;[2] the *Iliad* is much more complex. This is no doubt related to another fundamental difference between the poems: The *Iliad* is much longer at twenty-four books than the *Aethiopis* was at five.[3] What is most striking in the end is that two poems that had so much in common should also look so very different from one another.

Great variety within a shared tradition is characteristic of the whole early history of the epic genre. This genre presents a crowded field already in the archaic period, with numerous poems on record just dealing with the mythology of the Trojan War. Since these are the focus of the present study, I give below a brief account of their titles, attribution, length, and narrative scope:[4]

> *Cypria* (Stasinus), 11 books: The history of the Trojan War from the judgment of Paris to the beginning of the *Iliad*.
> *Aethiopis* (Arctinus), 5 books: Events at Troy from the death of Hector to the death of Achilles.
> *Little Iliad* (Lesches), 4 books: Events at Troy from the death of Achilles up to and including the sack of Troy.
> *Ilioupersis* or *Sack of Troy* (Arctinus), 2 books: The infiltration and sack of Troy.

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1. Cf. Burgess 2009: 98–110, who emphasizes the affinity of the *Odyssey* for attitudes to the afterlife underlying the *Aethiopis*, even if the former follows the *Iliad* in placing the dead Achilles in Hades.

2. On large-scale composition by doublets in cyclic epic, see chapter 3.

3. Even if the books of the *Aethiopis* averaged over a thousand verses each, the poem would still be little more than a third the length of the *Iliad*, and not quite half the length of the *Odyssey*.

4. Titles and attribution, sometimes with discrepancies, derive from numerous sources, whereas the length and scope of each poem are known mainly from the summaries of Proclus, on which see Appendixes A and B. Authors are named inconsistently and only by later sources (cf. Davies 1986: 11). In any case they are little more than names about which we know nothing further; see the discussion of Graziosi 2002: 184–187. For this reason, I do not discuss authorship and I will cite poems by title only, or (following the best practice of the ancient sources) refer to "the poet of the *Cypria*" vel sim. All citations of Proclus and the fragments refer to Bernabé's edition of the epic fragments; translations are my own.

Nostoi or *Homecomings* (Agias), 5 books: The homecomings of various Greek
 heroes from Troy.
Telegony (Eugammon), 2 books: The adventures and death of Odysseus after
 the *Odyssey*.

These and other poems of the so-called Epic Cycle were composed roughly in the
same time period as the Homeric poems; they used essentially the same poetic
language derived from an oral tradition of hexameter verse; and they narrated
stories from the same heroic mythology. Some were sufficiently similar to the
Homeric poems to be routinely assigned to Homer from their earliest reception.[5]
And yet they were so different that the contrast they offered could be used by
Aristotle, a few centuries later, to highlight the fundamental and exclusive—
indeed, "divine" (θεσπέσιος)—excellence of Homer above all others.[6]

Yet if we look closely at the set of poems dealing with the Trojan War that
are most consistently grouped together under the rubric of "Epic Cycle," what
is really striking is not the many ways they differ as a group from the Homeric
poems, but the staggering variety they present among themselves. Though all
were dwarfed by the *Iliad*, they show a remarkable range in length. Even leav-
ing aside the *Cypria* as an outlier, it is still significant that the *Little Iliad* and
Nostoi were twice or more the length of the shorter poems. Narrated time varied
as well. The shortest and longest poems, the *Cypria* and the *Telegony* respectively,
narrated periods of more than ten years; the *Aethiopis* a period of a few weeks,
with only a few days of actual action (similar in this respect to the *Iliad*); the
Little Iliad, a period ranging from several weeks to as few as twelve days; and the
Ilioupersis clearly restricted most of its narrative to the events of a single night.
Narratives could be tightly organized, as seems clear in the *Aethiopis*, or relatively
loose and catenulate in structure, as seems to be the case with the *Cypria* and
the *Little Iliad*. Poems could focus on a single protagonist or cover a Panhellenic
cast of characters, or alternate their focus from a single hero to the group or vice
versa.[7] The tendency to oppose a monolithic Cycle to the excellence of Homeric
poetry tends to obscure from view the rather complicated constellation that these
works form among themselves.

The excellence of Homer has been studied almost continuously from antiq-
uity into our own age, and too often by a kind of inverse process our estimation
of the Epic Cycle has suffered through the implied comparison. All too often the

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5. See Pfeiffer 1968: 43–44, fully updated by Graziosi 2002: 164–200.

6. On Aristotle, see further 5–6.

7. See chapter 4.

virtues we detect in the Homeric poems are precisely those that we then surmise to be lacking in cyclic epic.[8] This was the trend already in antiquity. More recent studies partly redress this bias in seeing the Cycle as an independent poetic tradition with its own generic features and objectives—a distinctive "cyclic" tradition that perhaps developed in parallel with the tradition giving rise to the Homeric poems. But even this perspective makes the one tradition into a negative reflection of the other, since it emphasizes all the more starkly what Griffin calls "the uniqueness of Homer." Yet so much of what we have learned about Homer has tended to the view that his most basic methods of composition are highly traditional and conventional in character. This of course applies to his language and versification, which Parry established as irrefutable proof that Homeric poetry emerged from a centuries-long tradition in oral composition. But it extends equally to the large variety of narrative structures that have been shown to have a conventional form ultimately linked with a tradition of oral composition. Type scenes, battle narrative, *aristeiai*, catalogues and "catalogic" style, inset narratives and mythological *paradeigmata*, and a host of rhetorical structures and conventions of speech (keeping in mind that direct speech constitutes a good half of all Homeric verse)—these are the "building blocks," if you will, of the edifice of Homeric narrative, almost certainly learned by the poet from his forebears no less than his formulas and diction.[9] A basic thesis of this book is that the poems of the Epic Cycle were constructed through the use of these same basic elements; in other words, just as to all appearances the cyclic poets composed in the same traditional poetic language as Homer,[10] so they used the same large-scale units of composition. They may have used these differently, and to different effect.

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8. See Griffin's (1977) magisterial and justly influential discussion of the "uniqueness" of Homer against the Epic Cycle; Davies 1989a focuses acutely on the many ways in which the cyclic epics sound "unHomeric."

9. Cf. Graziosi and Haubold 2010: 16–18; Notopoulos 1964 (see quotation on 19). For type-scenes the seminal study remains that of Arend (1933); see also Edwards 1987a: 71–77, Clark 2004: 34–36; and compare Lord's concept of "theme" (2000: 68–98). The conventional format of the Homeric battle narrative is shown by Fenik 1968; for the *aristeia* as a more specific example, see my discussion in chapter 5. For the traditional character of catalogues and "catalogic" composition, see my book (2010: 7–8), with references. For speeches as a crucial compositional element, see Griffin 2004, esp. 159–167. I leave aside still further examples, such as the Homeric simile, equally conventional (as shown especially by Scott 1974) but too small-scale to play a role in the present study, which is of necessity restricted to large-scale elements of narrative composition.

10. Attempts to discover significant differences between the language of cyclic epics and Homer have uncovered only a relative handful of "recent" linguistic features. See in particular Davies 1989b and West 2013: 66–68 (on fr. 1 of the *Cypria*). The basic poetic diction is strikingly similar, as is the use of formulas, notwithstanding the variations and transformations that one would naturally expect; on this see Bernabé 2015.

One edifice may look very different from another, depending on the artifice of the builder, even when the materials are essentially the same. But in order to understand where the real differences lie, we must first understand how much is shared.

The ancient reception of early Greek epic, in which the opposition of Homer to virtually all other poets was fundamental, reveals much that is instructive, and much else that should caution us against faulty assumptions. It begins (for us) with Aristotle, who mentions two of our poems (though not under the rubric of "cycle" or "cyclic") in the *Poetics*.[11] His fundamental observation is that while Homer constructs his poem around a single action, incorporating other elements in the form of episodes, poems like the *Cypria* or the *Little Iliad* follow a different strategy (Chapter 23, 1459ᵇ1–7 Kassel):

οἱ δ' ἄλλοι περὶ ἕνα ποιοῦσι καὶ περὶ ἕνα χρόνον καὶ μίαν πρᾶξιν πολυμερῆ, οἷον ὁ τὰ Κύπρια ποιήσας καὶ τὴν μικρὰν Ἰλιάδα. τοιγαροῦν ἐκ μὲν Ἰλιάδος καὶ Ὀδυσσείας μία τραγῳδία ποιεῖται ἑκατέρας ἢ δύο μόναι, ἐκ δὲ Κυπρίων πολλαὶ καὶ τῆς μικρᾶς Ἰλιάδος [[πλέον] ὀκτώ, οἷον ὅπλων κρίσις, Φιλοκτήτης, Νεοπτόλεμος, Εὐρύπυλος, πτωχεία, Λάκαιναι, Ἰλίου πέρσις καὶ ἀπόπλους [καὶ Σίνων καὶ Τρῳάδες.]]

But the others [i.e., other epic poets] compose their poems around a single person or a single time and a single action with many parts, e.g., the poet of the *Cypria* and the poet of the *Little Iliad*. So from the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey* one tragedy can be made from each, or at most two, but from the *Cypria* many can be made and from the *Little Iliad* more than eight, e.g., *The Judgment of the Arms, Philoctetes, Neoptolemus, Eurypylus, Odysseus as Beggar, Laconian Women, Sack of Troy, The Sailing, Sinon*, and the *Trojan Women*.[12]

This is not merely a criticism of cyclic compendiousness. Homer's poems include many tragic stories in its episodes and indirect narratives; what Aristotle seems to be talking about here are self-enclosed narratives that make up the constituent "parts" (μερῆ) of a spurious unity.[13] Hence the criticism is as much about narrative

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11. As I note below, Herodotus, the only earlier authority to discuss this issue, distinguishes the *Cypria* and *Iliad* only on point of factual content, not on aesthetic grounds.

12. The list of titles, or perhaps only the last two, may have been added by a later hand; but Aristotle's point remains clear, and most of the stories mentioned are indeed attested for the *Little Iliad*.

13. Cf. Lucas 1968: 218.

structure as it is about content. While other epic poems offer compendiums of stories, strung or otherwise slapped together but remaining distinct pieces of an agglomerative (πολυμερῆ) whole, a Homeric poem is a unitary story in itself. This is not, it should be noted, a criticism of "cyclic" poetry, only of poems later called "cyclic"—Aristotle does not use the term.[14] Indeed, earlier in the *Poetics* (Chapter 8, 1451ᵃ19–30) he brings a similar criticism against the authors of *Herakleids* and *Theseids*—biographical epics that derive at best a spurious unity from the fact that they treat the exploits of a single hero, but seem never to have been classified as "cyclic." Again the contrast is with Homer, and the criticism is directed, apparently, against all early epics *not by Homer*.

The distinction observed by Aristotle between these two cyclic epics and the Homeric poems is almost certainly a real one. Yet Aristotle may marginalize a natural tendency of epic as a genre (i.e., the tendency to include as much as possible) in order to support his own claim that epic poems should be evaluated on the principles he sets out for tragedy—an anachronistic procedure that Aristotle himself has trouble sticking with.[15] In fact what Aristotle has in view is not the inferiority of other epic poets to Homer, but the inferiority of epic in general to tragedy.[16] What he reveals inadvertently is the remarkable versatility of the epic genre in its early period, when poets evidently pursued a wide range of narrative strategies despite a shared language and subject matter. The relentless focus on the cyclic epics' relationship to Homer has obscured the question of what similarities and differences these poems show among themselves, but this must be better understood before individual poems, let alone the "Cycle" in general, can be compared meaningfully to the Homeric poems. Indeed, we should note again that Aristotle, in naming the *Cypria* and the *Little Iliad*, does not call these "cyclic," nor does he cite an "Epic Cycle" in contrast to Homer anywhere else. Yet in the later ancient reception upon which most of our indirect sources depend, the concepts of "cycle" and "cyclic" seem to have exercised a significant but also changing influence. It will be best to get a handle on what exactly the Epic Cycle or cyclic epic was in the view of a later age, and then work our way back to Aristotle and what little we can surmise about the origin and early reception of the poems themselves.

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14. On his two references to the idea of epic as *kyklos*, see below, n. 24. As Rengakos 2015a: 162 notes, Aristotle's criticism is particularly suitable to the two poems named, but would be less justified in the case of the *Aethiopis* or *Ilioupersis*.

15. See Halliwell 1986: 261, who points out that in Chapter 26 (1462b) the Homeric poems are criticized in virtually the same terms as the cyclic epics earlier. Lucas 1968: 256–257 argues that the problem arises from a failure to distinguish primary from subordinate episodes as "parts" or μέρη of the composition, with the Homeric poems being particularly abundant with the latter.

16. Halliwell 1986: 253–257.

What Was the "Epic Cycle"?

If "Epic Cycle" is a misnomer, it is at least an ancient one. It is doubtful whether the poems that spent their later fortunes under this rubric ever were collected in a single edition;[17] that may have been the fanciful belief of a later age that saw little value in the poems aside from the continuous and unbroken mythological record they supposedly furnished. This ancient idea continues to influence how we think about these lost poems, and in more than just the "cyclic" label we persist in attaching to them. It evokes a collection or corpus of early epics that cover, in theory, the whole "cycle" of myth—from the creation of the world through to the end of the heroic age with the aftermath of the Trojan War. This would be a full compendium indeed, yet sources that speak of an existing "Epic Cycle" leave unclear exactly which epic poems belonged to it. The Cycle would appear, in fact, to have been more a porous category than a closed corpus, with a core group of poems and others of less secure status.[18] The epics concerned with the Trojan War (discussed in the present study) seem to have the most secure status as cyclic poems. This probably reflects an idea that "cyclic" poets were so called because they furnished a complete narrative arc or circle around the two Homeric poems.[19] Additionally, four archaic Theban epics (*Oidipodeia, Thebaid, Epigonoi,* and *Alcmeonis*) are regularly cited as cyclic; these, too, could be placed in a seamless mythological sequence with the Homeric poems.[20] A *Gigantomachy* or *Titanomachy* (or both) is cited by Philo as the work of οἱ κυκλικοί; this may be the same poem mentioned by Athenaeus as having been attributed to Arctinus, a name also associated with the cyclic *Aethiopis* and *Ilioupersis*.[21] But these latter

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17. The existence of an Alexandrian "edition" of the Cycle as such (rather than separate editions of the various poems) seems to be assumed by Davies 1986: 95–96, but cf. West 2013: 22.

18. See Bernabé 2015: 3 for a list of poems called "cyclic." This includes a *Titanomachy* along with the Theban and Trojan epics; there is not good cause for including a *Theogony* in this list (cf. Bernabé's own references on 8).

19. Cf. the scholion to Clement *Protr.* 2.30.5 (*Cycl. Ep.* test. 11, cf. *Cyp.* test. 10), which seems to define the Cycle as a set of poems narrating events before and after the action of the Homeric poems, hence drawing a circle around them: κυκλικοὶ δὲ καλοῦνται οἱ τὰ κύκλῳ τῆς Ἰλιάδος ἢ τὰ πρῶτα ἢ τὰ μεταγενέστερα ἐξ αὐτῶν τῶν Ὁμηρικῶν συγγράψαντες. Porphyry (on *Ars Poet.* 132) attributes the same definition to Horace (*Cycl. Ep.* test 12); cf. *Cycl. Ep.* test. 28–29. As I suggest below, such sources may be extrapolating the existence of an "Epic Cycle" from the common critical term *kyklikos*.

20. Some of the *epigonoi* (i.e., Tydeus and Sthenelus) also fought at Troy. Hesiod (*Works & Days,* 161–165) thinks of the Theban Wars as joining up with the Trojan War in a master narrative about the end of the heroic age; cf. Scodel 2012: 511–512.

21. *Titan.* test. 1–3. The *Tabula Borgia* included a title ending *–machia,* probably one of these poems (test. 3).

titles stand out strangely from the others (being the only cosmological works among others dealing with the heroic age), and it is at this point that our sources cease to be consistent or particularly believable. Photius paraphrases Proclus, the source of our invaluable summaries, as follows:[22]

διαλαμβάνει δὲ καὶ περὶ τοῦ λεγομένου ἐπικοῦ κύκλου, ὃς ἄρχεται μὲν ἐκ τῆς Οὐρανοῦ καὶ Γῆς μυθολογουμένης μίξεως, ἐξ ἧς αὐτῷ καὶ τρεῖς παῖδας Ἑκατοντάχειρας καὶ τρεῖς γεννῶσι Κύκλωπας. διαπορεύεται δὲ τά τε ἄλλως περὶ θεῶν τοῖς Ἕλλησι μυθολογούμενα καὶ εἴ πού τι καὶ πρὸς ἱστορίαν ἐξαληθίζεται. καὶ περατοῦται ὁ ἐπικὸς κύκλος, ἐκ διαφόρων ποιητῶν συμπληρούμενος, μέχρι τῆς ἀποβάσεως Ὀδυσσέως τῆς εἰς Ἰθάκην, ἐν ᾗ ὑπὸ τοῦ παιδὸς Τηλεγόνου ἀγνοοῦντος κτείνεται.

He also summarizes the so-called Epic Cycle, which begins from the fabled union of Heaven and Earth, from whom were born to him the three Hundred-handers and the three Cyclopes. But it runs through the other stories told by the Greeks about the gods, and narrates also anything pertaining to history. And the Epic Cycle is finished, being filled up from different poets, up until the return of Odysseus to Ithaca, where he is mistakenly killed by his son Telegonus.

The only specific poems named here are a theogonic work (perhaps to be equated with the cyclic *Titanomachy* mentioned above) and the *Telegony* of Eugammon (which narrated the end of Odysseus). These are, of course, bookends. The rest implies a sweeping account of myth and history, and if we take seriously the idea of a "collection" of works covering everything between these bookends, we would have to imagine a huge compendium of poems ranging from theogonies and tales of the gods through the whole breadth of the heroic age. The *Tabula Borgia* offers an even more idiosyncratic list that does not even include the Trojan War epics.[23] In fact, there are no early references to the "Epic Cycle" as a corpus of works. In two places Aristotle alludes to an idea that epics are somehow cyclic or circular, but it is not clear at all that he has an actual "Epic Cycle" in mind.[24] With few

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22. *Cycl. Ep.* test. 13 = Photius, *Bibl.* 319a 21.

23. I.e., *Titanomachy* (see n. 21), *Danaides*, *Oidipodeia*, and *Thebaid* (*Cycl. Ep.* test. 2); West (2013: 3) would add *Naupaktia* to the list. As West notes, "it does not seem to be the canonical Epic Cycle that is in question here . . . rather a more narrowly drawn, personal cycle offered as a supporting bibliography for the particular areas of myth illustrated on the plaque."

24. (1) In *Post. Anal.*1.12 (77b) = (*Cycl. Ep.* test 1), Aristotle points out that while "every circle (κύκλος) is a shape" this does not mean that epic is a κύκλος (i.e., in this sense). (2) In *Soph. Elench.* 10 (171a) (= *Cycl. Ep.* test 8) he gives as an example of a false argument, "Homer's

exceptions, other allusions to an "Epic Cycle" as some kind of collection of poems derive from the same epoch in which the poems began to disappear or had already done so.[25] This could mean in theory that some kind of edition of the Cycle was produced in the Hellenistic period; but then we might expect later citations to be more regular in what they include and exclude from the Cycle.[26] We are probably dealing with a more or less loosely applied term rather than a set corpus. Insofar as it matters, the one set of poems most regularly referred to as "cyclic" are precisely those six poems dealing with the Trojan War, poems that could indeed be seen as completing a cycle of myth of which Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* form segments.

I do not focus on these poems because they have a more secure claim than others to "cyclic" status, nor because they are inherently more worthy of attention than other early epics; we simply have much more information about their content than we do about other lost epics. Most importantly, we have the summaries of Proclus. These provide a hugely valuable if problematic basis for discussion, particularly as pertains to the structure, scope and organization of the poems.[27] Secondly, they share with the Homeric poems not only the same mythological subject matter and

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poetry is a shape because of its circle" (διὰ τοῦ κύκλου). It is very difficult to see here any allusion to an existing body of works known as "the Epic Cycle." The allusion to Homer expressly rules this out in the second passage, since we know from the *Poetics* that Aristotle rejected Homeric authorship of the cyclic *Little Iliad* (cf. Peirano 2012: 221n25). It is unlikely, as Pfeiffer 1968: 73, argues, that this is a casual concession to "the old vulgate opinion" attributing the Cycle to Homer. Though tantalizing, these passages are too cryptic to show, on their own, that the "Epic Cycle" was a fixed corpus in the classical period; cf. Parmentier 1914: 29–30. All that is at play here is the idea that an epic poem (nothing more need be implied in the plural ἔπη) can be described as having the shape of a circle. West 2013: 23–25 calls attention to a *Kyklos* of Phayllos cited by Aristotle (*Rhet.* 1417a15) as an example of conciseness comparable to Odysseus's summary of his adventures spoken to Penelope (*Od.* 23.310–341) and the prologue to Euripides' *Oineus*. He argues on this basis that already in Aristotle's day the "Cycle" was known as a "literary quantity" though perhaps "more a bibliographic construct than an editorial reality." He supposes that the poems may have been summarized by Phayllos and could then be assembled by interested readers, using the summaries as a kind of reading list. However, there is really no way of knowing what the subject matter of Phayllos's *Kyklos* was (Aristotle provides no details), nor do we know, if it was indeed a summary of poems, which poems were summarized. The other two examples given by Aristotle (which involve summaries of single myths, not assemblages of epic poems) suggest something on a more modest scale.

25. Many of the testimonia that actually name "the Epic Cycle" as a corpus of poems clearly depend on Proclus.

26. Burgess 2001: 13–33, followed in part by Fantuzzi and Tsagalis 2015: 29–31, argues that the Cycle was "manufactured" out of much larger poems by Alexandrian editors, who cut these poems down to size and fitted them together in the form now reflected in the summaries of Proclus. But there is no evidence for this type of editorial activity in general, and the elisions noticeable in Proclus's summary can be explained in other ways (see Appendix A, 234–236).

27. For a detailed discussion of these summaries, see the Appendix A. For an English translation, see Appendix B.

the same Panhellenic cast of characters, but the same basic motifs (war and home-coming). They therefore lend themselves particularly well to comparison with the two early epics we do possess. It should be noted that if "Epic Cycle" is questionable as an ancient term, the designation "Trojan Cycle" under which these poems are often discussed is entirely a modern one, but useful for distinguishing these partic-ular poems from the broad and permeable category of "cyclic" poetry in general.

Why a "Cycle"?

It may be significant that the adjective, κυκλικός, is attested much earlier than the noun κύκλος—and is much better attested in general. It is also used differently. For while later sources speak of the "Epic Cycle" as though citing a compendium of poems, earlier sources and those with a demonstrable link to Hellenistic schol-arship seem to bandy about the term "cyclic" as a free description of a particu-lar kind of poetry—inferior, vulgar, and rife with infelicities.[28] This is the gist of Callimachus's famous attack on the "cyclic poem."[29]

> ἐχθαίρω τὸ ποίημα τὸ κυκλικόν, οὐδὲ κελεύθῳ
> χαίρω τίς πολλοὺς ὧδε καὶ ὧδε φέρει.

> I hate the cyclic poem, nor do I delight
> in a path that carries many this way and that.

"Cyclic" here certainly has the basic meaning "vulgar," but also alludes to a recog-nized type of epic poem.[30] Pollianus, alluding to Callimachus, takes the criticism a step further and accuses cyclic poets of formularity, if not outright plagiarism.[31]

> τοὺς κυκλίους τούτους τοὺς "αὐτὰρ ἔπειτα" λέγοντας
> μισῶ, λωποδύτας ἀλλοτρίων ἐπέων.

> I hate those *kyklioi* who say "but then,"
> bath-house thieves of other peoples' verses.

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28. Cf. Pfeiffer 1968: 230–231. Fantuzzi and Tsagalis 2105: 26–27 argue that the prevalence of the adjective reflects rejection of the poems' older ascription to Homer in favor of the Cycle, but this does not explain the relative rarity of references to an actual "Cycle" nor the connota-tive gist of the adjective.

29. *Cycl. Ep.* test. 20 = Call. *Epigr.* 28.1–2 Pf.

30. Cf. Blumenthal 1978, Henrichs 1979: 211, Cameron 1995: 394–399.

31. *Cycl. Ep.* test. 21 = *Anth. Pal.* 11.130.1–2. Peirano 2012: 223–224, argues that in both texts the essential problem with the Cycle is its derivative and inauthentic status relative to Homer.

This implies poets who borrow episodes or scenes from other poems freely, slotting them into a simple chronological narrative with the phrase "but then" (frequently used by Homer to move his narrative along).[32] Similarly Horace speaks not of an "epic cycle" but of the *scriptor cyclicus* who fails to deliver on the promise of his pompous opening.[33] The epigram that prefaced Apollodorus's mythographic *Bibliotheca* lists all the genres the prospective reader will no longer need to study, including Homeric poetry, elegy, tragedy, lyric, and "the clamorous verse of the cyclic poets."[34] In the Homeric scholia, "cyclic" is very often used as a pejorative term to describe stylistic faults such as mechanically deployed epithets, catachresis, and tautology.[35] When οἱ κυκλικοί, the "cyclic (poets)," are mentioned, it is almost always in the phrase ἡ ἱστορία παρὰ τοῖς κυκλικοῖς appended to interesting mythological asides.[36] References to an actual "Cycle" serve the same purpose.[37] No doubt this shows early use of the cyclic poems as a kind of mythographic resource, and it is significant that the scholia show no interest in (or knowledge of) which of the cyclic poems this or that myth should

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32. κύκλιοι (as opposed to the more specific κύκλικοι) could just mean "commonplace," like ἐγκύκλιος (cf. Wilkinson 1967: 5), but the allusion to Callimachus could not fail to bring his "cyclic poem" particularly to mind, and attack on the epic phrase "and then" probably alludes to the relatively catenulate structure of some cyclic epics. (The usual interpretation, according to which Pollianus criticizes only the formularity of latter-day epic, does not go far enough.) Cameron 1995: 397 suggests emending to κυκλικοί (likewise in the Apollodorus epigram, quoted in n. 34), noting that *kyklios* in reference to poetry ought to denote dithyramb.

33. *Ars Poet.* 136–139 (nec sic incipies, ut scriptor cyclicus olim: / "fortunam Priami cantabo et nobile bellum" ... / parturient montes, nascetur ridiculus mus).

34. κυκλίων ... πολύθρουν στίχον (*Cycl. Ep.* test. 5); cf. Cameron 1995: 398. Valk 1958: 167–168 notes that the reference to the "cyclic" poets is here essentially Aristarchean. There is little doubt that parts of the *Bibliotheca* are based indirectly on poems of the Cycle: see Appendix A, 227.

35. Catachresis: schol. A on *Il.* 6.325, 9.222; tautology: A on *Il.* 15.610–614; misused epithets: B on *Od.* 7.115 (where the Homeric poem is exonerated of using epithets κυκλικῶς). Cf. Blumenthal 1978: 125–126, Cameron 1995: 396. Schol. A on *Il.* 2.160 explains the athetesis of three lines because words that ought to belong to a speech of Athena are used, in "more cyclic" (reading κυκλικώτερον) fashion, by the narrator. Cf. Bernabé 1996: 7–8, Severyns 1928: 155–159. For use of the term *kyklikos* for these and virtually any "unsuccessful or incompetent turns of phrase" see Peirano 2012: 220–222.

36. See schol. A on *Il.* 18.486, 23.346, 23.660–661; D on *Il.* 3.242, 5.126, 19.326; HQV on *Od.* 11.547.

37. Schol. T on *Il.* 23.347 and B on *Od.* 2.120 cite genealogical data ἐν τῷ Κύκλῳ. According to schol. H on *Od.* 4.285 Antiklos (silenced by Odysseus in the Trojan Horse when he is about to respond to Helen's voice) is "from the Cycle" (ἐκ τοῦ Κύκλου). It may be significant that Aristarchus athetized the relevant lines, supposedly because "Homer does not know Antiklos."

be assigned to,[38] nor are the poems or their mythology ever referenced in con-
nection with a "cyclic" striving to encompass all of Greek myth or to encircle the
Homeric poems.

Evidently the Alexandrians took the same view as Aristotle and set out to
decisively divorce the cyclic epics from the Homeric poems as belonging prac-
tically to a separate genre.[39] The argument appears to have been mainly stylis-
tic, with perhaps some reference to content. Their reason for using the term
"cyclic" (if in fact they did) remains obscure, but there is no evidence that they
were referring to an established collection of poems. It may well be that the term
was for them always a literary-critical one, used to describe non-Homeric epics
as "commonplace" or "banal," drawing on the same critical vocabulary displayed
in the Callimachean epigram. Later the term may have achieved something like
a semi-technical meaning to denote unattributed archaic epics not by Homer.
The point was to argue that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* alone were by Homer. The
term *neoteroi* was broader but more meaningful and was certainly applied to the
cyclic poets, included among the "the more recent poets" because it seemed clear
that they were later than Homer.[40] To judge from the relevant scholia, arguments
adduced ranged from linguistic to mythological. But it may have been reason
enough that the poems seemed far inferior to the Homeric poems—and since,
in the ancient view, traditions deteriorate rather than improve over time, it was
only natural to infer that the cyclic epics represented a decadent period of the epic
genre. The same view has many modern adherents. It is, as I have already noted,
an idea that goes back at least to Aristotle. Yet Aristotle's insight into fundamen-
tal differences of narrative structure, subject matter, and organization—highly
sophisticated observations that could easily be divorced from the more subjective
negative judgments they were meant to support—give way at this stage to a gen-
eralized contempt.

This negative judgment of the Alexandrians probably played a significant
role in the ultimate extinction of the poems. Other factors contributed to this.

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38. We are often able to surmise which poem each detail belonged to, and perhaps ancient read-
ers were even better equipped to do so, but it still seems strange to cite the "cyclics" as a group
rather than specific poems or authors, unless these specifics were already lost. On the difficul-
ties surrounding subscriptions like ἡ ἱστορία παρὰ τοῖς κυκλικοῖς, see Cameron 2004: 89–123,
esp. 104–106. In the case of the scholion to *Od.* 4.248, the singular ὁ κυκλικός is used on a quite
specific point (whether Odysseus posed as a beggar or a person named "Dektes"). This almost
certainly means the *Little Iliad*, but again the poem itself is not cited.

39. Severyns 1928: 83–101, Pfeiffer 1968: 230–231.

40. Severyns 1928: 31–61; for the *kyklikoi* as a subcategory of *neoteroi*, see Severyns 63–68,
Cameron 1995: 394.