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Greek Education and the Transition From Oral to Written Culture

The alphabet was introduced into a Greek civilization that was completely oral. Knowledge and traditions in this ancient culture were preserved by memorization and repetition and passed on from one generation to another by word of mouth. Society was largely organized around a tradition of oral poetry which has come down to us in written form in the works of Homer and Hesiod. Wandering bards, singers (rhapsodes), storytellers, and poets mastered a style that made it possible for them to learn verses by heart and to recreate extemporaneously poems that took hours to recite. These recitations were the focus of a sense of community. Listeners identified with the poet and assimilated information and values through the sound and rhythm of the spoken verse. Poems carried the memory of the past and represented at once history, education, and entertainment for the audience. The need for a powerful memory was a feature of oral society that appeared in contexts other than the performance of epic narrative. In ancient Greek culture, all political and legal processes depended on the oratorical power of those in authority, and on their ability to remember and repeat what had been done in the past as a means of deciding issues in the present, and planning the future.[1]

The arrival of the alphabet in the eighth century marked only the beginning of the transition to the use of letters. Initially, the use of alphabetic writing was confined to a privileged elite. Over time, commemorative inscriptions started to appear. Later, writing began to be used to record commercial transactions. At some point, scribes undertook to commit to letters the oral poems and stories that made up the cultural heritage.

Writing liberated the life of the text from the moment of performance. It allowed the poet to reflect on and manipulate traditional forms and subject matter. Recording the chronicles of oral culture led to the development of prose, a purely written use of language. By the fifth century, the transition of Greek society from oral to scribal habits was well underway. Athens began to provide public gymnasia and palaestras so that teachers could set up their own schools for the sons of wealthy citizens. Short texts were written on scrolls or wax tablets as an aid to memorization and oral recitation. Reading was done out loud, and writing used capital letters with no spaces between words. As literacy became increasingly widespread, and more and more of the cultural heritage was documented in writing, the need to preserve and re-create over and over the traditions and memory of the society became less

urgent. In time, dependency on the forms of social organization designed to preserve the culture orally receded.

These cultural changes coincided with a number of other social, political and economic factors. The establishment of democracy in Athens in combination with the wealth and curiosity of an imperial society created a demand for formal, higher education in letters, oratory, rhetoric, science, philosophy and statesmanship. This demand was met by wandering scholars -- the sophists, or "teachers of wisdom" -- who engaged lecture halls, gave their courses of instruction, and then passed on to other cities to repeat them. From the start, the sophists incurred resentment for charging all that their patrons could be persuaded to pay. Their costly instruction made higher education available only to the rich and gave those who could afford it an advantage in politics and in the law courts. For decades and then centuries, the oral traditions persisted alongside of and in tension with new forms of organization that were emerging in response to the changing technology. The poets passed on the tradition through their songs and in tandem with them, the sophists offered their education in letters and oratory. Into this historical and cultural arena came three great teachers.[2]