

Introduction

A hymn is a song to a god, originally sung, usually to a lyre. The meaning of *hymn* is unclear and it may have a foreign origin. The word occurs only once in Homer (*Odyssey* 8.429), and Hesiod speaks of winning a prize for a *hymnos* (*Works and Days* 651), but it is unclear what he meant by *hymnos*. Early hymns seem to have been composed in hexameters (see below), but later poems appear in other meters. The standard form was to list the god's names, thus invoking his or her presence, then to continue with some event from the god's career, often the god's birth, and to conclude with a prayer, a reference to the god, or a declaration that the hymnist would now proceed to another song. Hymns to the gods must have been widely circulated in antiquity but, puzzlingly, they are not often referred to by other ancient writers.

A remarkable collection of Greek hymns, by a range of authors, survives in twenty-nine manuscripts, none older than the fifteenth century AD. They are among our most important sources for our knowledge of Greek myth. The collection was evidently made in the early Middle Ages and included, in this order: the anonymous *Orphic Hymns* (c. AD second/third century?); the *Hymns of Proclus*, an important Neoplatonist philosopher of late antiquity (AD 412–485); the anonymous *Homeric Hymns* (eighth/seventh centuries BC–fifth century BC, with one exception), our earliest surviving hymns; and the *Hymns of Callimachus* (c. 310—c. 240 BC), from the Hellenistic Age (323–c. 30 BC); Callimachus was a poet, critic, and scholar at the

Library of ALEXANDRIA (see map 1; place-names that appear in the maps are in small caps), one of the most influential intellectuals of his day. The collection also includes an anonymous *Orphic Argonautica* from the fifth or sixth centuries AD that tells the story of Jason with an emphasis on the role of Orpheus, but it is not a hymn and is not translated here.

One of these manuscripts, discovered in Moscow in 1777 and now in Leiden, is unique in containing a portion of a “Homeric Hymn to Dionysos” and the long “Homeric Hymn to Demeter,” poems not included in other versions of the collection. Several papyrus fragments also preserve portions of the *Homeric Hymns*. The manuscripts of the collection are not nearly so well preserved as texts of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* and there are many corruptions, some incurable, and occasionally misplaced lines. The collection (missing only the hymns to Dionysos and Demeter) was printed in the *editio princeps* of Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, published in Florence in 1488 by Demetrios Chalkokondyles, one of the most eminent Greek scholars working in the West, tutor to the sons of Lorenzo de Medici.

This book will contain translations of most of these hymns, arranged not as they are in the collection, but according to each individual deity. In this way the reader can see how Greek poets, during a period of over one thousand years, conceived and celebrated their gods, allowing the reader to form an impression of how notions of each god evolved over nearly a millennium. All the hymns of Callimachus and Proclus are included, together with twenty-eight of the thirty-four *Homeric Hymns*, and thirty-two of the seventy-eight *Orphic Hymns*; hymns to minor gods, such as the *Orphic Hymns* to Justice, Misê, the Seasons, Leukothea, and the like, are omitted. The hymns will be cited in rough chronological order: first the *Homeric Hymns*; then the *Hymns of Callimachus*; then the *Orphic Hymns*; then the *Hymns of Proclus*.

METER AND PERFORMANCE

The hymns are mostly composed in a Greek meter that modern scholars call dactylic hexameter, the same meter used in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Each line consists of six feet, each of which may be a dactyl (a long and two shorts, $\text{—}\cup\cup$), like the knuckles on a finger, hence the

name, which means “finger”), or a spondee (two longs, — —; the name means “libation,” being characteristic of poetry that accompanied libations). The last foot is always a spondee. Vergil (70–19 BC) imitates this meter in his Latin *Aeneid*:

— U U/— U U/— —/— —/— U U/— —

Arma virumque cano, Troiae qui primus ab oris . . .

I sing of arms and the man who first from the shores of Troy . . .

as does, in English, Longfellow in his *Evangeline* (1847):

— U U/— U U/— U U/— U U/— U U /— —

This is the forest primeval, the murmuring pines and the hemlocks . . .

This was the meter of Greek oral poets, really an unconscious rhythm. Rhyme is avoided. The oral poet was not conscious of any division of the line into its constituent feet, as indicated above. Such schematization is a result of modern analysis of written texts. Probably, however, the poet “felt” the line as a whole, as a unit. Early inscriptions, based on oral delivery, though very short, seem to divide the text into lines, though the words are run together.

The origin of this complex meter has been the subject of intense speculation because the natural rhythm of spoken Greek is iambic (U—). Some scholars have thought that dactylic hexameter was adopted from a foreign language; others describe it as a native formation. In fact its origin is not known, but it was already old in antiquity and the oral poet learned it by apprenticeship to a master of the tradition. Dactylic hexameter does not work well in English, and I abandon it entirely in this translation, preferring a rough five-beat iambic line that accurately preserves the meaning of the Greek.

Because the oral poet, always a male entertainer as far as we know, composed in this meter “on the fly” and at a rapid pace he made use of such formulas as “flashing-eyed Athena” or “Artemis of the golden shafts” or “the wine-dark sea.” Such preset phrases filled out his line so that he did not have to recreate appropriate metrical locutions every time from scratch. They also provide, in the case of epithets attached to names, a capsule summary of the qualities of the god, person, or thing. We might think of this oral poetry as composed in a special language in which, to a remarkable extent, phrases, rather than words, were the units of expression. Such was the nature of dactylic

hexameter in the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, and the *Homeric Hymns*. The later, *written* poetry of Callimachus, the *Orphic Hymns*, and Proclus imitated this rhythm, although it had lost its function as an aid to oral performance. So great was the prestige of the Homeric poems.

From the very earliest times the Greek alphabet was used to take down performances of oral poetry, and there is reason to think that this unique technology, alphabetic writing, was invented for the express purpose of recording oral poetry. Once alphabetic written texts came into being, they were memorized by literate aristocrats and reperformed in the symposia (“drinking parties”) and perhaps in more public contexts, such as festivals. The *Homeric Hymns* are examples of such compositions. We cannot be sure of when or where they were performed, but we do know that the qualities of this or that god or goddess were celebrated each time. Presumably later hymns composed in writing were also committed to memory and performed at appropriate occasions, but evidence for the circumstances of their performance is entirely lacking.

The great value of these poems is that they give us a profound look into ancient Greek religion and culture, including aspects that may seem alien or troublesome to us. Perhaps the most palpable example of this is the hymns’ permissive attitude toward sexual violence. By today’s standards, the actions of many gods are violent and reprehensible. The hymns treat as a matter of course the fact that Zeus impregnates his daughter Persephone or has sexual relations with the boy Ganymede. While the hymns themselves do not register these events as coercive, they may look so to modern readers.

ANNOTATION; THE SPELLING OF ANCIENT NAMES AND PLACES; GREEK TEXTS

In the annotation to these translations, I have taken the hymns to each god as a whole so that, for example, when there is a reference to Nysa in the hymns to Dionysos, I explain the first occurrence of Nysa, but not subsequent occurrences.

The spelling of ancient names is always a problem in translations. Dictionaries prefer the Latin forms, for example, Hephaestus or Cronus, but modern taste prefers a direct transliteration, Hephaistos or Kronos. I have chosen a middle way, using the Latin forms if they are

familiar—Cyprus not Kupros, Oedipus not Oidipous—but I use the Greek forms otherwise. I do not, however, pretend to consistency, which is in any event impossible. Mostly I render the Greek *upsilon* as *u*, but sometime stick to the more familiar *y*, for example Nysa, but Tituos. The Greek *kappa* is usually rendered *k*, but is sometimes *c*. The Greek *chi* (*x*) is always *ch*. Pronunciation is according to the Latin convention: if the next-to-last syllable is long, it is accented; if it is short, then the third syllable from the end is stressed. Because it is sometimes hard to know whether the next-to-last syllable is long or short, the Glossary shows the accented syllable in bold with a long mark over the vowel: “Demeter (de-**mē**-ter).” The Glossary includes all important names, but I omit obscure names that appear only once; these are explained in the notes. An ellipsis [. . .] in the text indicates that words are missing; brackets (< >) indicate conjectures. I place a circumflex over final vowels where they should be pronounced, hence Hekatê, except in such common names as Aphrodite. I place a dieresis over a vowel in a vowel cluster, where the vowels are to be pronounced separately: Demophoön. When a place-name first appears in a poem or in the commentary or introduction to it, it is in SMALL CAPS to indicate that the place can be found in one of the maps at the beginning of the text.

For the Greek text, I have used, for the *Homeric Hymns*, M.L. West’s *Homeric Hymns, Homeric Apocrypha, Lives of Homer* (Cambridge, MA: Loeb Classical Library, 2003); for Callimachus, I use R. Pfeiffer’s *Callimachus*, vol. 2, *Hymni et epigrammata* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953); for the *Orphic Hymns*, I have used A. Bernabé’s *Orphicorum et Orphicis similibus testimonia et fragmenta*, vol. 2 of *Poetae epici graeci, testimonia et fragmenta* (Munich: De Gruyter, 2004–7); and for the *Hymns of Proclus*, R.M. van Den Berg’s *Proclus’ Hymns: Essays, Translations, Commentary* (Leiden: Brill, 2001).

THE HOMERIC HYMNS

Evidently it was the custom in early times for *aidoi*, “oral singers,” to preface long poems with an address to a god. We call such long poems “epic,” of which the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are examples, but the Greek word for such a poem was *oimê*, meaning “way, path,” a technical term for “the theme of epic song.” The address to the god was called a

prooimion, that is, a “song before the *oimê*.”¹ So in the *Odyssey* (8.499) the oral poet Demodokos begins his song about the Trojan Horse “starting out from the god.” Hesiod’s *Theogony* begins with a hymn to the Muses and his *Works and Days* with a hymn to Zeus. And Pindar in the opening to a poem (*Nemean* 2.1–6) says:

Just as the sons of Homer,
the singers of stitched words,
often begin with a *prooimion* to Zeus,
so this man is given a first beginning
of victory in the sacred games
in the much-hymned grove of Nemean Zeus.

Pindar means that the athlete’s victory in the Nemean games is the predictor of future victory in other games, even as a *prooimion*—a poem in Homeric meter—precedes a longer song.

The *Homeric Hymns* are a collection of thirty-three such *prooimia*, probably put together before the first century BC by some Alexandrian scholar whose identity remains unknown. One hymn, “Hymn 8: To Ares,” is of late composition, probably by the Neoplatonist philosopher Proclus (AD 412–85), whose other hymns I here translate also. Ancient authors rarely referred to the *Homeric Hymns*, for some reason. Thucydides (c. 460–c. 400 BC) is the earliest writer to refer to one, the “Hymn 3: To Apollo,” calling it a *prooimion* (3.104.4). He quotes eighteen lines from the poem. A third-century BC scholar, Antigonos of KARYSTOS (ON EUBOIA), quotes one line from “Hymn 4: To Hermes.” The Epicurean philosopher and poet Philodemus (c. 110–c. 35 BC) refers to a single word in “Hymn 2: To Demeter,” and the Greek historian Diodorus of SICILY (first-century BC), quotes lines 1–9 of “Hymn 1: To Dionysos.” Diodorus refers to the *Homeric Hymns* three times, calling them the “Hymns of Homer,” evidently referring to the very collection that has come down to us.

Later references are equally scarce. In the second century AD the travel-writer and geographer Pausanias (c. 100–c. 180) refers twice to “Hymn 2: To Demeter” and once to “Hymn 3: To Apollo.” The late second-century AD grammarian and rhetorician Athenaeus quotes

¹ The word *prooimion* first appears in Pindar *Nemean* 2.3; *oimê* appears in the *Odyssey* three times: 8.47, 8.481, and 22.347.

from “Hymn 3: To Apollo”; he is the first to call into question Homer’s authorship. His contemporary, the famous orator Aelius Aristides (c. 117–c. 180 AD)—over fifty of his orations survive—also quotes from “Hymn 3: To Apollo.” Otherwise these poems are ignored, although recent scholarship on the Latin poets suggests that the *Homeric Hymns* were studied and imitated in ROME, but not named. Thucydides attributes “Hymn 3: To Apollo” to Homer, but the Alexandrian scholars seem to have decided that Homer did not write any of them, which may explain the general silence about these poems.

Modern scholars agree with the Alexandrians that the poet of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* did not compose the *Homeric Hymns*. Their attribution to Homer derives from a pious attachment to a tradition of poetic composition of which Homer was the most prominent exemplar. The *Homeric Hymns* are anonymous compositions from widely various dates, from the eighth or seventh century BC to the fifth century BC and possibly later. “Hymn 31” and “Hymn 32,” to the Sun and the Moon respectively, are probably Alexandrian (from the third to first centuries BC) and the anomalous “Hymn 8: To Ares” (perhaps by Proclus) seems to be from the fifth century AD. These anonymous poets lived in various parts of Greece, to judge by geographical references in the poems, which sometimes allow us to speculate about the occasions on which they were performed. For example, “Hymn 2: To Demeter” may have been performed at a festival in ELEUSIS, where the goddess of the fertility of grain reigned. “Hymn 3: To Apollo” contains a description of a festival on DELOS, where it must have been performed.

The original purpose of the *Homeric Hymns* as prefaces to longer poems can be confirmed by internal evidence. Thirty-one of the thirty-three *Homeric Hymns* mention a god in the first line, indicating their function as invocations of the god’s power. Places where the god is powerful are often mentioned as part of the god’s attributes. Most end with an invocation to a god, some ask for a benediction, then state that the singer will proceed to another topic: “I will remember you and another song.”

There is an enormous difference in the length of the *Homeric Hymns*. Four are long, running to hundreds of lines: the hymns to Aphrodite, Apollo, Demeter, and Hermes. Two (to Dionysus and Pan) are of intermediate length, but the rest are short, not more than twenty-two lines. The long hymns, which come first in the collection,

celebrate the god's birth or other notable exploit, whereas the short hymns focus on the god's sphere of influence and activity. Many consider Hesiod's *Theogony* as a kind of "Hymn to Zeus," similar to the long hymns that narrate the birth and exploits of a god, in this case expanded to Zeus's family history and to cosmogony. Probably the long hymns, like Hesiod's *Theogony*, were never intended as preludes, although they include the common formulas, but always existed as independent compositions. This would make sense, but we have no real information about the performance of any of these poems.

THE HYMNS OF CALLIMACHUS

Callimachus (c. 310–c. 240 BC) was born in CYRENÊ, the Greek colony in Libya, five hundred miles west of ALEXANDRIA, founded from the island of THERA, north of CRETE, around 630 BC. He was productive and famous as a poet, literary critic, and scholar in the Museion ("temple of the Muses") at Alexandria during the third century BC, when Egypt was ruled by the Macedonian pharaohs Ptolemy II Philadelphus ("brother-loving," 283–46 BC) and Ptolemy III Euergetes ("benefactor," 246–22 BC). Callimachus was of the highest birth, claiming to be descended from the colony's founder, Battos of Thera, who died c. 600 BC. He seems to have been educated in ATHENS, then moved to Alexandria to work in the Ptolemy's newly founded Museion.

Callimachus was famous for his remark that "a big book is a big evil" (*mega biblion, mega kakon*), which scholars have taken to mean that he opposed long poems like Homer's (or he may have been referring to the size of the papyrus roll!). He had no way of knowing that Homer's poems—and the *Homeric Hymns*—were composed orally and taken down by dictation, quite unlike his own learned verse, which was composed in writing. In any event, a feud was rumored between Callimachus and Apollonius of RHODES, author of the long *Argonautica*, an epic poem about Jason that in form and length imitates Homer.

Callimachus made a bibliographic survey of the enormous contents of the Alexandrian Library, by far the largest in the world, in an exhaustive and original prose work that occupied 120 papyrus rolls, called the *Pinakes*, "Lists," the first known catalog of a library's holdings. He organized titles by genre, including biographies of each

author, and cited their works by first lines. In all, Callimachus was said to have been the author of eight hundred “books,” that is, rolls of papyrus, on all kinds of topics.

Callimachus wrote in a learned and obscure style. There are eighty-six neologisms, words of his own creation, found only in his hymns, and another ninety-six words that are used later but first appear in Callimachus, evidently influenced by his usage. Though most of his works have been lost, he was the most productive of all the Greek Hellenistic poets. He had a profound influence on the Roman poets Catullus, Ovid, and Propertius, who studied him closely and whose works do survive. Only Homer is quoted more than Callimachus in later writers. Six of his hymns (translated here) and sixty-four “epigrams” (brief poems on various topics) survive complete. From commentators and fragments we know that, in addition, he wrote iambic poems (especially the “Ibis,” a mocking poem imitated by Ovid); a thousand-line poem on Theseus’ meeting with the Bull of Marathon (called “Hekalê,” after an old woman who helped Theseus); poems praising the Ptolemies; and victory odes. His most famous work was the *Aitia*, “Causes,” a six-thousand-line composition in four books that survives only in fragments. The *Aitia* was a collection of poems that celebrated the foundation of cities, little-known cults and religious practices, and odd local customs. In it the poet imagines that he was carried in a dream from LIBYA to MOUNT HELIKON in BOEOTIA, where he converses with the Muses. The poems of the *Aitia* are formulaic, first asking a question such as “Why on the island of PAROS, do worshippers of the Graces use neither flutes nor crowns?”

Callimachus certainly knew the *Homeric Hymns*, although not necessarily in the collection that has come down to us, and he sometimes quotes them. Yet his poems are unlikely to have been performed as memorized texts in public, as no doubt were the *Homeric Hymns*, but were probably read aloud to small groups of highly educated intellectuals and possessors of political power, who could understand and delight in his refined and learned references.

THE ORPHIC HYMNS

There is no reference to the *Orphic Hymns* in antiquity. They are first mentioned in a commentary to Hesiod’s *Theogony* in a manuscript

dated to the twelfth century AD, but there is no information about where or when they were composed. They are, however, included in the fifteenth-century collection of hymns referred to above. They created a stir among Italian intellectuals when published because they were thought to be genuine poems by the famous Orpheus, founder of the mysterious religion called Orphism, on which Plato was supposed to have based much of his philosophy. However, modern scholars do not think there ever was a “religion” called Orphism, but merely “Orphic poems,” poems ascribed to Orpheus, whose name gave them the authority of great antiquity and prestige. Of these there were many, but most are lost. As for Orpheus, there is doubt that he ever existed or that he wrote any of the poems ascribed to him.

Orpheus is a figure of myth, curiously unrelated to the genealogies elaborated in the poetry of Homer and Hesiod. He has no connection with the Mycenaean world (c. 1600–1100 BC). He was said to have come from THRACE, his father a certain Oiagros, about whom nothing is known. Several stories were persistently attached to him in classical literature. His music was so powerful that birds and animals stopped to listen, rivers halted in their course, and even rocks and trees gathered around him. He was a member of the Argonautic expedition, which he saved from the Sirens by his exquisite singing. He descended into Hades to recover his wife Eurydikē (yur-**id**-i-kē), enchanted its denizens, and persuaded them to release her, but lost her again when he turned back to see if she was behind him as they neared the upper world. He was killed by Thracian women, or followers of Bacchus, who cut off his head, which continued to sing.

These stories have much in common with reports of shamans, who have an intimate relationship with nature, can pass into the other world, do things there, and return, and many scholars see in Orpheus a shamanistic figure who entered Greek myth from Thrace independently of Mycenaean saga. Shamanism was vigorous in Thrace and in lands still further north. As a figure who had journeyed to the other world, Orpheus was logically said to be the author of poems that revealed the truth about the nature and destiny of the soul and the reality and power of the gods. He knew secrets, especially about the life of Dionysos, that he imparted to his followers. The poems ascribed to him, some classical and some post-classical, survive in fragments scattered in the works of many authors, both Greek and Latin.