**BOOK REVIEW**

*From Hittite to Homer: The Anatolian Background of Ancient Greek Epic*. By mary r. bachvarova. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016. pp. xxxviii + 649. Hardcover, $160.00. ISBN: 9780521509794.

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he question of whether—and if so to what extent—the cultures of second millennium Anatolia played a role in the shaping of the Greek literary and mythological tradition has had a complex and at times turbulent history. Almost immediately upon the decipherment of Hittite in 1915, scholars began to notice parallels between the world revealed in the archives at Boğazköy and the Greek world of the first millennium bc. A pioneer in this nascent era of Hittitology was the Swiss scholar Emil Forrer, who made important progress in identifying points of contact between the Hittites and ancient Greece. There was an immediate backlash against Forrer, spearheaded in particular by Ferdinand Sommer. So damning were Sommer’s attacks on Forrer’s methods and results that Forrer abandoned the field of Hittitology, and the question of the possibility of cultural contact between Hittite Anatolia and Greece was largely shelved for the better part of fifty years.[[1]](#footnote-1) In the long dry spell of the mid-twentieth century there were certainly advances; notably Hans Güterbock’s important work on the Kumarbi cycle and Hesiod, which came to be one of the most widely known Hittite myths amongst Classicists. But by and large the field of Hittitology progressed with the immense undertaking of cataloguing, publishing, editing, and interpreting the voluminous material still being uncovered in excavations in Turkey, while Classics turned to the Iron Age Levant to seek the well-spring of ‘Oriental influence’ on Greek culture.

From around the mid-1980s onwards, there began a correction of the preceding half-century’s skepticism.[[2]](#footnote-2) The decipherment of Linear B had rendered the geographic proximity of Hittite and Greek powers in the Late Bronze Age a historical fact, while the progressive elucidation of Hittite texts was making it increasingly evident that the Hittite empire had military and diplomatic interests in western Anatolia. Archaeological investigation was revealing a significant Mycenaean presence at various Western Anatolian sites, while pottery analysis was revealing a hybridized East Aegean-West Anatolian style. Linguists were increasingly finding evidence of lexical borrowing and areal diffusion between Anatolian languages and Greek.[[3]](#footnote-3) And then there was the ‘Ahhiyawa problem’, as it was charitably known for many years. Namely, does the political entity known in Hittite texts as Ahhiyawa refer to a Mycenaean kingdom, or to a non-Greek state somewhere in Western Anatolia? There were valorous and ingenious efforts to put Ahhiyawa anywhere but in Greece, though the last possible shred of objection to the equation was (or at least should have been) demolished by the picture of the historical geography of Western Anatolia that emerged from Hawkins’ reading of the Hieroglyphic Luwian karabel inscription, leaving scholars no option but to go West in their search for the kingdom.[[4]](#footnote-4)

The new millennium thus began with the increasing certainty that there were direct contacts between Greeks and Anatolians from the Late Bronze Age onwards. Most of the work done in the past fifteen years in the area of Greco-Anatolian cultural interaction has thus been devoted not to whether we should look for evidence of contact, but rather to the nature, extent, depth, and breadth of the contact that is now an inescapable reality.

Mary Bachvarova’s *From Hittite to Homer: the Anatolian Background of Ancient Greek Epic* is a welcome and magnificent contribution to this endeavor. Her overarching argument, that the traditions of Hurro-Hittite narrative song played a pervasive role in the shaping of the Greek epic tradition, is deceptively simple. And, as a baldly stated thesis it is not in itself new. The strength and importance of the book lies in the comprehensive analysis of a disparate body of evidence, from texts in Hittite, Hurrian, Akkadian, Luwian, and Greek, to archaeology, ritual practice, and linguistics. Bachvarova offers many new insights on all of the above-mentioned fields, and it is this meticulous sorting and evaluation of evidence that builds towards her overarching thesis. The book falls into three distinct sections. Chapters 2–8 are largely devoted to the Anatolian and Near Eastern narrative traditions. 9 and 10 are devoted to the mechanisms for cultural contact and transmission between Anatolia and Greece. 11–16 are largely devoted to the question of the development of and context for narrative song in the world of Iron Age Greece.

Chapter 2 provides critical grounding for the non-specialist in the Ancient Near Eastern narrative traditions. Bachvarova identifies several distinct traditions that were to a greater or lesser degree mutually informative in the third and second millennia (Sumerian-Akkadian; Hurrian-Akkadian; Syrian-Akkadian-West Semitic; and Hurro-Hittite). Chapters 3 and 4 engage in a close analysis of the Gilgamesh epic, taking into account the Akkadian, Hittite, and Hurrian recensions. It is here we first encounter two of Bachvarova’s most important arguments. Firstly, Bachvarova concludes that, contrary to the current *communis opinio* of most Hittitologists and Assyriologists, Hittite narrative traditions reflect a living bilingual oral tradition rather than a scribal tradition, and furthermore that oral composition and transmission was a defining feature of the Mesopotamian traditions that much Hittite narrative song was based upon. Bachvarova argues that textual variants in the Gilgamesh epic and *Song of Release* (variants that reflect differentiation both within the Hurro-Hittite tradition and between the Hurrro-Hittite tradition and the Akkadian) reflect reworking of material for local, Anatolian audiences. The evidence is compelling, and if accepted provides an important typological parallel for the model of oral composition that has developed out of the Parry-Lord hypothesis for Greek epic verse.[[5]](#footnote-5) And Bachvarova’s distinguishing of traditions yields important results. For instance, she notes (68) that the dream of Enkidu, which parallels the deliberations of Zeus and Hera over the fate of Sarpedon in *Il*.16.419–683, is only preserved in the Hittite song of Gilgamesh, which in turn points to the specifically Anatolian Gilgamesh tradition as informing the tradition behind the *Iliad* in this instance. Chapter 4 provides evidence for the close association between ritual practice and the performance and dissemination of narrative song in the Hittite world. Bachvarova argues for the association of the Gilgamesh epic with pit-rituals and necromantic magic, and posits the ritual function and context of narrative song as an important vector for the transference of poetic motifs between Anatolia and Greece. The topics introduced in these chapters return to prominence throughout the book.

The following three chapters are dedicated to the Hurro-Hittite *Song of Release* (*SoR*). Discovered in 1983 and edited with translation and commentary in 1996,[[6]](#footnote-6) *SoR*, a poetic narrative on the sack of Ebla, was soon seen to contain close parallels to the plot of the Iliad (due in no small part to a seminal article by Bachvarova in 2005[[7]](#footnote-7)). Bachvarova argues that *SoR* refracts historical memory about the sack of Ebla both by Sargon (Tell Mardikh IIb1) and later by Hattusili I (Tell Mardikh IIIb), with the latter’s exploit heroized in the Hurro-Hittite narrative tradition with reference to Sargon’s exploits several centuries earlier (here we might compare with Hattusili the figure of Alexander the Great (at least as presented by Arrian), forever labouring under the weight of the mythico-historical traditions about Troy). Bachvarova argues that *SoR* was propagated through incorporation in royal ancestor cult in Hattusa, after Hattusili’s introduction of the cult of the Stormgod of Aleppo. She also suggests, against majority opinion, that Hurrian poetic narratives arrived at Hattusa in the Old Hittite period, rather than the Middle Hittite period as commonly assumed (observing that the politico-historical backdrop of *SoR* matches the agenda of Hattusili I). Signs of Middle Hittite geopolitical concern would then reflect later adaptation within a living oral tradition.

Chapter 8 both ties together arguments about *SoR* and Sargonic legend, and delves further into north Assyrian myth. Most importantly and convincingly, Bachvarova argues that the *Cuthean Legend of Naram-Sin* (a ruler who didn’t properly heed or interpret omens and thus caused the destruction of his city) informed the characterization of Hector in the poetic tradition behind the *Iliad*.

Chapters 9 and 10 address the mechanisms by which narratives could have been transferred between population groups. Bachvarova argues against the idea of itinerant poets and craftsmen moving at their own free will, and instead examines the evidence for trade in professionals between elites. Bachvarova posits festivals and state-sponsored religion as a mechanism for international, formalized transfer of verbal art among performers across linguistic and geographic boundaries. For transfer between the Anatolian and Greek traditions, Bachvarova looks mainly to the Early Iron Age rather than the Late Bronze Age as the temporal locus for cultural dissemination. While this is certainly an improvement on Walter Burkert and Martin West, who saw the Orientalizing period (750–650 bc) and cultural contact with the Levant as the locus for the diffusion of Ancient Near Eastern traditions to Greece, here and elsewhere Bachvarova misses many opportunities by downplaying the prominence of Late Bronze Age cultural contact.

Bachvarova next turns to the Greek epic tradition and Homer. In Chapters 11 and 12 Bachvarova again argues for the Early Iron Age as the beginning of cultural diffusion of Ancient Near Eastern narrative traditions to Greece, with Cyprus a prime locus of dissemination, and elite centres such as Euboea particularly active in cultivating alien wisdom as a form of conspicuous consumption. For instance, Bachvarova sees the *Odyssey* as a product of Euboean trade-driven contact, with later accretions via east Ionic bards (295). Bachvarova’s general disregard of the possibility of cultural transmission in the Late Bronze Age is surprising (as is her statement [341] that she is not concerned with whether Mycenaean settlers in Late Bronze Age Western Anatolia spoke Greek; she should be). As she notes (266), the evidence for cultural contact between Greece and Anatolia is more plentiful by the Iron Age. However, absence of evidence is not evidence of absence, and there increasingly is evidence (archaeological, documentary, linguistic) for Greco-Anatolian contact well before the end of the Late Bronze Age. Thus any inquiry into the question of Anatolian influence on Greek culture that deemphasizes Late Bronze Age western Anatolia as a possible spatio-temporal locus for diffusion is inherently predicated on a flawed premise.

The final three chapters are devoted to the *Iliad* and the creation of a hybridized Greco-Anatolian / Ancient Near Eastern poetic tradition, and these chapters have much to offer. Chapter 14 is devoted to continuity of memory at Troy, and Bachvarova rightly observes that the *Ilia*d is a product of cultural memory reflecting the contested status of Wilusa between Hatti and Ahhiyawa in the Late Bronze Age, superimposed onto narrative aspects of Ancient Near Eastern traditions as represented by *SoR* (351–356). Chapter 15 discusses the date of Homer, the formation of the Troy myth and its ‘textualizations’. Some of the conclusions arrived at here are highly questionable. Bachvarova posits a narrow window of 1160–1050 for the ‘creation’ of the legend of Troy (distinct from the composition of our Iliad, which Bachvarova tentatively dates to ca. 700).

The later date is arrived at through the dubious proposition that the dactylic hexameter developed in Ionia in the Protogeometric period. The earlier date is arrived at by the even more surprising means of accepting the dates given for the Trojan War by ancient sources (Ephorus, Eratosthenes)—ca. 1250 bc—and then counting off three generations to mark the limit of historical memory. The logic here is perilously flimsy. Although acknowledging elsewhere the importance of Wilusa as a contested periphery between Ahhiyawa and Hatti in the Hittite documents, and being aware of the famous incipit of a Luwian ‘Wilusiad’, Bachvarova simply dodges the question of a Bronze Age tradition by observing (401) that “there is . . . no reason to believe that a Mycenaean epic about the fall of Troy existed.” There is of course no reason to believe that it did not exist either.

Bachvarova is an excellent philologist, and the facility with which she can handle the textual sources is admirable. Her linguistic judgment is at times less fortunate. This is most problematic in her uncritical acceptance of Robert Beekes’ reconstruction of ‘Pre-Greek’, which mars several passages. In particular, Bachvarova erroneously claims that Beekes’ suggestion of a Pre-Greek origin of Apollo is ‘vindicated’ (246). It is not. While the etymology and origin of Apollo remain a mystery, there is no reason to reject the proposition that the Greek deity Apollo was adopted at Wilusa in the Late Bronze Age (Bachvarova rightly notes that the divine determinative d is in fact visible in KUB 21.1iv27, and thus that we can confidently read dAppaliunaš in the *Alaksandu Treaty*). Equally problematic is her acceptance (361–362 and elsewhere) of Ilya Yakubovich’s flawed assessment of the status of Luwian and the linguistic make-up of Western Anatolia in the Late Bronze Age.[[8]](#footnote-8)

*Minor points*

There are a few factual errors and infelicities in the book: Page 90 note 55: I see no reason why the double springs mentioned at Il.22.147–56 must be a recollection of the kaskal.kur mentioned in the *Alaksandu Treaty*. Page 256: the Oppian who wrote the Haleutica is dated to the 2nd c ad, not bc. Page 258: the suggested etymology of the mythical serpent Typhon from Mount Ṣipon is inherently unlikely, and furthermore is irreconcilable with Watkins’ highly compelling argument for the diffusion of the myth from Anatolians to Mycenaeans in the Late Bronze Age.[[9]](#footnote-9) Page 357: whether Phrygian forms an IE sub-group with Greek and Armenian is a highly contentious issue. Page 374: the suggestion that the cultural memory of the Hittites might have been ‘purposefully erased’ in Western Anatolia is bizarre. Page 375: the name Gyges (Lydian kukaś < PIE \**h2éuh2-o*-) is not necessarily Carian; it is simply not a native development within Lydian.[[10]](#footnote-10) Pages 396–397 with reference to the formation of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*: ‘authoritative’ and ‘written’ do not necessarily go hand in hand! Page 427: the discussion of Luwian *tar* misses the most basic Greek parallel: Homeric τίς ταρ (Il.1.8+). Page 428: it does not follow from the absence of code-switching in Greek epic that the number of bilingual poets was small (and Bachvarova’s definition of code-switching is misleadingly restrictive).

In a number of places there are unfortunate omissions from the bibliography: pages 8 and 172 on the *Anitta Text*: reference should be made to the fundamental study of E. Neu, *Der Anitta-Text*. StBoT 18 (Wiesbaden, 1974). Page 9 on Palaic: readers should be directed towards O. Carruba, *Das Palaische: Texte, Grammatik, Lexikon*. StBoT 10 (Wiesbaden, 1970). Page 211 on Aristeas: readers should be directed towards J.D.P. Bolton, *Aristeas of Proconnesus* (Oxford, 1962). Pages 243–249: the discussion of dlamma and the Hittite tutelary deities contains no reference to G. McMahon, *The Hittite State Cult of the Tutelary Deities* (Chicago, 1991). Page 308 on Cypriot: should contain reference to M. Egetmeyer, *Le dialecte grec ancien de Chypre* (Berlin and New York, 2010). Page 323 on the syncretization of the Cyprian goddess with a NE goddess of sexuality: on the associations between ištar and Išḫara in the tablets of Alalaḫ (Tel Achana) VI and VII see J. Miller, *Studies in the Origins, Development and Interpretation of the Kizzuwatna Rituals.* StBoT 46 (Wiesbaden, 2004), 376–7. Page 359 note 43: with reference to Holt Parker on Aeolic, the counter-arguments of J.L. García Ramón must be taken into account, “On the genetic classification of ancient Greek dialects: comparative reconstruction versus hypercriticism and atomism at work,” *Μελέτες για την Ελληνική Γλώσσα* 30 (2010) 219–36. Pages 399–400 on the Greek alphabet: should at the very least refer to R.D. Woodard, *Greek Writing from Knossos to Homer* (Oxford, 1997). Pages 458–64: missing from Bachvarova’s appendix on the hexameter is the important paper of G. Horrocks, “The antiquity of the Greek epic tradition: some new evidence,” PCPhS 26 (1980), 1–11.Typos are amazingly few for a book of this scale and complexity: page161 note 52: for “145–6” read “175–6”; page 293 last line of text: for ‘who’ read ‘which’.

This is in sum an excellent and very important book. Bachvarova’s mastery of the myriad sub-disciplines she brings to bear is a feat that few alive today could hope to equal. The evidence that Bachvarova adduces in pursuit of the Anatolian background of the Greek epic tradition is overwhelming. In addition to the overall weight of the evidence adduced, it is Bachvarova’s subtlety and sensitivity in handling the data that single the work out as particularly noteworthy. This is no mere collection and catalogue of parallels. Instead, Bachvarova teases out the differing strands of the multi-layered tradition that informs Homeric verse, often within the same mythical and narrative nexus being able to differentiate inherited elements, Akkadian, Hittite, Luwian, and Greek. While disagreement about certain aspects of her analysis should and will persist, the overall case has been made in spectacular fashion. Going forward, no serious scholarship that seeks to engage with the origins and development of the Greek epic tradition can afford to ignore what Bachvarova has set down with such authority and conviction.

Alexander Dale

*Concordia University*, alexander.dale@concordia.ca

1. This early stage of Hittitology is analysed in several of the contributions in D. Grodek and S. Rößle, *Šarnikzel: hethitologische Studien zum Gedanken an Emil Orgetorix Forrer* (19.02.1894–10.01.1986) (Dresden, 2004), and R. Oberheid, *Emil O. Forrer und die Anfänge der Hethitologie* (Berlin, 2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. E.g. M.J. Mellink (ed.) *Troy and the Trojan War: a Symposium held at Bryn Mawr College*. October 1984 (Bryn Mawr, PA, 1986), and in particular the contributions of Hans Güterbock and Calvert Watkins. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The bibliography is too extensive to list, though over the past thirty years the work of J.D. Hawkins, Craig Melchert, Wolf-Dietrich Niemeier, Jaan Puhvel, Frank Starke, and Calvert Watkins, to name only a very select few, has been instrumental in reshaping our understanding of all aspects of particularly Western Anatolian culture and the vectors of transmission between Anatolia and Greece. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. J.D. Hawkins, “Tarkasnawa King of Mira: ‘Tarkondemos’, Boğazköy sealings and Karabel” *Anatolian Studies 48* (1998), 1–31. The bibliography on the Ahhiyawa question is vast; for a useful, if unimaginative and uninspired, account see R. Fischer, *Die Ahhijawa-Frage, mit einer kommentierten Bibliographie* (Wiesbaden, 2010). All relevant documents are now available in English translation with brief discussion and historical commentary in G.M. Beckman, T.R. Bryce, and E.H. Cline, *The Ahhiyawa Texts* (Atlanta, 2011). An example of the increasingly antediluvian approach can be found in G. Steiner, ‘”he case of Wiluša and Ahhiyawa,” *Bibliotheca Orientalis 64* (2007), 590–611. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Whether the composition-in-performance model that has developed out of the Parry-Lord theory built upon observation of the South Slavic tradition is the best paradigm for Greek—let alone Ancient Near Eastern—epic verse is disputable. For a distinction between composition-in-performance and premeditated oral composition see A. Teffeteller “Orality and the politics of scholarship.” In C. Cooper (ed.) *Politics of Orality* (Leiden and Boston, 2007), 55–70 with reference to further literature. Cf. also B. Alster, “Interaction of oral and written poetry in early Mesopotamian literature,” In M. E. Vogelzang and H. L. J. Vanstiphout (eds.) *Mesopotamian Epic Literature: Oral or Aural?* (Lampeter, 1992), 23–69. P. Kiparsky “Oral poetry: some linguistic and typological considerations.” In B. A. Stolz and R. S. Shannon (eds.) *Oral Literature and the Formula* (Ann Arbor, MI, 1976), 73–106. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. E. Neu, *Das hurritische Epos der Freilassung I. StBoT 32* (Wiesbaden, 1996). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. “The Eastern Mediterranean Epic Tradition from *Bilgames and Akka* to the *Song of Release* and Homer’s *Iliad*,” GRBS 45 (2005), 131–53. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. I. Yakubovich, *Sociolinguistics of the Luvian Language* (Leiden and Boston, 2010). See now J.D. Hawkins, “Luwians *versus* Hittites,” in A. Mouton, I.C. Rutherford, and I. Yakubovich (eds.), *Luwian Identities* (Leiden and Boston, 2013), 25–40. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. C. Watkins, *How to Kill a Dragon* (Oxford, 1995), 448–459. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See now A. Dale, “WALWET and KUKALIM,” *Kadmos* 54 (2015) 151–66 at 155 note18. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)