NomosTextbook

Rüpke | Bianchi Mancini

Ancient Epic Poetry

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0 Introduction

Epics are grand narratives in an ornate, poetic form. At various times across Africa and Eurasia, material that appeared to be of broad interest to society was collected by specialists, prepared for musical performance in metrically bound language and repeatedly supplemented or revised. The presented content also circulated elsewhere as myths, with a focus on founding stories and the history of the respective group or the examination of fundamental problems of being human (male and female roles and social relationships, domination and lack of freedom, freedom and fate, love and loss, position in the cosmos and in relation to the gods): all of this promised an audience and prestige for the performers, or else it represented an appropriate activity for those who were already socially elevated, i.e. the "nobles".

This constellation favoured an ever-increasing expansion of the texts - up to 200,000 verses in the great Indian epic *Mahabharata,* the "great story of the family of the Bharatas". In such collections, it was possible to change verse measures or even retain prose texts. The large volume of such texts made it possible to take on the role of narrator or singer over several days. At the same time, it required a clear structuring of the narrative in terms of content and form, a serialised novel. Even in the earliest surviving epic, the Mesopotamian tale of Gilgamesh, a clear organisation of the narrative sections, each written on a tablet, can be seen. The change of tablet usually coincides with a clear break in time or a change of location. Across cultures, such textual units, which are best described as chants (*cantos*), generally range between 300 and 1000 lines and thus performance lengths of between half an hour and an hour and a half. The recital performed on a certain evening - or during certain rituals - need not have been limited to one such unit, but it is precisely the narration of the end of day at the end, or the beginning of day at the beginning, of several *cantos* and epics that suggest a distribution over several days, whether in Babylon, Rome or in Central Asia when the Gesar epic is recited in Mongolian or Tibetan.

Even if the intention of the epic form was the oral performance, the singing, there were at least two good reasons for using it where writing was available (at least to record the text), though the style of performance, the melody, and the instrumentation could vary according to the situation. The first reason was on the part of the producer: writing allowed a faster, more organised growth of the text, and it served as a backup aid for the performance and preparation for the performance. The second reason was on the part of the recipients: especially where the text deals with topics important to the group or society, there may have been an interest in securing the text or even specific formulations - possibly even against the professional interests and creative freedom of the presenters.

Where the fiction of an epic guarantees a common prehistory or normative basis - and this is usually the point - it cannot be left to the arbitrariness of the authors. In case of doubt, Roman testamentary law must be broken and Virgil's wish to burn the unfinished *Aeneid* after his death must be ignored. Whether in Greek or Mongolian literature, the *epê* or *tuuli* are the most important, most prestigious

genres. The resulting texts are often canonised, commented on and transformed into other forms, dramas, prose narratives (novels), image sequences or even films (in Hollywood as in Bollywood). Some of these forms could be consumed in a short period of time. However, a compression of the time of performance could also be realised within the literary space itself: small or short epics (*epyllia*) of a few hundred verses, i.e. a single unit of recitation, were certainly not typical representatives of the genres. However, they shared in the prestige of larger poems. For all these reasons, it is worth paying attention to the epics, both in terms of literary history and historically, as they are often the oldest complex texts of single-language literatures. This is the aim of this book. Its focus is on Graeco-Roman antiquity as well as the history of the production and reception of such texts in the ancient Mediterranean world.

0.1 A wide world

The small world of the Mediterranean was neither the cradle nor the only home of epics. Large-scale metrical poems can be found in many other regions and epochs. A rich epic tradition can be assumed in the Indian subcontinent as early as the late first millennium BC. In Sanskrit - and this includes older material - the first seeds of the great epics of the Mahabharata - attributed to a wise singer Vyāsa - and the Ramayana probably belong to the historical poet Valmiki and date back to the fourth century BC. With an average of 10,000 verses (or 5000 double verses), its 18 or better said 7 "books" *(parvas)* are hardly lecture units, unlike the more numerous subsections *(upa-parvas)*. Both achieved more stable textual forms in the first centuries AD. In South Indian Tamil, a group of five so-called "great" epics of several thousand verses (e.g. the *Cilappatikāram* has 5730 verses) can be found in the second half of the first millennium AD partly in uniform and partly in varying verse formats.

The most important Central Asian epic, the Gesar Epic, dates back to the middle of the first millennium AD. It was first printed in Beijing in 1716 and, together with other Mongolian epics such as the *Jiangar,* is now part of the UNESCO World Cultural Heritage in China. Arabic epics such as the *Sīrat Àntar* with its heroic tales of around 10,000 lines - partly in metre, partly in prose - date back to the Middle Ages, as does the founding epic of the Mali Empire, the *Sundjata* with its forty or so episodes, about the figure of *Sundjata Keita* who died in 1255 AD. These are texts that are at best only slightly younger than Western and Northern European epic poetry, from the *Walthari* to the *Song of Roland* and the *Nordic Eddas*. In the sixteenth century, the Columbus epic, which deals with the arrival of Europeans in the Americas, continued the Latin epic.

None of these texts is in a demonstrably older tradition than the Epic of Gilgamesh, which is documented in numerous clay tablet copies and older variants. Gilgamesh is the oldest narrative about the founding of a city, and it concerns perhaps the oldest city of all, Uruk. In other words, it is necessary to consider it even though the text predates the central subject of this book in terms of time and space. It represents an epic tradition that was probably known to the earliest

Greek epic narratives as a cultural practice and as a treasure trove of motifs. Since 1872, more fragments of the Epic of Gilgamesh have become known in antiquity.

In the last third of the second millennium BC, various narratives were brought together in a self-contained metrical narrative that filled eleven clay tablets (a shorter but older narrative occupied a twelfth tablet). Each contained around two hundred and fifty to three hundred verses in Babylonian and cuneiform script. They created well-composed units through clear demarcations of time (such as night or morning) or place, typically at the beginning and the end of an individual tablet. By repeating the opening verses 1:18-23 at the end of the text (11:323-328), a circular composition with an unambiguous ending was created (verse counts and quotations according to Maul 2020; for dating 13-14; Maul's italicisation of unclear textual meanings has been adopted).

In the epic, King Gilgamesh restores the walls, the sanctuaries and the rituals after the destruction and cultural rupture caused by a great Flood (1:11-21; see also 43-44). It was this close parallel to the biblical Flood narrative about Noah that first aroused the interest of European and American scholars in this text:

> "He built the wall of Uruk, the great ramparts,
> that of the most holy Eanna, the pure treasure house.
> Look at its wall that *shines* like *copper!*
> Look at its battlements, which no one knows how to equal!
> Take the stairs that have been (there) for ages!
> Come near to Eanna, the abode of Ishtar,
> that no future king will be able to emulate,
> nor any other human being!
> Climb up, walk around the wall of Uruk!
> Inspect the foundations and examine the brickwork:
> whether their brickwork is not made out of brick
> and whether the Seven Sages did not (themselves) lay their foundations [before the Flood, JR]!
> One (whole) square mile [approx. 390 ha] is a city,
> one (whole) square mile of garden land,
> one (whole) square mile is floodplain [and therefore serves as a clay pit]
> half a square mile is the Temple of Ishtar.
> Three square miles and a half, that's Uruk, those are the measurements!"

But even these undertakings are not themselves narrated. Rather, their knowledge is presupposed. Chronologically, it remains unclear in the epic whether they are a consequence of the narratives (and the transformed character of the hero) - this is suggested by the reference to the events of the last book and the subsequent edification note 1:42-43 - or if they are already part of the prerequisites for the unfolding of the events narrated.

However, the city is not only the setting for large parts of the epic but also its subject: urban institutions and urban life are not only mentioned in passing, they are explicitly thematised. It is precisely the contrast between the "civilised" city dwellers and the "uncultured" inhabitants of the wilderness that provides an opportunity to praise urban institutions or curse them. The real theme of the

epic is Gilgamesh's (and others') realisation of death and their own mortality as a result of, and from the consequences of, the way of life associated with the achievement of urban culture.

The drama of the story is triggered by the arrogance of the young and beautiful king of this populous city, who keeps the young men from productive or reproductive labour within their own families by playing ball games and by violating the young women ("he is their bull, and they are the cows", 1,73). It is primarily in response to the women's complaint that the uncultured Enkidu is created, first as an adversary, then as a friend of Gilgamesh, and the first of the two to suffer death.

The central achievements of the city, by which Enkidu can be moved to Uruk, are the sanctuaries of Anum and Ishtar (i.e. Eannu, the "heavenly house"), as well as the prostitutes and festivals, and the nocturnal debauchery characterised by them and their drumming (1,209-232). Although the prostitutes are institutionally assigned to the temple of Ishtar (3,122-128), the cursing of the "trapper" (the prototypical inhabitant of the wilderness) and the counter-curse by the now civilised Enkidu, show prostitutes active everywhere in the city. They offer themselves in front of the city wall and, if successful, manage to get into every bedroom (7,102-123; 151-161).

Bathing as a bodily purification is of comparable prominence. Bathing is the first and most important element that introduces the return from the wilderness to the city, whether at the beginning of the sixth part (6:1-5) or outside before the final return to Uruk in the eleventh discourse (11:250-270). Valuable and colourful clothing completes the transformation (see 2,227 and 11,261; 270).

After all, luxury here is associated with wood and precious stones, as both can be sourced from afar. The tall cedar forest forms the outermost edge of the economic geography of the epic. Its trunks enable not only shipbuilding (10:87-107) but the production of huge doors (5:295-300), which Enkidu will later curse (in an address to the door, which is both without understanding and yet vengeful, 7:37-61). The even more distant garden of paradise is full of precious stones (9:171-194), of which masses of lapis lazuli in particular, but also many others, are present in the city (6:162; 8:95-104). Finally, various craftsmen have to make a statue of the deceased Enkidu from precious metal, wood and lapis lazuli (8.65-130). It is the ritual handling of the dead that finally brings the entire city and its surroundings together in the eighth lecture: people, animals, personified landscape elements and finally the gods.

As becomes clear in the list of those involved and their contributions to his development, the civilisation of the wild Enkidu does not begin at the city walls. Instead, it already begins at the "outposts" of the city with the ploughmen, the brickmakers, the shepherds, and this is before the list - which began with the elders and the "crowd" (8:9-10) - is finally completed with the brewers in the Eanna sanctuary, the harlots, the young husbands and wives, the foundlings and the orphans (8:31-37). The text, which uses the figure of a city builder and re-founder to attract attention, completely ignores the act of building. However,

it creates a sharply contoured image of ancient Babylonian urbanity of the second millennium BC, projected back to a Sumerian city foundation and received by writers and certainly also listeners from southern Mesopotamia to the Hittite Hattusha, where there is evidence of a translation. Building for, living with and dying by the gods is central to this epic. This is another reason why the epic became training material for scribes across language barriers.

0.2 Questions

As many ancient epics are among the most influential texts in their time and far beyond antiquity, then the Epic of Gilgamesh offers a logical starting point. Our introduction therefore attempts to provide a brief overview of the content and form of such texts. The guiding question here concerns the conditions under which extensive metrical narratives could be produced and received in societies in which writing only covered small areas. How long did people listen to these recitations? How are predetermined breaking points designed? What could be communicated across different days and occasions, and what did people want to hear? The introduction ranges from Homer to late antique biblical epic, thus focusing on the Greek and Latin texts, even though the Mediterranean world was more multilingual.

Whether in Greek or Roman times, the problem of orality and literacy is important for the beginnings of the epic. But it is also important throughout the entire period with regard to the question of how a text is perceived. Does anyone or even the majority of people listen to a text? Or is a reading approach the norm? Ancient societies must essentially be understood as oral societies, as orality is the only textual mass medium: a situation that changed only with the invention of printing. At most, large inscriptions, for example as architectural inscriptions on public buildings, are an exception.

Less important for us is the criterion of fictionality, which is of great importance in modern literary history, as it is intended to distinguish fictional literature from non-fiction or specialised literature and commercial literature by stating that the value of a text is not primarily measured by its reference to reality. The recipients of many texts are not primarily interested in whether the events described are historically true - this is only important when they ask about the autobiographical content of the text. Many ancient readers would have been surprised if they had been told that the Trojan War, as described by Homer, did not actually take place, but was merely a fiction. Yet Mediterranean antiquity did indeed deal with the phenomenon of fictionality. Atticus regarded those who questioned the historical reality of poetic details as fools (Cicero, *De legibus* 1.4). If it is only about referentiality, about the representation of the real world, then the keyword is often "lying poets". This makes it clear that the concept of fictionality was indeed addressed but that it was seen as a problem of specific text types, not as a defining characteristic of literature. The allegorical interpretation of the classical poetry shows precisely the intention to achieve the opposite: to prove the texts

to be counterfactually true, not fictional. Critical enquiry by ancient readers also found more favour in the epics than historical facts.

0.3 Epic

The word epic comes from the Greek and is derived from the aorist stem of λέγειν, from εἰπεῖν. Translated in its broadest usage, epic first of all means word expression. Of course, such a general term can take on many special meanings, but τὸ ἔπος means the word, the utterance, even utterances of more than one word.

The Greek word epic in the meaning we ascribe to it today is first found in Theophrastus. Theophrastus was Aristotle's successor in the leadership of the Peripatos. He lived from around 371 to 287 BC. The use of a term that we take for granted to reflect on these texts therefore only began much later. Furthermore, this term is not attested from a directly preserved writing by Theophrastus but from a quotation that was written down 750 years later (Diomedes, *Ars grammatica* 1,483,27 ff.). However, it can be traced back to Theophrastus with some certainty. Its use in Latin is extremely rare (for the first time Horace, *Saturae* 1,10,43), as is the use of the Latin adjective *epicus* derived from it, which is first documented in Cicero in the middle of the first century BC (*De optimo genere oratorum* 2): *epicus,* "epic", epic poetry, *epici,* "the epic poets".

But what did the Greeks understand by τὸ ἔπος? Their interest was not of a classificatory nature. Rather, it was aimed at understanding Homer's two oldest epics, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. The frame of reference in which this was done was poetry. Homer is initially analysed as a poet, not yet as an epic poet in contrast to other types of poetry: Homer and poetry are initially synonymous. This synonymity is later broken up, and one begins to ask about different types of poetry. In this context, the use of the word epic is an attempt to conceptually characterise the type of poetry represented by Homer.

Plato was the first to attempt to describe the various genres in a common framework in the *Politeia* (392-394). There he operates with two terms: *diēgesis* (διήγεσις) and *mimēsis* (μίμησις). The former means narrative, report, and the latter means imitation, imitative representation. *Mimēsis*, of course, stands for drama: the poet has people speak texts on a stage in a public space, re-enacting actions. *Diēgesis* is associated with poetry and all the variations it can take. Here a poet speaks about himself or about something else, but there is always a person, a narrative entity, who makes recognisable statements. The epic is characterised by a combination of both elements. On the one hand, it is a narrative genre and thus belongs to the first category. On the other hand, it also has mimetic elements. One element that can be found in the Homeric epic, as well as in the drama, are dialogue passages, direct speech, i.e. the poet does not speak himself but lets someone else speak. This mixed construction διηγήσει διὰ μιμήσεως ("narrative by imitation"), this *genus mixtum,* is the definition used for the epic.

If one follows the history of this attempt at classification, it becomes clear that it has a double afterlife: on the one hand, the triad developed from it - *diēgesis*, *mimēsis* and the mixture of the two, i.e. the narrative by imitation - and has been continued to the present day. This is preserved under the term "natural genres": poetry, drama, epic. The narrator without any distance, i.e. the poet who speaks for himself, is the lyric poet. The narratorless representation is the drama. And the narrative, with the help of actors, would be the epic: sometimes imitative representation, sometimes narration. The other line of tradition reduces this triad to these two elements, understanding them in terms of types of performance: in one case, imitative representation: we hear something, but we also see something - visual perception; in the other case, purely acoustic perception: a text is recited, read aloud.

As a means of classification, that is, as a means of categorising texts, neither is very satisfactory because the selectivity of these terms is not high. Through Theophrastus, Greek literary criticism had already come up with an alternative, namely, to take the content into account. The definition handed down in the late antique Latin source for Theophrastus reads in this Latin translation: *Epos dicitur Graece,* "*Epos* in Greek means", *carmine hexametro, divinarum rerum et heroicarum humanarumque comprehensio* - the *comprehensio,* the "summary", the "interaction" of "divine, heroic and human things", namely "in" or "with a hexametric poem". The decisive point is the interaction of gods, humans and heroes. This distinguishes the epic from tragedy, which is defined as a conflict situation of heroic fate (quoted by Theophrastus in Diomedes), and from comedy, which is the risk-free interaction of the private actions of ordinary people, with a *happy ending* (in contrast to tragedy).

These approaches are convincing when applied to Homer, Aeschylus, Aristophanes, and the great classics. However, if we look at other texts, we realise that the selectivity is poor. On the basis of this definition, the poem of Lucan, the ten books of the *Pharsalia* - which does not mention heroes and gods, but in which the civil war is depicted and historical figures are involved - would not be classified as an epic but would be reified history, historiography.

Both definitions establish a certain pre-eminence of the epic. This system of genres is not simply a classification on one level but forms a hierarchy. At the top is the epic, the highest genre, and below it, one level lower, dealing with the heroes or the fate of ordinary people, are those genres that rank below the epic. Here, but also in most other cases, the genre system always implies a genre hierarchy. In order to get out of the dilemma of vague definition, ancient literary criticism introduced a further criterion, the metrical criterion. The epic is a poem that is written in *versus heroicus,* in “heroic verse”, in hexameter, the sequence of six dactyls: long, short, short, and if necessary, the double brevity can be replaced by a length in the second part. As a defining characteristic of the epic, this is largely true, but not always. Moreover, hexameter is not limited to the epic. Hymns, songs in praise of the gods, bucolic poems and, later, satire in Rome are all text types that work with hexameter.

Servius, a late antique grammarian who wrote a commentary on the most famous Latin epic, Virgil's *Aeneid*, gives a definition of the epic at the beginning of his commentary: *qualitas carminis patet*, "the type of the poem is obvious", and now come these elements: *est metrum heroicum*, "it is the heroic metre of verse" - the first element - *et actus mixtus*, a "mixed action", *ubi et poeta loquitur et alius inducit loquentes*, "where both the poet himself speaks and lets others speak." That is the recourse to the Platonic definition, which is the second, the narrative instance. The third element: *est autem heroicum* (one would have to add *carmen*), "it is a heroic poem", *quod constat divinis humanisque personis*, "which consists of divine and human persons". This is therefore a definition of content that goes back to Theophrastus: the interaction of gods, heroes and humans. But now Servius goes one step further: *continens*, "containing", *vera cum fictis*, "truth with fiction". He elaborates on this with an example and says: *est autem stilus grandi loquens,* "it is written in" a very high style, "the grandiose speaking style". A stylistic criterion, the stylistic level, thus becomes the fifth element of this definition.

These definitional elements describe the text precisely but are problematic when used as classification criteria. The problem is illustrated again by the criterion of fictionality. Servius says: it is true that Aeneas came to Italy; it is fiction that Venus spoke to Jupiter. This is the idea of truth and fictionality at the end of the fourth century AD, a world in which many were already Christians or had religious ideas difficult to reconcile with the usual polytheistic beliefs. Today, we would assume that the truth of poetry is most likely to be found at the level of representation of the gods, the principles that are in conflict with each other. In other words, from today's point of view a historical journey of the historical person Aeneas to Italy can be ruled out with certainty. The criterion of fictionality is therefore also ambiguous.

The newly added criterion of style is no less problematic. It is possible to agree on a stylistic level within the framework of ancient style criteria, albeit with a wide range, but then one realises that these can also be found in other texts, so that the selectivity of this criterion is rather low. If we want to use these characteristics to constitute text groups, working with the five-criterion model is extremely difficult.

It is easier to link the formal criterion of hexameter with the content: hexametric poems about history - historical epic - about mythological events - the mythological epic - or about factual content - the didactic poem or factual poem. With this combination of formal criteria, groups can be constituted of both hexameters and criterion of content. From these groups it can then be recognised that there are epics of any content. This categorisation leads to perhaps dozens of groups that have little to do with the poets' self-image or the recipients' understanding, which raises the question: why should we work with the concept of genre at all, i.e. organise texts into specific groups?

0.4 Genre

What do these texts have in common? What are the consequences of the common features of these texts? In principle, the criteria can be defined arbitrarily. However, one must be aware that a group of texts can only be meaningfully considered and analysed together from a certain perspective. If one uses the concept of genre, one generally does not have this in mind.

The use of the term genre usually refers to a triangle of relationships constituted by the following points: an author, the producers of texts, an audience, the recipients of these texts, and a third group of people, or rather texts, designated by the term predecessor.

The primary relationship in this triangle is the relationship between author and audience. An author produces a text and wants this text to be understood, to be noticed. Genre now provides the basis for literary communication, communication about texts between author and audience. Normally, one associates texts on the basis of the definition of genre. In addition to the relationship between author and audience, there is also the connection between audience and predecessors, and on the basis of this there is also a relationship between author and predecessor in the following sense: the author knows that if I write my text in a certain way, then this will arouse in the audience associations with other texts, as well as expectations about the text, and I therefore want to fulfil or disappoint these expectations. The relationships in this triangle are not static but can be constantly modified. The way in which the author refers to predecessors makes this clear to the audience (or not), and he can then influence these expectations, which have been awakened through the genres.

The concept of genre therefore does not mean something arbitrary, but is based on a social consensus. In the understanding of an audience, a text is classified in a certain group of texts, and this classification is recognised or consciously rejected by the author in a certain way. The author attempts to create something new, to define a new genre or to change an existing genre.

As already stated, texts can be classified in any way for certain purposes. The exciting thing about such genre analyses is that modifications can be observed. The triangle is not static and always fixed to a series of texts, but rather every producer has the possibility of changing the reference system to its predecessors, the characteristics of a genre. Genre is always fluid, and the author uses it to shape the expectations of his readers, and whoever writes a text of this type after him is forced to respond to the changed expectations of his audience.

0.5 The goal

Following the general remarks on the concept of genre, the epic will now once again take centre stage. A definition of the epic, which is based on a study by Heinz Hofmann and reflects the scholarly consensus, once again reveals difficulties. In the following, epic is understood to be: a) a generally hexametric b) long form