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**HOMER AND THE SOUTH-SLAVIC EPIC SINGERS**

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**ХОМЕР И ЈУЖНОСЛОВЕНСКИТЕ ЕПСКИ ПЕЈАЧИ**

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## HOMER AND THE SOUTH-SLAVIC EPIC SINGERS

## ABSTRACT

*Most probably the South Slavs had an oral tradition even before they settled in the Balkans and their songs and their performance differed from those of the aoidoi and the singing of the Homeric epics. Any similarities are a result of the nature of the oral tradition itself, its formulaism and the epithets it uses as well as the legends of blind singers, the accompanying of the songs with stringed instruments and the motifs in the songs. Many scholars studied the character, manner of creation and transmission of the epic poetry but not the musicological aspect of their instruments and performance which would make it possible to regard the whole question from a slightly different angle.*

**Keywords:** AOIDOI, GUSLA, EPIC SINGERS, THE ORIGIN OF GUSLARS.

1. Milman Perry's research in the inter-war periods into Homer's epics in comparison with the oral epic tradition in the Balkans cast considerable light on questions relating to the creation of epic poems, their transmission over the centuries, the manner of their composition, and in particular, on questions concerning the techniques used by the singers of these epics when performing them. The subsequent research of his successors, and in particular Albert Lord<sup>1</sup>, conducted in Montenegro, south Serbia and Macedonia had a considerable influence on the study of the subject. There followed many works which treated particular segments of the question: the relationship between their oral character and the textuality of epic poetry in the Middle Ages<sup>2</sup>, the way in which the South Slav bards and *aoidoi* performed their songs<sup>3</sup>, etc. When the interest of

<sup>1</sup> A. B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1960. Although there have been attempts more recently to dispute the Perry-Lord model, e.g. G. Nagy in *Poetry as Performance, Homer and Beyond*, Cambridge 1996, which in truth is not supported by sufficiently firm evidence to leave the concept of an oral poet who could neither read nor write, an *aoidos* who composed his songs as he performed them on the basis of handed-down traditional linguistic and narrative patterns.

<sup>2</sup> A. N. Doane – C. B. Pasternak (eds.) *Vox intexa: Orality and Textuality in the Middle Ages*, University of Wisconsin Press, 1991.

<sup>3</sup> J. M. Foley, *The Singer of Tales in Performance*, Indiana University Press, 1995; "Guslar and Aoidos: Traditional Register in South Slavic and Homeric Epic", *Transactions of the American Philological Association*, 126, 1996, 11–41; *Homer's Traditional Art*, Pennsylvania 1999; K. Reich (ed.), *The Oral Epic: Performance and Music*, Berlin 2000, etc.

particular researchers expanded in the direction of a parallel study of other European epic traditions, many of them tried to find through a comparative study of the metre a common Indo-European archetype by means of which they would be able to explain similarities between the Hellenic, South Slavic, Vedic and Celtic traditions<sup>4</sup>. All of this created in contemporary scholarship an image of the South Slavic epic singers as direct descendants of the Hellenic *aidoi* who had managed to preserve in the untaught and forgotten Balkans the tradition of singing heroic epics.

2. As G. S. Kirk warns<sup>5</sup>, such an equating of Homer with the South Slavic epic singers may in large measure distort the image of the ancient *aidoi* and lead to erroneous hypotheses. A. Lord, together with his teacher Milman Perry, published and annotated the numerous songs he collected throughout the Balkans<sup>6</sup>. These annotated records influenced all the attempts at reconstructing of the singing of Homer's songs which are today considered to be closest to their original performances<sup>7</sup>. Can we, however, accept the existence of a traditional singing and performance which have been handed down in the Balkans for virtually 2000 years? The problem arises because Perry and Lord studied the character, manner of creation and transmission of the epic poetry but not the *musicological aspect* of their instruments and performance which would make it possible to regard the whole question from a slightly different angle.

3. It is generally accepted that the Aegean *aidoi* appeared in what is known as the Dark Age after the collapse of the Mycenaean palaces c. 1100–800 BC<sup>8</sup>. Archaeological evidence from this period, pictorial representations on clay vessels and Cretan bronze figurines from the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC in particu-

<sup>4</sup> R. Jakobson, "Studies in Comparative Slavic Metrics", *Oxford Slavonic Papers* 3, Oxford, 1952; M. L. Gasparov, *A History of European Versification*, Oxford, 1996; M. L. West, "Indo-European Metre", *Glotta* 51, 1973, 161–187; C. Watkins, "Aspects of Indo-European Poetics", *Polomé* 1982, 164–180; "Indo-European Metrics and Archaic Irish Verse", *Celtica* 6, 1963, 194–249; J. C. Franklin, "Structural Sympathies in Ancient Greek and South Slavic Heroic Singing", in E. Hickman – R. Eichmann (eds.) *Studien zur Musikarchäologie IV, Music-Archaeological Sources: Finds, Oral Transmission, Written Evidence (Orient-Archäologie 15)*, Rahden/Westf., Leidorf 2004, 241–251, etc.

<sup>5</sup> G. S. Kirk, *Homer and the Oral Tradition*, Cambridge, 1976, esp. ch. "Homer and modern poetry: some confusions", 113–128.

<sup>6</sup> A. B. Lord – B. Bartók, *Serbo-Croatian Folk Songs*, New York, 1951.

<sup>7</sup> v. R. Duev, "Muzikata kaj Homer", *Godišen zbornik na Filozofskiot fakultet*, vol. 57, Skopje, 2004, 405–411; M. L. West, "The Singing of Homer and the Modes of Early Greek Music", *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 101, 1981, 113–129; G. Danek – S. Hagel, "Homer – Singer", *Wiener Humanistische Blätter*, 1995, 5–20.

<sup>8</sup> Although I personally think that their appearance dates from the late Bronze age (cf. M. L. West, "Greek Poetry 2000–700 B.C.", *CQ* 23, 1973 179–92. Palaima, T. "Appendix one: Linear B sources" in S. M. Trzaskoma, R. Scott Smith and S. Burnet (eds.) *Anthology of Classical Myth*, Hackett Publishing Co., 2004, 442; I. Mylonas Shear, *Tales of Heroes: the Origins of the Homeric Texts*, New York & Athens, 2000).

lar, confirm the image of the epic singers<sup>9</sup> which is given to us by Homer through Demodocus and Phemius in the *Odyssey*<sup>10</sup>. They were frequently blind and sang their songs to the phorminx or kithara, a kind of box lyre<sup>11</sup>. With the appearance of the alphabet and the writing down of Homer's epics in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC this profession gradually began to disappear, and the songs were performed by *rhapsodoi* whose skill, although Plato considered it to be music<sup>12</sup>, lay in reciting rather than singing.<sup>13</sup> But were the musical abilities of the *aidoi* equal to those of the Balkan bards?

When in the *Odyssey*<sup>14</sup> the Homeric singer Demodocus sings a hymn to the love of the Ares and Aphrodite, Phaeacian youths dance a wonderful dance around him which causes wonderment in Odysseus. Would a monotonous melody, such as the Balkan singers used to sing their songs, have been suitable to the dancing of a circle dance? I think that the *aidoi* and their *phorminx* had greater melodic potential than is generally supposed, as is testified to by the pictorial representations of the *phorminx* players on the clay vessels of the geometric period where they are most frequently shown as playing among dancers<sup>15</sup>.

If, on the other hand, we study A. Lord's comments on the manner of performance of the epic songs and their singing and melody in the region of the former Yugoslavia<sup>16</sup> carefully we will note that the *gusla* plays no spectacular role during the singing of the lines since the singer frequently merely holds an extended note throughout the whole line. The monotonous melody, played on a single string and sung by the performer, is far from the Homeric performance of Demodocus, who is presented to us in the *Odyssey* as an extremely skilled musician and singer (v. *supra*). The Balkan bards thus resemble the Hellenic *rhapsodoi* rather than the *aidoi*<sup>17</sup>.

<sup>9</sup> M. Wegner, *Music und Tanz, (Archaeologia Homerica, U)* Göttingen, 1968, 2–16; M. Maas – J. Mc. Snyder, *Stringed Instruments of Ancient Greece*, New Haven /London 1989, 11–23; R. Duev, 2004, 391–93.

<sup>10</sup> *Il.* 1. 185–191, *Od.* 8. 43–5, 105–6, 154–5, 262, 472, 478, 483, 486–7, 537; 13. 28; *Od.* 1. 153–5, 337–42; 12. 261–3; 22. 330–54.

<sup>11</sup> R. Duev, "Za mikenskata lira," *Godišen zbornik na Filozofskiot fakultet*, Skopje, 56, 2003, 345 esp. note 10.

<sup>12</sup> Plato, *Ion* 530a, 535b, 537a; *Leg.* 764c–765d.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. G. Nagy, "Epic as Music: Rhapsodic models of Homer in Plato's *Timaeus* and *Critias*", *The Oral Epic: Performance and Music* (ed. Reich), Berlin, 2000, 41–67; R. Duev, 2004, 396 note 30.

<sup>14</sup> 8. 250–66.

<sup>15</sup> R. Duev, 2004, 391 v. Pl. 1 and 2; see n. 9.

<sup>16</sup> A. Lord, 1951.

<sup>17</sup> G. S. Kirk, 1976, 126.

4. A particular problem is presented by the hymns addresses to divinities which may well have differed from the singing of heroic epics.<sup>18</sup> This tradition has a lengthy history in the eastern Mediterranean, from the Ur hymns discovered in ancient Ugarit from c. 1500 BC,<sup>19</sup> through the psalms of David written at the beginning of the first millennium BC and played in the temples on the *kinnôr*, the instrument that developed into the Hellenic *kithara* or *phorminx*, up to what are known as the Homeric hymns which ancient tradition ascribes to Homer though they are most likely to date from a much later period than the time of the appearance of Homer's epics. Odysseus' delight (see above) leads us to think that the performance of the religious hymns differed from that of the epic songs, as did the manner in which the audience experienced such songs, which was not the case with the South Slavic epic tradition.

5. The metre in Homer's epics – dactylic hexameter, whose rhythm corresponds to that of the contemporary Greek dance the *syrtos*<sup>20</sup> – is of particular importance and suggests that this metre did not arise because of the requirements of the *aidoi* but was a dance, as opposed to the *deseterac* (decasyllable) of the South Slav epic singers. Despite many attempts to discover common links between the two rhythms<sup>21</sup>, such as isosyllabic lines, the fall at the end of the line, etc., the rigidity of the dactylic hexameter and its quantitative rhythm are very different from the looseness of the *deseterac* which made possible a more free performance by the South Slavic singer despite the numerous similarities between the two.

6. Although there is neither written nor archaeological evidence of South Slavic epic singers and their instrument the *gusla* from the 6<sup>th</sup> to the 14<sup>th</sup> centuries, nevertheless even those few traces which we find indicate their difference. In his *Historiae* the Byzantine historian Theophylactus Simocatta describes an event in 591 when three Slavs were captured in a battle who, instead of arms, were carrying kitharas and for that reason he styled the Slavs 'song-lovers'.<sup>22</sup> The same historian mentions the word *gusla* for the first time in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, which indicates that this instrument was popular among the Macedonian Slavs.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>18</sup> T. Szudov located this type of Macedonian folk songs among the epic songs (*Makedonska Narodna Knizevnost*, Skopje, 1988, 95).

<sup>19</sup> C. F.-A. Schaeffer, *Ugaritica V*, Paris, 1968; M. L. West, "The Babylonian Musical Notation and the Hurrian Melodic Texts," *Music and Letters* 75/4, 1993, 161–179; Dumbrell, R. J., *The Musicology and Organology of the Ancient Near East*, London, 1998, 103–193; A. D. Kilmer, "The Cult Song with Music from Ancient Ugarit: Another Interpretation," *Revue d'Assyriologie* 68, 1974; R. Duev, "Psaltirov na psalmpisecot David," *Godišen zbornik na filozofskiot fakultet vo Skopje* 58, 2005, 261–2, etc.

<sup>20</sup> T. Georgiades, *Der Grieschische Rhythmus*, Hamburg, 1949; A. David, "On the Origin of the Trochaic Caesura and the Bucolic Diaresis", *Živa Antika* 51, 2001, 9; R. Duev, 2004, 410.

<sup>21</sup> J. C. Franklin, 2004.

<sup>22</sup> 6.2. 10–16.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. A. Linin, *Narodni muzički instrumenti vo Makedonija*, Skopje, 1986, 6; S. Koljević, *The Epic in Making*, Oxford, 1980, 11.

If one analyses the translation of the names of the musical instruments in the oldest texts from the *Bible* in the Old Slavonic language, especially in the *Psalter*, it is noticeable that usually Constantine The Philosopher<sup>24</sup> simply transcribes the Greek names into Old Slavonic whereas he translates *kithara* as *gusla*. As a teacher at the Magnaura School he was very familiar with classical Greek literature, especially with Homer's epics. The *kinnôr* was the instrument which accompanied the chanting of the Levites in the Temple and which gave rise to the Greek *kithara*, the instrument of the *aoidoi*, which corresponded to the *gusla* of the South Slavic epic singers. Why did he replace the most popular instrument in the eastern Mediterranean, the *kinnôr*, with the Slavonic instrument, the *gusla*?

*Gusla* as the name of a musical instrument is to be found among all the Slavonic peoples, while in Macedonia it is known as *kemane*, *gegalgaga*<sup>25</sup>, *zugla*, etc. As well as the one-stringed *gusla* there is another type of *gusla-kemane* with three strings and a shorter neck on which the Macedonian epic singers performed their songs. It is generally accepted that the *gusla* originated from the Near East, from the Arab countries, where it was known as the *rabab*. The oldest evidence of the existence of this instrument dates from the end of the 10<sup>th</sup> century. It is thought that it was carried to Byzantium and Spain in the 11<sup>th</sup> century and was known in mediaeval Europe as the *rebec*, the instrument which gave rise to modern bowed stringed instruments.<sup>26</sup> It is interesting to note that the oldest reference to this type of musical instrument is to be found in the writings of Bishop Sidonius Apollinarius in the 5<sup>th</sup> century, where it is referred to as the *fides* (*fiddle*), and this period of time coincides with the first Slavonic invasion of Thrace and Macedonia<sup>27</sup>. There is no evidence of the existence of this type of instrument in ancient Greece or in Byzantium. Although it might be expected, because of the links with the East, that the *gusla* would be familiar to the Byzantines, nevertheless the evidence indicates that most probably the Slavs brought this instrument on the Balkans. Because of the lack of evidence from this period, however, it would be an overstatement to say that the *gusla* is a Slavonic instrument and an innovation as part of their own epic tradition. The Lyres had a long tradition in the eastern Mediterranean, espe-

<sup>24</sup> From an analysis of the first Slavonic alphabet, *glagolica*, it is known that Constantine the Philosopher was familiar with the Semitic alphabet and the Hebrew language (cf. P. Hr. Ilijevski, *Pojava i razvoj na pismoto: so poseben osvrt kon početocite na slovenskata pismenost*, MANU, 2001, 123.

<sup>25</sup> A. Sterjovski, *Posledniot ohridski guslar*, Skopje, 1994, 6 which mentions *gega/gaga* as the ancient Slavonic name for the *gusla*.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. *Muzicka enciklopedija*, Zagreb 1974, s.v. *gusle i guslari*; *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, s.v. *gusla, rabab, rebec*, etc.

<sup>27</sup> A. Linin, 1986, 6.

cially the Semitic *kinnôr* which gave rise to the *kithara* or the *phorminx* of the *aidoi*<sup>28</sup>. In the hands of skilled musicians the instrument changed its form to meet the requirements of their music. Thus, from an instrument with from 7 to 12 strings, the *phorminx* had only 4 to meet the needs of the musicians of the geometric period.<sup>29</sup> Perhaps the *gusla*, in the hands of the Slavonic epic singers, underwent a similar process.

7. The aim of my research is not to stress the difference between the *aidoi* and the South Slavic bards but is rather an attempt, through a musicological analysis supported by philological and historical facts, to prove the existence of an epic tradition which the Slavs had developed before their coming to the Balkans.<sup>30</sup> Most probably the South Slavs had an oral tradition even before they settled in the Balkans and their songs and their performance differed from those of the *aidoi* and the singing of the Homeric epics. Any similarities are a result of the nature of the oral tradition itself, its formulaism and the epithets it uses as well as the legends of blind singers,<sup>31</sup> the accompanying of the songs with stringed instruments and the motifs in the songs. There are virtually no people in the world which has not had epic singers who accompanied their songs with some sort of stringed instrument as a part of its oral tradition. In ancient Sumer, because of the early appearance of an alphabet, the songs were written down on tablets and with *za-mi* for the lyre written below.<sup>32</sup> The *gusla* as an instrument is undoubtedly characteristic of the South Slavic epic singers, as the *phorminx* was for the *aidoi*. The manner of playing, and the length of the tone which the bow gives, give the singer a freedom in the composition of the verses as opposed to the *phorminx*, on which the *aidoi* struck the strings with a plectrum. The metre itself, the *deseterac*, suits the *gusla* because it does not have the hardness of the dactylic hexameter. With the appearance of an alphabet and the writing down of songs the oral tradition began to die out. Thus the cuneiform records spread the Sumerian epics and

<sup>28</sup> On the appearance and development of different sorts of lyres v. R. Duev, 2003; cf. M. L. West, *Ancient Greek Music*, Oxford, 1992, 48–70.

<sup>29</sup> For more v. R. Duev, 2004, 394–5.

<sup>30</sup> Something that S. Koljević (1980, 11) and Kiril Penušliski (*Junacki narodni pesni*, Skopje, 1968, 5) left as a possibility without justifying their stance.

<sup>31</sup> The existence of a large number of blind singers in Macedonia is linked by many people to the legend of Samuil's blinded warriors, but A. Sterjovski well-arguedly explains the reason for their existence, following them through with examples of the existence of such blind singers throughout the entire Mediterranean region since ancient times (*Prosjacite-guslari; primeri od homerovoto peenje*, Skopje, 1999; cf. V. Mitevski, *Antička epika*, Skopje, 2001, 157; L. Manniche, 1991, ch. 7 "The blind harpist and his sings", 97–107; R. Duev, 2004, 397).

<sup>32</sup> M. L. West, *The East Face of Helicon: West Asiatic Elements in Greek Poetry and Myth*, Oxford, 1997.

their popularity contributed to their expansion throughout the entire Mediterranean region, in which process certain of the motifs also appeared in Hellenic epic poetry. After the writing down of the Homeric epics in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC there appeared the *rhapsodoi*, while the *aidoi* disappeared, so that it is not logical that this tradition should have been handed down to the Slavs after such a long period of time. The particularity of the tradition of the South Slavic epic singers is testified to by the fact that, despite motifs and myths taken over from other peoples and interwoven with Christian ones, there are many proto-Slavic epic formulae<sup>33</sup>. The myths, the tales were handed on from one people to another as were the instruments, but the traditional music and dances had firm roots in each people and their power inevitably survived over the centuries.

(Рецензент: проф. д-р Вишомир Мишићевски)

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<sup>33</sup> A. Loma, *Praksovo: slovenski i indoevropski koreni srpske epike*, Beograd, 2002, 21–117.



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Ратко ДУЕВ

## ХОМЕР И ЈУЖНОСЛОВЕНСКИТЕ ЕПСКИ ПЕЈАЧИ

### КРАТКА СОДРЖИНА

*Веројатно, Јужните Словени имале усна традиција и епски пејачи пред да се доселат на Балканот, чии песни и изведба се разликувале од аојдните и пењето на Хомеровите епови. Сличностите се должат на самата природа на усната традиција, формулаичноста и епитетите, постоа легендите за слепите пејачи, придружувањето на песните со жичен инструмент и моќните во песните. Проблемот се јавува бидејќи многумината аворите ги проучувале карактерот, начинот на создавање и пренесување на епската поезија, но не и музиколошките аспекти на изведбата, кој овозможува проблемот да се разгледува од малку поинаков агол.*

**Клучни зборови:** АОЈДИ, ГУСЛА, ЕПСКИ ПЕЈАЧИ, ПОТЕКЛОТО НА ГУСЛАРИТЕ.