Greek Epic Fragments: From the Seventh to the Fifth Centuries BC
(Loeb Classical Library No. 497)

Ian Myles Slater On: Bits And Pieces

Greek epics of the archaic period include poems that narrate a particular heroic episode or series of episodes and poems that recount the long-term history of families or peoples. They are an important source of mythological record. Here is a new text and translation of the examples of this poetry that have come down to us.

The heroic epic is represented by poems about Heracles and Theseus, and by two great epic cycles: the Theban Cycle, which tells of the failed assault on Thebes by the Seven and the subsequent successful assault by their sons; and the Trojan Cycle, which includes Cypria, Little Iliad, and The Sack of Ilion. Among the genealogical epics are poems in which Eumelus creates a prehistory for Corinth and Asius creates one for Samos. In presenting the extant fragments of these early epic poems, Martin West provides very helpful notes. His Introduction places the epics in historical context.

My Personal Review:
I opened a review of M.L. West's edition and translation of "Homeric Hymns. Homeric Apocrypha. Lives of Homer" (Loeb Classical Library No. 496) with a bibliographic note that applies to this volume as well:

Back in 1914, the Loeb Classical Library issued, as volume 57 of the series, "Hesiod, The Homeric Hymns and Homerica," edited and translated by Hugh G. Evelyn-White. A revised and expanded edition of 1920 included a substantial appendix of newly published fragments from Greek papyri; this appendix received a further supplement in 1936, edited and translated by D.L. Page. The volume was reprinted at intervals thereafter (my copy is from 1967), but without updating.

So much for the repeated information.
As was the case with the volume of "Homeric Hymns" (etc.), this is a whole new edition of part of the contents of the older, single-volume Loeb edition, along with some additional material. "Greek Epic Fragments" (LCL No. 497) is made up of the summaries and snippets which are all that survive of a body of narrative poetry outside the familiar "Iliad" and "Odyssey," dating, at least in theory, from Archaic and early Classical times. The works represented concern not only the Trojan War, but also the earlier wars of Thebes, the Voyage of the Argo, and the adventures of such heroes as Herakles (Hercules) and Theseus, and some lesser-known material. Some of the stories survive in other forms, including the famous, or relatively well-known, "Argonautica" of Apollonius, Virgil's "Aeneid," Statius' "Thebaid," and many of the extant Greek tragedies, and in more obscure works, such as the "Posthomerica" of Quintus of Smyrna. Ancient scholars sometimes noted borrowings or divergences, information preserved as marginalia ("scholia"), and embedded in other works.

For the most part, however, we are fortunate when we have spare prose summaries of what was in each of the epics, versions from late antiquity preserved under the name of Proclus. These seem to be based at least in part on the works of Alexandrian scholars, who had access to manuscripts of the works in question. The learned travel writer Pausanias supplies some valuable quotations, with critical comments, and there are a variety of other incidental sources, plus invaluable parallel versions in the "Library" of mythology attributed to Apollodorus. Among recent studies of the problems this presents, Timothy Gantz's "Early Greek Myth: A Guide to the Literary and Artistic Sources" is comprehensive and relatively accessible.

The whole harvest, however, even counting some works included by West, although usually considered too late to belong to this group, fits on about a hundred mass-market paperback sized pages of Greek text. (For those not familiar with the Loeb series of small hardcovers, the Greek and/or Latin text is printed on the left-hand page, facing an English translation on the right side.)

Nothing, therefore, is going to make this particular volume thrilling reading. Unlike some of the Loeb editions of the tragedians and lyric poets, it is pretty clearly for the serious student, or the enthusiast (like me), not the ordinary literate reader. West, however, presents it clearly, and the edition marks a much-needed advance on Evelyn-White's venerable, but, in my experience, frustratingly antique, version.

On technical points, I must defer to qualified reviewers in the classical journals (see, conveniently, Michael J. Anderson in the on-line "Bryn Mawr Classical Review"); the initial response seems favorable, with the usual number of suggested alternative readings of the evidence. West has previously edited and/or translated Hesiod, the "Iliad," and a substantial body of lyric verse. I am certainly not about to challenge the distinguished editor's decisions!
Despite some residual grumblings about paying for three new books to replace one volume, I look forward to the forthcoming Loeb "Hesiod."

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