

How Useful is Archaic Greek Poetry as a Historical Source

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“The higher Greek poetry did not make up fictitious plots; its business was to express the heroic saga, the myths”

- Gilbert Murray, 1909

Gilbert Murray, the preeminent Australian classicist, expresses a statement in his preface to Aristotle on the Art of Poetry that raises the highly contentious issue of how useful is archaic [poetry](#) as a historical source? If we accept the definition of a ‘source’ as anything that can provide us with information which can add to the sum of our knowledge of the past, and the definition of a ‘historical source’ as any such piece of information used by a historian to make a point. Then, is certain that we can accept Archaic Greek poetry as a historical source. This poetry has been used for centuries to make points on Greek culture and events, regardless of it’s veracity. It is undoubtedly useful as a source when we consider just how much use repeated generations of classicists and historians have managed to gleam from the existing material. There must be a distinction, however, between justification and usefulness. Archaic poetry comprises a vast array of different

kinds of discourse: epic narrative of the kind found in the Iliad and the Odyssey; Hymns to the gods and narratives about them; didactic poetry; poetry that offers encouragement, lament, praise to blame; political poetry; love lyric; and drinking songs. Despite The term archaic deriving from the Greek word archaikos, which means primitive, Modern historians think of the term archaic as a misnomer, as the archaic period is considered to be one of the most fruitful periods of Greek history. The many different kinds of statement contained in the diverse genres of archaic poetry make different claims on truth and permit diffe...

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