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Why Do We Call Early Greek Poetry 'Archaic'? Periodization and Histories of Greek Literature, 1830-2022

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In nearly every 'History of Greek Literature' written in the past twenty years (in German, English, Italian, and French), the authors and works from Homer in the eighth century BC to Demosthenes at the end of the fourth are divided into two periods: the 'archaic' and the 'classical', with the dividing line between the two given as 480 or 479 BCE - the dates of the Persian Wars. The term 'classical' has been the focal point of countless discussions over the years, charting the history of its usage, its meaning, and its validity as a term. But surprisingly, in none of these 'Histories' (intended for non-specialists, one might add) is the origin of the term 'archaic' explained or its usage defended, a fact made even more curious by the fact that it carries a

pejorative connotation in most modern languages - 'out of date', 'old-fashioned', 'primitive'. In this talk, I chart the history of this periodization of an 'archaic' era of Greek literature from the early nineteenth century to today, in order to show how unstable the periodization of early Greek

literature has been over the years, when and why the term 'archaic' was adopted, and why, as currently employed, both the periodization and the term remain deeply problematic.