

EARLY TEXTS AND THE TRANSITION FROM ORALITY



This article looks at some of the earliest literary creations to make the transition from oral remembrance to written text.

Because we now know something of their history, it is possible to see how and why their oral origins helped shape the kinds of texts that came down to us.

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FOUNDATION TEXTS

This article looks at some of the earliest literary creations to make the transition from oral remembrance to written text. Because we have these early texts and we know something of their history, it is possible to see their oral origins and to understand how and why this helped shape the kinds of texts that have come down to us.



Many early texts carry a society's foundation myths and define tribal identity so it is perhaps not surprising that, even though their content may have been quite random and the collection and selection difficult to rationalise, they often became major religious works. In particular this article looks at: *The Vedas*, *The Old Testament*, *The Koran* and *Beowulf*.

Wikipedia defines the Classics as: 'texts written in the ancient Mediterranean world'. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* defines the Classics as: 'outstandingly important works of acknowledged excellence or value in Latin or Greek'. These are useful starting points, but 'the Classics' has a much wider range of meaning than either of these. The Classics, in addition to polished and sophisticated works in Latin and Greek, also refers to work from further afield, and it includes texts that began life as oral compositions.

The wider definition of classic texts includes: *Hymns of the Rigveda*, *The Bible*, the *Koran*, the Babylonian/Sumerian epic *Gilgamesh*, the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, the Irish *Táin Bó Cúalnge*, the Welsh *Mabinogion* and the Anglo Saxon *Beowulf*. These are among the foundation texts of literary culture and modern civilisation and they all have their roots in oral culture.

An oral culture differs in many fundamental respects from a written culture, but the transition from one to the other is interesting because orality is often inadvertently reflected and preserved in the early texts. But we have to know what we are looking for. The Canadian literary critic Professor Northrop Frye wrote:

An oral culture depends on memory and consequently it also depends mainly on verse, the simplest and most memorable way of conventionalising the rhythm of speech. In oral culture mythology and literature are almost coterminous: the teachers of the myth are poets, or people with skills akin to the poetic, who survive in legend or history as bards, prophets, religious teachers, or culture-heroes of various kinds. With a writing culture, prose develops, and the continuity of prose enables philosophy to take form, as a

mode of thought articulated by logic and dialectic. Similarly, history detaches itself from epic, and gradually becomes the study of what actually occurred. Further, as writing culture is usually a counting and measuring culture as well, scientific and mathematical procedures form part of the same change in mental attitude.¹



Professor Northrop Frye (1912–91)

When we look at the human experience that lies just behind these classics, we look at them in a particular ‘writerly’ way. Among many other questions, we might focus on the following:

- ◆ What is writing and where does it come from?
- ◆ What does writing do?
- ◆ What are we doing when we write?
- ◆ What do writers do when they write?
- ◆ What can we expect of writing?
- ◆ What can writers expect to achieve in their writing?
- ◆ What does writing do well and what does it do badly?
- ◆ What are the effects (positive and negative) of writing?
- ◆ How effectively does writing record language?
- ◆ How effectively can we hope to capture an oral classic in writing?
- ◆ What do we do to an oral creation when we write it down?
- ◆ In what ways is a world without writing different from a world with writing?

When dealing with the ‘foundation texts’ these fundamental questions are often much clearer than when asked in relation to contemporary writing. But by using the classics in this way and by asking these questions we can then also ask students to imagine ‘the opposite’ of our world – that is, a world without writing.

While oral culture generally may have ‘perished on the air’, it left its mark on what was to come. The transition from an oral to a literate culture was not sudden – in some parts of the world and in some parts of our own society, it is still going on.

¹ N. Frye, ‘The Social Context of Criticism’ (1970) in: E. Burns & T. Burns (eds.), *Sociology of Literature & Drama* (Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1973), 149.

Even in societies where the written word is widespread, the transition took many years during which the oral culture continued to influence and shape the written culture.

In ancient Greece for example – a culture that made a swift transition to the culture of writing and the mental habits associated with writing - it is nevertheless clear that the historian Herodotus read his texts to an audience much in the manner of an ancient storyteller working in a village square or market place. Socrates' dialogues, though written down by Plato, owe a great deal to early unwritten popular public theatre. Equally there is evidence that once a thing was written down it acquired 'authority' and there is evidence to suggest that even oral practitioners consulted and referred to written texts to refresh their memories.

In considering oral-based texts – that is, texts based on oral transmission - we have to remember that we are studying myths and stories which have somehow survived to be written down, and once written, we are looking at texts which have somehow survived or have been copied-on into the present day.

Also we are often dealing with competing tribal or scribal traditions that contributed to different parts of these documents, and which allowed or helped the documents to survive. Often the documents in their various parts reveal they are but snapshots of a historical process of development and combination, since they record competing versions, changing interpretations and reinterpretations of belief systems and each of these has affected the surviving texts at every stage of their transmission.²

We know, for example, that in Classical Greece written records were very scarce. Greek traditions preserved knowledge orally. Individual families, a community, a whole clan might have a professional remembrancer to keep the tradition of their origins and the stories of their founders in oral form. But it is clear from Herodotus - Europe's first historian - that religious centres and sanctuaries also preserved oral traditions, with varying degrees of accuracy, and that he was able to make use of these oral sources when he came to write his histories.



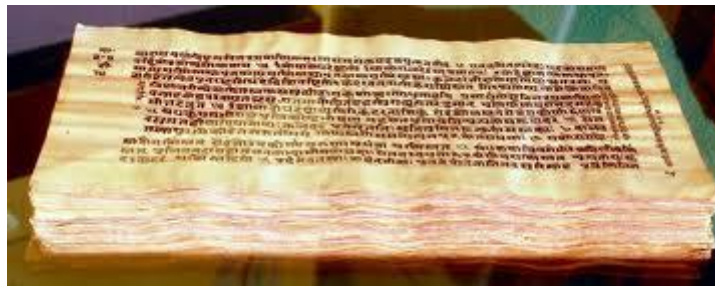
Herodotus (c484-425BC)

² J. Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and Religions of Late Antiquity* (Routledge Curzon: London, 1990), 107.

However, what Herodotus came to realise was that writing something down was not as simple as it sounded since often when he was gathering his evidence, there was not necessarily any agreement between different tribes, traditions or versions of a particular event.³ This may explain why there are repetitions and variations in the Bible and other early texts.

THE VEDAS

- It had long been suspected that Sanskrit was the common ancestor from which Hindi, Sindi, Nepali, Bengali, Marathi, Gujarathi and Sinhalese derived. In 1767 a French missionary called Coeurdoux first recorded a connection between the ancient classical Sanskrit and the European languages. Then in 1786 an English judge called Sir William Jones, who was serving on the High Court in Calcutta and who studied languages in his spare time, announced that he had noticed similarities between Sanskrit and ancient records of Old Persian, Greek, Latin, Gothic and Celtic vocabulary.
- Jones' observations were born out by later study of the Sanskrit texts of *The Rigveda*. *The Rigveda*, a set of religious hymns and texts, preserved a version of Sanskrit once spoken by a people who called themselves as the Aryas. This language, it was realised, was in fact an ancient Indo-European language and the Aryas had been Indo-Europeans.
- There are three important points to be emphasised about the Sanskrit *Vedas* in relation to oral literature: (a) the depth of time involved (b) the size of the materials to be memorised (c) the extent to which the language has changed over time. During this stretch of time - between composition and written record - the language changed enormously. This must have made the hymns extremely difficult to memorise or understand.



- In total there are ten Vedic books and more than a thousand hymns. In its written form *Yajur Veda* (White Veda) alone consists of 3,000 pages of text. The task of memorising even one of the Vedas must have been enormous. But Brahmin family names like Trivedi (Three Vedas) and Chaturvedi (Four Vedas) indicate that often a holy person or a particular family would memorise three or even four Vedas.⁴ For us this would be roughly the equivalent of memorising the whole surviving body of Anglo-Saxon literature - in Anglo Saxon.

³ Herodotus, *The Histories* (Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1996), xix.

⁴ Arya society was stratified into four main classes: Brahmin (priest), Kshatrya (warrior), Vaishya (trader) and Sudra (labourer). This may have been the origin of the Hindu caste system.

- The word *Sanskrit* means refined, perfected or elaborated. The ancient Sanskrit language was spoken by a people called the *Aryas*. Originally they were hard-drinking, warlike nomads who lived in southern Russia, Turkmenistan, Iran and Turkey. They entered what was later to become Pakistan and northwest India from the north c1750BC and with their mastery of chariots, horses and swords destroyed the ancient Dravidian agricultural civilisation they found in the Indus valley, pushing the Dravidians out of the cities of Mohenjodarro in the south and Harrapa in the north.
- The *Aryas* settled along the Indus valley, particularly in Punjab and Sind provinces.⁵ The hymns refer to the aboriginal Dravidians as an enemy called *Dasyas*, *Dasyus* or *Dasa*, a Sanskrit word meaning slaves, wasters or robbers: the *Dasa* are described as having dark skins, no noses, no religion and incomprehensible speech. Many of the hymns are urgent appeals to the gods for aid in destroying the *Dasa* and their fortresses.
- The principle literary achievements of the *Aryas* were *The Brahmanas*, *The Upanishads* and the *Vedic Samhitas*. The *Samhitas* are a series of written collections of hymns, prayers and ritual formulae often referred to simply as *The Vedas*. There are four Vedic collections: *Rigveda*, praising the gods; *Samaveda* the melodies connected to the hymns; *Yajurveda* the sacrificial formulae and the *Atharveda* the magical formulae.
- According to some traditions the *Vedas* had no original text, existed eternally, preceded the creation of the world and were written neither by the hand of man nor by the hand of God. Unlike many later religious texts the *Vedas* do not deal in miracles and the supernatural and they do not attempt to purvey a moral code or set of strictures. Instead they set out an attitude to experience and attempt to develop a sense of the human on the path to the revelation of understanding.⁶
- The hymns of the *Vedas* were originally composed orally somewhere c1500-1200BC. But they were not written down until about a thousand years later, c1300AD. It is possible that what was eventually written down is nothing more than a fragment of the oral culture that once existed. After a history of about 3,500 years, *Vedas* are still sung and recited as a regular part of Hindu daily worship, and are still regarded as the primary source of knowledge, the repository of traditional wisdom and the foundation of the Hindu religion.
- The *Vedas* are still transmitted orally and yet clearly they now depend to some extent on modern written versions - even if it is only to check the accuracy or the meaning of the text to be memorised.
- Sanskrit has loaned several words - *avatar*, *suttee*, *yoga*, *nirvana*, *swastika*, *soma* - into English. If we look at the *Vedas* it is sometimes possible to see a connection to the Indo European language group and to English: at one point Indra's victory over Vrta is celebrated and the poets says:

indrasya nu (now) viryani (virile) pra vocam (tell, proclaim)
 yani (first) cakara prathamani vajri
 ahann ahim anu apas tatarda
 pra vaksana abhinat parvatanam

⁵ V. Ions, *Indian Mythology* (Hamlyn: London, 1975), 14.

⁶ S. Aurobindo, *The Secret of the Veda* (Shri Aurobindo Ashram: Pondicherry, 1971), 10-11.

I shall now the heroic deeds of Indra proclaim
first, the club bearer performed
slaying the serpent, made a breach for the waters
slit open the belly of the mountains.⁷

THE OLD TESTAMENT

- *The Bible* is a collection of ancient texts containing early sacred writings of both the Christian and Jewish religions. It is thought that the earliest references are to a period of the early Middle East Bronze Age, c2250-2000BC.⁸
- The books of the Old Testament were written over several centuries by several authors. Among these authors are said to be Moses, Samuel, David, Solomon and the Prophets, however, close examination of the surviving texts reveals that often they could not have been written by the people to whom they are attributed since these people lived before the Jews began to keep written records.
- The standard Jewish calendar indicates that human beings were created, in the manner described in Genesis, in the year 3758BC. Abraham, Sarah and the Patriarchs lived c1800BC and the Exodus from Egypt took place c1290-1220BC. By this calendar Moses received the Ten Commandments c1900BC, but in reality, it is unlikely that the Jewish tribes had a written culture at that time.
- The Old Testament drew widely on ancient Middle Eastern mythological tradition. The story of The Flood, for example, possibly recalled the floods that created the Black Sea c.6000BC, and which also appeared in ancient Mesopotamian literature; the idea of the Garden of Eden is widespread in Middle Eastern mythology; the word and the idea of *paradise* come from ancient Persian mythology.



- The story of the Creation, which appears in two different versions in *Genesis*, had its roots in ancient Mesopotamian tradition, where a dragon who lives in chaos has to be slain before the universe can be ordered. Traces of this story can be seen in Biblical references to the slaying of Leviathan in *Job* and *Isaiah*. It is clear that some of these Mesopotamian elements were absorbed into Hebrew tradition when the intellectuals and leaders were taken into captivity in Babylon (597-539BC), but other elements were drawn from Syrian and Egyptian tradition.⁹

⁷ J. P. Mallory, *In Search of the Indo Europeans* (Thames & Hudson: London, 1991), 36.

⁸ G. Steiner, 'Preface to the Hebrew Bible' (1966) in: *No Passion Spent* (Faber: London, 1996), 45.

⁹ S. Cook, *An Introduction to the Bible* (Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1956), 24; S. H. Hooke, *Middle Eastern Mythology* (Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1976); K. Armstrong, *The Bible: The Biography* (Atlantic Books: London, 2007).

- The oldest fragment of language preserved in *The Bible* is thought to be the song of Deborah and Barak in *Judges 5*, which may date from the oral culture of 10th or even the 11th century BC.
- Modern scholars have demonstrated that the early books of The Old Testament - *Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Ecclesiastes* and *Proverbs* - all seem to have begun life as oral compositions before being written down and compiled together. *Genesis*, for example, contains passages that may date from oral compositions and traditions of the 10th century BC, but the book was probably written down around the 5th century BC.
- Nothing in The Old Testament suggests that Moses himself actually wrote any part of the Bible. The Ten Commandments were said to have been written on stone by the finger of God (*Exodus 31:18*) and given to Moses. This is the only time in The Bible where God actually writes anything. This is an indication not only that Moses inhabited a largely pre-literate world where writing was still a mystery, but almost certainly that Moses was not able to read or write. It also indicates that Moses was relying on the power and authority of the written word to affect his audience.
- It is clear in the case of the prophet Amos (c.760BC), that the short structured 'oracles' that have come down to us derive from the prophet's oral preaching style. The preserved order of the verses is probably not that of the prophet, but rather the work of a scribe.
- *The Song of Songs, Proverbs* and *Ecclesiastes* are usually attributed in rabbinical tradition to King Solomon, and are thought to date from oral compositions c1000BC, but were all written down much later. *Proverbs* was probably written down around 500BC, but it records a much older tradition of oral advice.
- According to rabbinical tradition many of the Psalms in *The Book of Psalms* were composed by King David c1000-922BC. However, other commentators doubt that King David actually composed any a part of it.
- Some writing of what were to become Old Testament Texts may have taken place as early as 950BC, and some sections may have been written down around 725BC. Some compositions, like the *Book of Lamentations*, might have developed during the exile in Babylon c587-539BC. Ezra is said to have brought 'the book of the law of Moses' from Babylon around the year 539BC. After this, religious writing seems to have become a subject of serious discussion, debate and commentary within Jewish culture. Around 458-398BC the bulk of the re-writing and compiling of the Old Testament works seems to have taken place.
- The first five books of *The Bible* were certainly in use and in written form by about 400BC, but in several variant forms. Also, modern Biblical scholars think they can distinguish at least four different authors, possibly separated by hundreds of years, at work in the first five books of *The Bible*. At some point these variants and versions must have been compiled and edited into the versions that have come down to us.
- Within *Genesis*, for example, it is possible to see that whoever compiled the materials was working with at least two parallel sources and narrative traditions and often felt they had to include everything they had at hand or at least to include differing versions of the same event. Having established in *Genesis 1* how the world and humans were made, the story, slightly altered, starts again in *Genesis 2*.

- There are many other examples of material appearing in parallel versions. The story of the flood is given in *Genesis* 7:2-3 and 6, but again in 19:7-9 and 15. Abraham's migration is recounted in *Genesis* 12:1-4, and again in 12:4-5. Two versions of the story of God's covenant with Abraham are given, the first in *Genesis* 15 and again at 17. Different versions of the manna and quail in the wilderness are given in *Exodus* 16:2-3 and then again in 16:6-35, but also for a third time in *Numbers* 11:4-34.
- There are also different versions of the story of the Ten Commandments in *Exodus* 20:1-7 and 34:10-28, and *Deuteronomy* 5:6-18. There are also different versions of Jewish dietary rules given in *Leviticus* 11 and *Deuteronomy* 14. In some accounts Mount Sinai is the mount of the Covenant, in other versions it is Mount Horeb.
- Evidence suggests that at least two and possibly several different Jewish tribal traditions were represented in the writing of the first five books of The Old Testament. For example, one tradition referred to God as *Elohim* (E) which is actually a plural form, and the other to *Jaweh* (J). These traditions were both mainly concerned with laws, dreams and divine revelations. A third tradition, the Priestly (P), also seems to have been incorporated later. This was mainly concerned with genealogies and dates.
- It seems likely that the first five books of the Old Testament (often referred to as the Pentateuch or the Hebrew Bible) were put together first out of the sources deriving from the J and E traditions. At a later stage the P tradition materials were fitted into the narrative framework. At about the same time the material comprising *Deuteronomy* was added.
- It is possible to date the earliest times at which the various traditions began to be written down: J: 950BC; E: 750BC; P: 587-539BC. However, the oral traditions that preceded the writing were much older.
- With the Fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple in AD70 the idea of the Hebrew Bible as a source of authority began to take shape.
- The Hebrew Bible began to be standardised by the scribes after the return from Babylonian captivity. The Sopherim and the Masorites¹⁰ were responsible for writing down and copying the texts from ancient Hebrew script into the new Chaldee or square letter script. Even so a standardised canonical text only began to emerge in the 4th century AD.
- At about the same time that the Hebrew canon began to be established in the 4th century AD, the Greeks became the main military force in the Middle East. Consequently many Jews were functionally literate in Greek but illiterate in Hebrew and Aramaic.
- Even after Greek translations of the Massorite Bible became available, the bulk of the Jewish population would still have relied on their own memory and on temple texts presented orally.
- It seems that a great deal of written material dating from the period of the Old Testament has not survived, though there are occasional references to it – for example, to the lost *Book of Jashar* (*Joshua* 10:13 & *2 Samuel* 1:18) or the lost *Book of the Wars of Yahweh* (*Numbers* 21:14).

¹⁰ The name Sopherim derived from Hebrew word *safar*, to count. These were the scribes and accountants of the Temple. The Massorites, whose name derived from Hebrew word *masar*, to deliver something into the hand of another, committing it to the trust of another, were the authorized custodians of the agreed text.

- There was considerable literary activity around the time of the start of Christianity, but the Christians later excluded a great deal of written material on the grounds that it was not part of the Jewish *Pentateuch*, was not written in Hebrew, or was not doctrinally acceptable. As a result a great deal of apocryphal and apocalyptic writing fell into obscurity or was later grudgingly accorded lower status.
- The word 'apocrypha' means hidden or secret writing, writing which is for some reason of doubtful authenticity. At various times, among others, the books *Hebrews*, *Jude*, *James* and *Revelation* have been excluded from the canon as dubious or apocryphal.
- On the other hand, among others, *The Epistle of Barnabas*, *The Shepherd of Hermas*, *The Two Epistles of Clement to the Corinthians* and *The Psalms of Solomon*, which are all now excluded, were once accepted and included. Indeed some of the works now excluded from the canon were once considered very important either to the various Jewish sects, to early Christians or to the Protestant Church.
- There are currently fourteen books which form the Apocrypha – that is, books of the Old Testament which were included in the Septuagint and the Vulgate, but which do not appear in the Hebrew Bible and which consequently do not appear in modern Bibles.¹¹

THE KORAN

- From about the 2nd century AD there is evidence of graffiti found in caves, but for the most part Arabic culture relied on a rich tradition of complex oral poetry: literacy came to Arab society rather later than to most of the other peoples of the Middle East.
- Writing in Arabic script began to develop with *The Koran* (meaning literally 'the recitation') in the 7th century AD. *The Koran* is said to be the earliest and finest work of classical Arabic prose. It is also the holy book of the Muslim religion. It embodies a religious system called *al islam* (surrender or submission).
- *The Koran*, it is said, is the text given by God to the prophet Mohamed via the angel Gibreel (Gabriel) in a series of visions, dreams and ecstatic seizures, beginning in the year 610AD and continuing until the death of the Prophet in 632AD.



¹¹ *The Apocrypha* (OUP: Oxford, 1942).

- The messages revealed were not written down by the Prophet Mohamed because he was unable to read or write. However, it is said that the teachings and visions of the Prophet Mohamed were repeated by him to professional scribes or committed to memory and recited by professional remembrancers.
- It is said that the teachings of *The Koran* were transmitted entirely as received and that *The Koran* is the unaltered word of God, the 'scripture whereof there is no doubt', the finest and most perfect representation of literary style. In the 96th *sura* (verse) it is said that *The Koran* is a copy of the Eternal Tablet that resides in heaven.
- The earliest written records of *The Koran* were set down on pieces of leather, palm leaves, the shoulder bones of camels, bark and any other suitable materials that came to hand during the lifetime of the prophet – probably as aids to memory made by the people charged with remembering them accurately.¹²
- Once these written texts emerged problems of interpretation began to arise, since, as *The Koran* itself acknowledged, some of its verses were ambiguous.
- After the Prophet Mohamed's death, Abu Bakr (632-634AD), one of the first converts to Islam, the prophet's father in law, declared himself Kalifa (Caliph, meaning successor by family line of descent) and began to collect and copy the fragments of text. In 633AD most of those responsible for memorising the prophet's visions and messages were killed in battle and, as a result, Umar ibn al-Khattab urged Abu Bakr to commit everything to writing.
- The canonical text of *The Koran* was established in 651-52AD under the third Caliph, Uthman ibn Affan, who added several sections. Uthman then had all the collected fragments destroyed. Since then the book has been handed down unaltered.¹³
- While he may have done this to put an end to dispute, in fact his action led to further dispute as some Muslims claimed that the prophet's son-in-law and cousin had more or less vanished from view in the canonical text, and others found the *suras* or chapters to be counter to their view of established chronology or contrary to their idea of the logical order.
- With the destruction of the original versions the texts could no longer be clarified – an important point since at this time Arabic writing, and particularly the *kufic* script used to record these visions contained no vowels or diacritical marks, and consequently was so very ambiguous and sketchy that it was little more than an aid to the recitation of already memorised scripts.
- In spite of this, the problems of oral transmission and differing traditions became ever more apparent. When in the 10th century Ibn Mujahid began to collate different versions of *The Koran*, he found he had to contend with no less than seven leading traditions of recitation, mostly dating back to the 8th century. An 11th century Islamic scholar travelling from Morocco to Central Asia recorded 50 different traditions of recitation received from 365 teachers relating to the same 1,459 lines of text.
- It is important to note that Shi'ites did not accept many Sunni traditions nor have they accepted about 50 of the standard readings in the Sunni version of *The*

¹² M. Cook, *The Koran: A Very Short Introduction* (OUP: Oxford, 2000), also: S. R. Fischer, *A History of Writing* (Chicago University Press: Chicago, 2001).

¹³ T. Kiernan, *The Arabs* (Abacus: London, 1980), 124-5.

Koran. In addition to *The Koran* they also have other religious texts written out of a different oral tradition dating from the 10th and 11th centuries.

- Although there seem to have been many variant traditions within Islam, over time only one version these visions and teachings came to dominate. But this version is not uncontested.
- While variant readings of *The Koran* are recognised within Islam, these splits and the difficulties the destruction of the original records left behind are still with Muslim communities to this day.
- The first translation of *The Koran* from Arabic appeared in Latin in 1141. It was translated again in Venice in 1530, but the Pope and the Spanish Inquisition suppressed it. Another printed edition appeared in Switzerland in 1541, but the Basel city authorities suppressed it until Martin Luther intervened to protest at this censorship and the edition was released the following year.
- In Arabic, *The Koran* could not be printed for many years. It was issued only in handwritten copies up until the 18th century and it took special permission from the Turkish Sultan for the first small printed edition to appear in 1772. Only in 1874 did the Turkish government grant permission to print *The Koran*. In the rest of the Muslim world the printing of *The Koran* was forbidden. In Egypt the first printed edition appeared in 1833, but this was almost immediately locked away. Only under Said Pasha (1854-63) was this edition finally released in limited numbers. The first generally available printed edition authorised by the Egyptian government appeared only in 1925.
- The oral origins of *The Koran* have been preserved because recitation and memorisation are said to be part of the essence of the message and are still considered to be essential elements of Islam.

BEOWULF

- It is probable that Anglo Saxons were already present in the British Isles – along the South and East Coast - by the time the Romans arrived. The Romans recruited Anglo Saxons as mercenaries to help keep the Scots tribes north of the border. The Roman writer Tacitus, who observed the Germanic tribes at first hand, wrote in his book *Germania* (1st century AD), that they had only ancient songs as their ‘remembrance and history’. It a much the same for the Celts. In the year 440, after the departure of the Romans, the Anglo Saxon areas of settlement began to expand westwards. According to legend the Welsh speaking Romano-British resisted this expansion and fought a long rear-guard action - as the story of King Arthur testifies - but gradually the Saxons, with long established settlements in East Anglia, Kent and Northumbria spread into Mercia (the Midlands) and the West Country: Celtic society was restricted to Wales, Cornwall and Cumbria.¹⁴
- Although set some time in the 6th century, the story of Beowulf had been brought to Britain c700, composed into its present form orally c793 and written or copied c1000.¹⁵ Although the poem originates and is set in Scandinavia, the language of the poem is an Anglian or West Saxon dialect, but with a great many elements from other dialects and accents, and it is thought to have been written down in Mercia, probably somewhere north of Oxford. We don’t know

¹⁴ L. Alcock, *Arthur’s Britain* (Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1973).

¹⁵ S. Oppenheimer, *The Origins of the British* (Robinson: London, 2007), 448.

the name of the *scop* (poet) who composed the poem, nor do we know the names of the two scribes who copied it.

- Beowulf did not become a poem on which a religion was founded, but there are religious questions to be asked about it, since it seems to have arisen at a time when the Anglo-Saxons were in the process of becoming Christian. There is some disagreement as to whether the poem is Christian, using elements of paganism from the recent past, or pagan, but made suitable for Christian listeners. Beowulf himself makes no reference to Christianity: all the Biblical references are to the Old Testament: Christian references are not extensive or intrinsic, amounting to a few words here and there, and could have been inserted into the manuscript of what is basically a pagan tale.
- There is some disagreement as to the oral history of the poem before it was written down. The great variety of accents in the poem, the strange structure – three monsters, three funerals – and the mixture of actual history with fabulous elements, along with the very patchy nature of the tale itself, indicate that it had a complicated pre-life and that what we have here is probably a poet working to weave together the various strands from an oral tale and possibly even from different tellings of that tale.
- The poem *Beowulf* is set at the king's court on Heorot, a real island between Denmark and Sweden and it concerns the ancestors of the Anglo-Saxons - a tribe called the Geats - and their battles with monsters.
- The story looks back to the heroic age of the ancestors. In many ways it is a lament for bygone times and tells of two encounters the warrior Beowulf had with terrible monsters. Beowulf seems to be the last of the great heroes, surrounded by lesser men, who are complacent and untrustworthy, far from ideal leaders.



- Many of the characters mentioned in the poem were historic figures. Hrothgar, king of the Danes, lived in the 5th century; Hygelac is mentioned in several other documents and is known to have raided the Frisians in the year 521; Beowulf too seems to have been a real figure.
- Anglo Saxon verse was performed aloud, sometimes with music. Like the ancient Greek poets, the Anglo Saxon poet had a huge stock of formulaic picture-word compounds to draw upon: 'whale-road' and 'swan's way' (sea), 'bone house' (body), 'long home' (grave).

- The principal rule of the verse was that there was a long line of four strong syllables (feet) and this line was divided in the middle. The first three strong syllables (feet) of the line are often linked by alliteration. Alliteration helped the composer find his words, helped the audience follow the verse, but also helped the performer puncture the general thrum of noise in the Saxon hall.

Waes se grimma gaest : Grendel haten
mare mearcstapa : se the moras heold
fen and feasten

Was the grievous guest : Grendel naméd
mighty mark-stalker : and the moors his home
fen and fastness.

- Here is an extract from *Beowulf* in Anglo Saxon followed by a modern English translation:

Beowulf maþelode, bearn Ecgþeowes:
‘Hwæt, we þe þas sæ-lac, sunu Healfdanes,
leod Scydinga, lustum brohton,
tires to tacne, þe þu her to locast.
Ic þæt unsofte ealdre gedigde,
wigge under wætere, weorc geneþde
earfoðlice; ætrhte wæs
guð getwæfed, nymde mec God scylde.
Ne meahte ic æt hilde mid Hruntinge
wiht gewyrca, þeah þæt wæpen duge;
ac me geuðe ylða Waldend
þæt in on wage geseah wlitig hangian
eald-sweord eacen -oftost wisode
winigea leasum- þæt ic ðy wæpne gebræd.
Ofsloh ða æt þære sæcce, þa me sæl ageald,
huses hyrdas. þa þæt hilde-bil
forbarn, brogden-mael, swa þæt blod gesprang,
hatost heaþo-swata. Ic þæt hilt þanan
feondum ætferede, fyren-dæa wræc,
deoð-cwealm Denigea, swa hit gedefe wæs.
Ic hit þe þonne gehate, þæt þu on Heorote most
sorh-leas swefan mid þinra secga gedryht,
ond þegna gehwylc þinra leoda,
duguðe ond iogoþe, þæt þu him ondrædan ne þearft,
þeoden Sctydinga, on þa healfe,
Aldor-bealu eorlum, swa þu ær dydest.’

‘Son of Healfdane!’ exclaimed Beowulf. ‘We are glad to bring you these spoils from the lake, spoils which you see here in evidence of our success. I barely escaped with my life from the underwater battle, and it was with difficulty that I engaged in the task. If God had not been my

shield, the combat must have come to an abrupt end! I could do nothing with Hruntinge in the fight, good weapon though it is. But the Lord, who so often looks after people when they are without friends, allowed me to catch a glimpse of a fine giant sword hanging from a wall. So when I got the chance I drew it and killed the defenders of the place. When the hot blood gushed forth it burnt up the blade; but I carried off its hilt from my opponents, having avenged, as is proper, the persecutions and slaughter of the Danes. I promise that you can now sleep carefree in Heorot among your bodyguard and your chieftains, your young men and your veterans; and that you, king of the Danes, need not fear death for your people from that quarter, as you did before.¹⁶

CONCLUSION

Clearly the fact that these texts emerged over a very long period of time and that a great many people were involved in writing and editing them at various periods, means that the materials we have available to us have been shaped at different times by different needs, conditions and even by different traditions. Indeed, within Hebrew tradition it is clear that the first five books of the Old Testament contain competing versions of the same events (for example the Creation), presumably from differing tribal traditions. At some point both *The Bible* and *The Koran* have been collected and then at a later date have been edited into the text that has come down to us.

All the major religions stress the antiquity and the divine origins of their central texts. They are usually said to have been given a long, long time ago and in specific circumstances. The texts are usually said to be the 'word of God': generally, however, God did not actually write them, but dictated them to a man, often a chosen man, so they are clearly the physical product of humanity. To complicate matters, in *The Bible* and in *The Koran*, both Moses and Mohammed, the people responsible for the texts, were illiterate.

In the *New Testament*, Jesus is said to be 'the word of God made flesh' (*John* 1:14) or 'the word of God' (*Revelation* 29:13). Jesus, like God, did not himself write down any of his teachings. Those of his teachings that have come down to us were written by Gospellers anything from 50 to 200 years after his death. At first, while it was still a possibility that Jesus might influence the Jews, Paul and the Gospellers in producing what was to become the New Testament, made extensive use of the Old Testament to legitimate their writings and to locate Jesus within Jewish tradition and within the line of succession from the House of David.

However, as it became clear that this effort was not going to succeed, that the Jews were not going to accept Jesus as the messiah, Paul and the others emphasised the less specifically Jewish and the more open and universal aspects of Jesus' teaching in order to reach a wider, Roman and Greek, non-Jewish audience. In this way we can not only see the text in an emerging tradition, but also, and virtually at the same time, that text being re-shaped to new purposes.

¹⁶ *Beowulf* trans. D. Wright, (Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1967), section 24 beginning line 1651.

In addressing these fundamental issues about the nature of the foundation texts of our society, their oral origins and transition into written texts, we are invited to think about ourselves, about our place in the world, about what we do, and to ask: What is it to be human? What is it that humans do? Why are reading, writing and speaking unique, amazing, deeply mysterious and worthy of further study? What is it about 'the word' that is so special, and why is it doubly potent when it is written down? Do we fear writing?



FOLLOW-UP WORK

- In what way is this topic linked to the theme of Representation?
- What do ancient texts like *Rigveda*, *Beowulf*, *The Táin*, Homer's *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, Julius Caesar's, *The Conquest of Gaul*, Tacitus' *Germania and Beowulf*, have to do with Creative Writing?
- 'Humans have been around for over 50 million years, but they have only been writing for the last 4000 years; and only in the last 60 years has the bulk of the population of the richer countries been able to read and write. For most of its existence the bulk of humanity have been – and probably still are – illiterate.' What do you, as a creative writer, make of information like this?
- Look at W. J. Ong's *Orality and Literacy*. In what way does the act of writing something down alter it?
- Look at some of the early texts on the reading list - *The Rigveda*, *The Koran*, *The Bible* *Beowulf*. Consider:
 - how the earlier works might have been memorised and presented
 - changes in our relationship to language and literature between those times and the present
 - the literary and creative difference between the written and the spoken word
 - what can happen to texts when they are transcribed and copied.
- Look again at *The Rigveda*, *The Koran* or *The Bible*. From what you know of oral culture, what evidence can you find in them for their oral origins?
- What ambiguities can you identify in *The Rigveda*, *The Koran* or *The Bible* that might be solved by reference to an earlier text or to an oral source?
- How much of *The Rigveda*, *The Koran* or *The Bible* could you commit to memory for oral presentation and what techniques would you employ to aid your memory?
- What difference does it make, now that these oral creations have been written down?

- Why do you think 'orality' is still so important to these texts?
- Go to: www.unesco.org/culture/intangible-heritage/masterpieces. Follow the links to hear the *Rigveda* being sung. Does the manner of the recitation give you any clue as to how the hymns were remembered?
- If the *Iliad* and *The Odyssey* had not been written down they would have been entirely lost to us. Do you agree?
- Listen to Melvyn Bragg's BBC 4 radio programme *In Our Time* on 'The Odyssey' first broadcast on 9 September 2004. You can find it at: www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/history/inourtime
- Look at this opening passage from Genesis Chapter 1:1-5:

In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. And God said, Let there be lights: and there was light. And God saw the light, that it was good: and God divided the light from the darkness. And God called the light Day and the darkness he called Night. And the evening and the morning were the first day.

What evidence of its oral origins can you discern? Rewrite the passage to read as a strictly literary text.
- It has been estimated that oral transmission is at least 60% accurate. Look at this passage:

Now after these things in the reign of Ataxerxes king of Persia, Ezra, the son of Seraiah, the son of Azaria, the son of Hilkiah, The son of Shallum, the son of Zadok, the son of Ahitub, The son of Amariah, the son of Azariah, the son of Meraioth, The son of Zehariah, the son of Uzzi, the son of Bukki, The son of Abishua, the son of Phinehas, the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the chief priest:
This Ezra went up from Babylon.... (*Ezra 7: 1-6*)

Try to memorise this passage, then to recite it from memory. Record your effort. Compare it word for word with the original text. How accurate were you?
- Look at the genealogies in the *First Book of Chronicles*. How much of that do you think you could memorise?
- Try putting what you know of your own genealogy into a passage of verse to recite from memory.
- In what ways would you alter your genealogy if you were reciting it to a stranger rather than to your brother or sister?
- Imagine your genealogy is part of your evidence to a law court in a dispute over land. How would you re-shape your genealogy to show that you belonged to the land and the land belonged to you?
- Look again at the journey recounted in *Numbers 33:16-37*. In the same manner devise, memorise and deliver orally directions from the university to a party at your home.
- Look very carefully at the long list of laws and prohibitions in *Leviticus*. Do you think these prohibitions would still be observed today if they had not been written down? Why / Why not?
- W. J. Ong said: 'Significantly god speaks to Jesus – he does not write to him. Also, while we know that Jesus can read and write (Luke 4:16), he writes

nothing, since in traditional societies, as the New Testament reminds us, 'faith comes through hearing', (Romans 10:17) and 'the letter kills the spirit' (2 Corinthians 3:6).' W. J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy* (Routledge: London, 2002), 74. What do you make of this observation?

- Is it reasonable to suppose that ancient texts survived unaltered, in their original form and wording, for hundreds, perhaps thousands of years?
- In what way do these surviving texts represent the original ideas and writing the poets and writers concerned?
- How accurately do you suppose these texts are in representing the world from which they grew?
- What do these texts represent? What is represented in these texts?
- What do you know about scribal schools and the training of ancient scribes?
- In what ways does the idea of training a scribe differ from modern educational ideas – why do you think this might be?
- How and why were the ancient scribes powerful?
- Why might writers, journalists and historians be more aware of a connection to the work of ancient scribes?
- In what ways might an understanding of the work of the ancient scribes be of interest or use to a modern writer? In what senses do you suppose modern writers might still be scribes?
- In what ways was the work of scribes connected with that of the accountants, lawyers, politicians, painters, teachers and historians?
- What, if anything, do you think creative writing has in common with the modern professions of journalism, accountancy, the law, or with politicians, historians and visual artists?
- 'The hippopotamus hide whip and regular flogging may have fallen into disuse, but a modern writer still needs a sense of discipline.' Why?
- How and in what ways is the modern creative writing disciplined?
- In what ways do you think the role of the writer has changed since ancient times?
- In what ways might scribes be said to 'give life' to their culture and their times?
- In what ways is it likely that scribes might have a role in helping to shape a national or ethnic consciousness or the standardisation of the language?
- In what ways do modern Creative Writers represent a tradition that goes back to the scribal schools and schools of rhetoric? In what ways has that tradition changed?
- Look at: D. Crystal, *The Cambridge Encyclopaedia of Language*, D. Crystal, *The Stories of English* and D. Crystal, *The Cambridge Encyclopaedia of the English Language*. Use the Index in these books to look up references to scribes. What effect did scribes have on English?
- Why are Jewish women only now beginning to scribe the *Torah* for themselves?