

Structures of Epic Poetry

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Introduction

On 21 April 1797 Friedrich Schiller wrote to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe that a chief characteristic of the epic poem is the independence of its parts.¹ Indeed, ancient philologists, especially those engaged in early Homeric criticism, have long since observed that within the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* certain recognisable scenes organise the poems' sequences of action.² The scholiasts and ancient commentators, however, did not develop an overarching concept for the analysis of this phenomenon; rather, they discussed the individual scenes separately according to their shared content: e.g. arming scenes, messenger scenes, and typical actions on the battlefield. In 1933 Arend published his dissertation *Die typischen Szenen bei Homer*. This influential work identified recurring narrative themes in the Homeric epics and assessed both how a given pattern may be altered to fit each new poetic context and how schematic 'type-scenes' accentuate actions within the poem. Such scenes included, for example, meal preparations, sacrifices, arrivals, and assemblies.

At the same time as classical philologists of the early 20th century were studying Homeric type-scenes, scholars of oral poetry, at that point a still developing field of research, made similar observations about their material. Edwards (1991, 11–15), in his concise overview of Homer's orality,³ traces the roles played by 'type-scenes' and 'story patterns' within developing conceptions of the production and reception of oral poetry.⁴ Today many Homeric scholars, while accepting the importance of orality for their subject, nevertheless take a measured view of the issue, a position nicely illustrated by the *Basler Gesamtkatalog*⁵ or by the introduction to Graziosi/Haubold (2010, 17):

1 "Es wird mir aus allem was Sie sagen, immer klarer, daß die Selbstständigkeit seiner Theile einen Hauptcharakter des epischen Gedichtes ausmacht." In their correspondence during the spring of 1797 Goethe and Schiller examine the parallels and differences between the epic and the dramatic form. Their discussion combines theoretical reflection with their own practical experience. This exchange of ideas came to be known as the shared text "Über epische und dramatische Dichtung". The letter is quoted from the edition of Beetz (1990).

2 Cf. Nünlist (2009, 307–15).

3 See also Edwards (1975) and Edwards (1992).

4 On oral tradition, see, e.g., Foley (1991) and Bakker in this volume.

5 Cf. de Jong/Nünlist (2005, 170–1).

Traditional patterns, then, should not be regarded as the unwieldy legacy of an oral tradition, but rather as versatile poetic resources. The poet commands a very rich and diverse tradition, from which he draws together and combines many different elements.

This tradition, as research on early epic poetry has shown, encompasses pre-Homeric developments in Greek poetry as well as the likely influence of ancient Near-Eastern narrative modes.⁶ Structural elements, whose roots may be found in oral traditions, become formative for the genre of epic poetry after Homer. The German term ‘Bauform’ (translated as “structural element” or “building block” in this compendium) was first employed by Lämmert in 1955 for describing aspects of German narrative literature. In 1971 the concept gained currency in the field of Classical Philology with Jens’ study *Die Bauformen der griechischen Tragödie*. The assessment of structural elements in ancient epic poetry, however, brings a different set of questions to the foreground than those that are germane to drama.

The aim of the present compendium is to identify and to trace those epic scenes and structures diachronically whose set forms, sequences, and recognisable features mark them as a lasting and integral part of the ancient epic tradition. Our notion of the *bauforn* or ‘epic structure’ is more capacious than that of the established concept of the ‘type-scene’ and goes far beyond the conceptual scope of epic *formulae*. Our underlying theoretical considerations are reflected by a deliberate variety of concepts.

Firstly, we build on the ideas of structuralist thinkers and, in particular, the tradition of Russian Formalism. The terminology of the Geneva School of Linguistics (Ferdinand de Saussure), a differentiated and productive engagement both with synchronic and with diachronic observations, and the acceptance of the systemic structural nature of language and literature form the basis of the studies collected in this compendium. Yet, we have to take into account that already at an early stage, Formalism opted against a too ‘scholastic formalism’. To name one example, Tynjanov and Jakobson explicitly argued for a view on literary products that includes both a historical approach and a structural analysis.⁷ We aim at achieving a mode

⁶ On structures of Indo-European narratives, cf. the influential book by Watkins (1995, esp. 12–27) and the short but fundamental article by Schmitt (1968). On the Mycenaean roots of the Homeric poems, cf. the summary in Latacz (2003, 200–5 and esp. 261–95 with the example of the Catalogue of Ships). On ancient Near-Eastern epic with a view to the Homeric poems, see, in particular, the work of West (2007, esp. 35–6 on structures).

⁷ Cf. Tynjanov/Jakobson (1972, 382–3): “Die entschiedene Gegenüberstellung von synchronischem (statistischem) und diachronischem Schnitt war noch unlängst für die Linguistik wie für die Literaturgeschichte eine fruchtbare Arbeitshypothese, da sie den Systemcharakter der Sprache (bzw. der Literatur) für jeden einzelnen historischen Moment aufzeigte. Heutzutage veranlassen uns die aus der synchronischen Konzeption gewonnenen Einsichten, auch die Prinzipien der

of speaking that is both theoretically grounded and practicable, and that requires us as scholars to engage with the material in its structural form and to attend to the dynamic processes of its reception and imitation. Through a conscious synthesis of established methods, we strive to build a theory and terminology based on the texts themselves.

We acknowledge that in recent years the terminology of narratology and the analytic apparatus of intertextuality have fundamentally influenced how scholars interpret ancient texts. The study of ancient epic, in particular, has always been concerned with the processes of reception and imitation. A few stages of scholarly preoccupation with the phenomenon of literary *imitatio* deserve a brief outline. Within the broader humanities but also among classical philologists an increased interest in literary theory⁸ and a need for a consistent terminology for describing how texts interact and mutually influence one another⁹ have led scholars to engage thoroughly with the intellectual processes underlying the practice of literary reference. The theories of intertextuality¹⁰ and narratology¹¹ are established research paradigms available to readers and researchers for describing these complex pro-

Diachronie neu zu überprüfen. Entsprechend der Entwicklung auf dem Gebiet der synchronischen Betrachtungsweise ist man auch auf dem der diachronischen dazu gekommen, das Konzept einer mechanischen Agglomeration der Erscheinungen durch den Begriff des Systems, der Struktur zu ersetzen.”

8 The work of Wellek/Warren (1948), a quintessential expression of thought in New Criticism and the Structuralist School, is often mentioned as one of the starting points. How influential this book became can be seen from a quotation from Delarue (2000, 53), who takes the idea that “Le plaisir que l’on prend à un œuvre d’art naît à la fois d’un sentiment de nouveauté et d’un sentiment de reconnaissance” as his basis for interpreting the teichoscopy and the river battle in Statius by comparison to Homer.

9 Among other works, the often cited but little read study of Reiff (1959) on terminology merits mention. Nevertheless, Reiff’s study does not investigate the particulars of these practices as they relate to epic.

10 We cannot strive for completeness in this brief introduction: exemplary are the works of Conte, who on the shoulders of Kristeva and Genette laid the groundwork for this kind of inquiry; cf., e.g., Conte (1980). On the relationship of model and imitation, Conte (1980, 121) writes: “Omero non è solo spesso ... il Modello-Esemplare di Virgilio ... ma anche, e costantemente, il Modello-Codice. Omero è dunque presente come il modello costituito da una sequenza di singole imitazioni sedimentate, ma rappresenta anche l’istituto epico *tout court*.” Conte’s work formed the basis for future research; cf., e.g., Barchiesi’s wide-reaching studies: Barchiesi (2001a) and Barchiesi (2001b).

11 Sullivan summarises the development and importance of de Jong’s work in the area of narratological theory as part of their joint collected volume; cf. de Jong/Sullivan (1994, 1–26). In the present compendium, narratology is given further treatment in a short essay by Kirstein/Abele/Nill intended to relieve this introduction and the other contributions from the demands of reviewing its specific terminology.

cesses.¹² Here, especially the works in the wake of Conte merit mention.¹³ Most recently, studies of literary forgery and authorial attribution have brought new focus to questions of originality and imitation.¹⁴

As both a spur and an aid to the analysis of *imitatio*, studies like those of Knauer (1964) and Juhnke (1972) emerged in the 1960s and 1970s. Their intensive comparisons of the Homeric text to Latin epic produced the surveys and tables that formed the basis for future research into the referential practices of individual authors.¹⁵ Moreover, in recent decades imperial epic has received greater scholarly attention.¹⁶ As new editions, translations, and essay collections on Quintus of Smyrna and Nonnus demonstrate, this new scrutiny extends to the period's Greek poems as well as those in Latin.¹⁷ In addition to an abundance of single-themed studies and companions,¹⁸ a host of imperial poets have received edited volumes devoted to their works and careers. There are now companions to Silius Italicus¹⁹ and Lucan,²⁰ as well as multiple collections of essays on Statius and Valerius Flaccus.²¹ A comparable revival can be seen in scholarship on Hellenistic epic. Since the 1990s, after a period of relative disinterest, Apollonius Rhodius has been the subject of many monographs as well as a companion.²² A particularly

12 On Vergil and the Homeric epics, see recently Dekel (2012).

13 For Conte, see note 10 above.

14 See McGill (2012) and Peirano (2012).

15 Delarue (2000, 41–59), for example, does this pointedly in his introductory chapter on Statius and Homer. Additionally, cf. the review by Dominik (2002), which concurrently gives a short survey of French-language works on Flavian epic.

16 Providing an overview is not possible in this setting. After earlier individual studies like Kytzler (1955) and Schetter (1960), and influential works on Lucan (e.g. Ahl, 1976) and on Flavian writers of epic (e.g. Reitz, 1982 or Ahl/Davis/Pomeroy, 1986), scholarly interest in imperial epic increased considerably in the 1990s and continues into the present day. By way of example, we may point to the *Lucan-Projekt* under the direction of Walde (see, e.g., Walde, 2005) and the series of volumes with the title *Ratis omnia vincet* on Valerius Flaccus, with the review by Toohey (2002). Hardie (1993) is surely the best summary of the topic.

17 Cf. Gärtner (2005) and Gärtner (2010); the collected volume *La poésie épique grecque* (2006) contains an essay on Nonnus; Paschalis (2005) combines contributions on epic production in both languages.

18 From these we would highlight, in particular, the reflections on structure, like Roberts/Dunn/Fowler (1997) on “closure” (see esp. the contribution by Hardie (1997) and Kyriakidis/de Martino (2004) on “middles” (see esp. the contribution by Tipping, 2004).

19 Cf. Augoustakis (2010a). See also the essay collection *Studi su Silio Italico* (Castagna, 2006) and the volume edited by Schaffernrath (2010).

20 Cf. Asso (2011).

21 See, for example, Smolenaars/van Dam/Nauta (2008), Heerink/Manuwald (2014) on Valerius Flaccus, and Dominik/Newlands/Gervais (2015) on Statius.

22 See Knight (1995), Reitz (1996), and Papangelis/Rengakos (2008).

important study is Nelis' discussion of Apollonius' reception by Vergil.²³ Moreover, the *epyllion* and its idiosyncratic poetics have been the focus of productive new research.²⁴ Likewise, interest in epitomised and epitomising epic continues to increase.²⁵ Diachronic surveys of ancient epic in its entirety or of the Latin or Greek epic tradition separately complete this field of research.²⁶

Within this growing body of scholarship a number of approaches are distinguishable. Works of literary criticism range from studies of particular authors and poems to extended treatments of whole epochs.²⁷ New scholarly attention to issues of gender has put the questions it entails at the forefront of many research projects and programmes.²⁸ Another fruitful approach investigates the relationship between politics and poetry, especially as it pertains to the conditions of literary production under dictatorial regimes.²⁹ The perspective of cultural history increasingly informs single-author studies and multi-author collections on epic. Works of this kind, e.g. Galinsky (1996) on the Augustan period and the volumes by Boyle/Dominik (2003) and Kramer/Reitz (2010) on the Flavian period, illuminate the contexts and historical processes that bear on the various modes and media of expression within a given epoch. Furthermore, today the afterlives of texts and authors in the Middle Ages and in Neo-Latin epic receive treatment not only in individual studies, but also in more general overviews.³⁰

Given this profusion of work on intertextual theory and ancient epic, one might suppose that the field is suitably outfitted. Yet, through all the surveys, edited volumes, and cross-sections thus far, scholarship on ancient epic lacks an overarching and systematic way of discussing and comparing epic structures across poems. A reader intent on examining the occurrences and variations for a particular type-scene – to borrow momentarily the terminology of Homeric philology – or one who wants to compare underworld scenes across ancient epic must rely on

²³ Cf. Nelis (2001).

²⁴ Cf. Baumbach/Bär (2012).

²⁵ Conferences on the *Ilias Latina* in particular (Erlangen, January 2019) and on epitomising practices in general (Zurich, February 2019) reflect this renewed interest. See also Reitz (2007).

²⁶ Cf. Boyle (1993) and Foley (2005). The introductory summary by Rüpke (2012) has a different ambition and shows how urgently the field still needs an entry point that is academically rigorous and organised by objective criteria.

²⁷ See Feeney (1991). Tipping (2010) is an example of an especially convincing study that focuses on structure. See also Tipping (2004).

²⁸ For example, Sannicandro (2010) on Lucan, Klodt (2001) on Statius, and Augoustakis (2010b) on Silius.

²⁹ See Dominik (1994b), McGuire (1997), Ripoll (1998), Bernstein (2008a), and Bernstein (2008b).

³⁰ See Hardie (2002b) on Ovid, Dominik (2002) on Silius Italicus, and Walde (2009) on Lucan. On structural elements in Neo-Latin epic, see Braun (2010–2011).

the remarks of commentaries, individual studies, or in the most fortunate cases the highly abbreviated entries of lexical reference works like *Der Neue Pauly*.³¹ Farrell (1991, 8), in his résumé of the reactions to Knauer (1964), notes this gap in scholarship when he observes that the standard conventional elements of epic need to be seen as “integral parts of a tightly woven fabric of intertextuality” and when he describes the epic tradition as “an extensive systematic programme of allusion based on an analytical reading of major sources.”³²

Broad cross-sectional works on individual structural elements exist only in a small number. There are, however, a series of exemplary studies examining the use of a single *bauforn*. Miniconi (1951), for instance, attempts to gather the vast number of structural elements pertinent to warfare. Looking at the deployment of funeral games in Statius, Lovatt (2005) highlights how the poet both engages and departs from his epic predecessors. Foucher (1997) discusses *aristeiai* and Gibson (2008) studies battle scenes in Statius.³³ The account of dream sequences given by Walde (2001a) is another example of this kind of fruitful studies.³⁴ Especially the phenomenon of *ekphrasis* has received much critical attention in recent years.³⁵ Nevertheless, a study like that of Putnam (1998) demonstrates that political readings – in this case the presupposition that Vergil is a critic of the Augustan regime – often hazard opportunities to approach this narrative *bauforn* objectively. Naturally, interest in the interaction between figurative and textual storytelling dominates the study of *ekphrasis*. Departure scenes in the poetry of Valerius Flaccus form the focus of Tschiedel’s article from 2004. Klodt (2003) and Reitz (2012a) explore arming scenes, especially those in Vergil. Romano Martín (2009) investigates the councils of the gods as a recurring scene, while Reitz (2012b) analyses their function in the plots of Flavian epics. Bettenworth’s extensive study of banquets from 2004 illustrates the pragmatics and variability of this commonly occurring situation.

Thus, structural approaches to elements of epic narratives indeed exist, and studies that combine a sensitivity for the systematic aspects of epic with an understanding of its historical context are highly fruitful, as many examples have

³¹ Cf., for example, the following *lemmata*: *Aristie*, *ekphrasis*, *Gastmahl*, *Gleichnis*, *katabasis*, *Katalog*, *Teichoskopie*.

³² Farrell (1991, 9).

³³ On the battle scenes in Ovid, cf. Braun (2009).

³⁴ By contrast, Bouquet (2001) gives an unsatisfactory account of the same topic. Cf. the review by Weber (2002).

³⁵ Cf. the lemma *ekphrasis* in DNP (Fantuzzi/Reitz/Egelhaaf-Gaiser, 1997). The most important essay on the intellectual richness of ekphrastic elements is still Fowler (1991). See also Zeitlin (2013).

demonstrated. Nevertheless, the terminology at play in these efforts is still in a state of flux. The term ‘type-scene’, for instance, cannot be used sensibly for narrative patterns, such as the epic catalogue or *ekphrasis*, nor does it encompass similes and proems. These structural elements are not restricted to single episodes, but they occur within epic poems, providing unity and coherence to the plot. On occasion they also comment on the narrative proper or offer the path for pro- and analeptic extensions of the storyline. Varied in kind, these structures characterise epic narratives and serve as genre markers. They merit being discussed together under a single conceptual framework (‘core structures’).

With our compendium we aim to put forward a systematic overview of the most important structural elements in ancient epic. The frequent interplay and juxtaposition of individual narrative elements makes it clear that epic poems are neither limited nor constrained by tradition. To the contrary, they can also be influenced by other genres.³⁶ Epic poetry develops its power for innovation precisely out of the recognisability of its fixed structures. In reference to Statius, Henderson (1993, 162) described the great variety of epic structures as total chaos:

Olympian inserts, twin catalogues and teichoscopy, necromancy and underworld scenography, funeral games and *aristeiai*, prayer-sequences and prophecy, tragic included narrative and aetiological hymn, developed formal similes, battle-*Sturm und Drang*, mountain vastness ... *in extenso* – the whole works!

We are more optimistic to be able to find a systematic approach. Set forms and familiar contents, on the one hand, enable recipients to orient themselves within the vast texture of an epic narrative and form a shared set of expectations, which allows the epic poet either to fulfil them or to be innovative by deviating from them. They can be reversed, compressed, or simply alluded to as, for example, in ‘almost-episodes’. Epic structures, by their very consistency, facilitate variation.

The overarching design for our own work evolved step by step, taking its start in a group of like-minded colleagues. The now classic monograph by Heinze (³1928) formed an important impetus.³⁷ The format as it now stands was then further developed by Reitz and Finkmann.

The first volume (‘Foundations’) contains theoretical considerations on the architecture of ancient epic that lay the foundation for our study: contributions on genre and genre theory, on formularity in epic narration, on classification, i.e. the

³⁶ See Ambühl (2017).

³⁷ See the appraisal of Heinze by Schmidt (1995, 137–41) in his essay on Latin philology. Schmidt identifies Heinze as perhaps the only ‘unideological’ Vergilian scholar of the first half of the 20th century, esp. in German Classical Philology.

distinctions between didactic and narrative epic, and the use of mythological and historical material. Every scholar and reader of epic literature is confronted with the problem that in many respects Ovid's *Metamorphoses* occupies an exceptional place in the epic tradition. Consequently, we have left it up to the contributors whether to include the *Metamorphoses* in their essays or whether to exclude the work from their purview. To address potential gaps in coverage arising from our editorial guidelines, a separate contribution examines Ovid's engagement with traditional epic structures using the poet's battle, storm, and hospitality scenes as representative examples.

The question of book divisions as early attempts to identify structures, and the role of the authorial voice in the initial proem, the internal proem, and the *sphragis* are handled in individual contributions. As we encouraged a plurality of narratological approaches, we included the aforementioned chapter on narratology and epic poetry in this volume to unburden the single contributions from repetitive methodological introductions. Volume I also broaches the topic of those structural elements whose function may denote those structural elements that pause or accompany the main action. They are, in a sense, situated alongside the plot, not disconnected to it but capable of coming loose. In addition to forming narratological digressions, they can contain inset narratives of parallel stories or offer retrospect and proleptic narration. In this respect, structural elements, like catalogues, aetiological and genealogical digressions, *ekphraseis*, or similes, are also open to metapoetic interpretations. The comparably rare but important occurrence of 'almost-episodes' is also treated separately in this volume.

Whereas the essays designated for each individual *bauforn* keep their focus within the genre of epic, a separate contribution discusses the intergeneric aspects of structural elements, especially in connection to tragedy. Similarly, special manifestations of epic forms, like parody, are not treated in the essays on individual structural elements. Rather, the topic is taken up in the contributions on Greek and Roman *epyllia*. Another problem is raised by texts transmitted only in fragments, which may nonetheless have formed an important influence on later poems. Therefore, a separate contribution is devoted to examining the traces of epic structures in fragmentary epic poems.

In volumes II.1 and II.2 ('Configuration') we aim to provide a comprehensive approach to the discussion of the most important epic structures that are tied to epic plots. Volume II.1 is devoted to representations of battle scenes, proceeding sequentially through war preparations (arming), observation (teichoscopy), the individual stages and modes (single combat, mass combat, chain-reaction fights, naval and river battles), and extraordinary feats (*aristeiai*) of epic combat, as well as its aftermath (deaths, burial rites, and funeral games). The first section of volume II.2 is dedicated to epic journeys and their related scenes, most importantly arrivals,

banquet scenes, departures, and storm scenes, which are at the core of *nostos* and *ktisis* epics. The recognition that epic action takes place in time and space (both on the horizontal and vertical axis) informs the second and the third section of volume II.2. A set of contributions explores how epic poetry understands and makes use of time (and, by extension, weather and the challenges or blessings it provides) in its varying structural functions and of space, especially with regard to the portrayal of landscapes, cities, mythical places, as well as the abodes of the dead and of the gods. The fourth and final section of volume II.2 encompasses the broad domain of communication. The scope includes not only communication as it transpires between the characters of a given poem (e.g. in messenger and council scenes), but it also extends to communication with the past and the future in the context of underworld scenes, prophecies, epiphanies, and dreams.

In volume III our authors address the question of epic structures on a timeline from Akkadian epic to the Neo-Latin texts of the 19th century. The final paper discusses one of the many possibilities provided by digital research tools and methods for the study of structural elements and narrative patterns in the epic tradition.

By including extensive bibliographies³⁸ and indices of sources, names, and subjects, we have endeavoured to make the compendium as accessible as possible not only for classical philologists, but for any literary scholar or reader interested in narrative genres. We are convinced that the contributions in these volumes furnish the concept of the *bauforn* with the needed structural rigor, new analysis, and fresh presentation. The sophisticated toolkit available to today's philologists and recent theoretical insights into epic imitation have together enabled this project, in all its intended plurality, to plumb the utility of existing methodologies and to leverage a clear structure and comprehensible organisation into attaining the following goal: to give an overview of ancient epic structures that describes their diachronic development, analyses their varied instantiations, and ultimately provides a key to the intertextual character of ancient epic narrative and its tradition.

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