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Fighting on the River: The Alpheus and the ‘Pylian Epic’

In the *Iliad* the old Pylian king Nestor talks on several occasions about his past glorious deeds.¹ Many scholars think that these passages are what survives of a ‘Pylian Epic’, i.e. of the epic songs which in Mycenaean age celebrated the lords of Pylos.² It is assumed in fact that there was Mycenaean epic poetry, which was performed at the courts of the kings on the occasion of festive or funeral banquets;³ and that this poetry has been almost completely lost, the only exception being the Pylian songs which were incorporated into our text of the *Iliad*. The survival of the ‘Pylian Epic’ must probably be connected with the important role that many families of Pylian origin played in archaic Greece. In archaic Athens some of the most powerful γένη claimed descent from Neleus and the Neleids. In the cemetery of the Ceramicus the excavations have brought to light geometric funerary vases, produced at the end of the VIII century BC, which reproduce the fight between Nestor and the Moliones.⁴ We can hypothesise that the mythical episode which was depicted on the vases containing the ashes of the deceased corresponded to a poem performed by a singer during the funeral. If this is so, this means that in geometric Athens the epic tradition originating from Pylos still survived, was still performed and was a key-element in the creation of identity.⁵

Now, if we look at the content of Nestor’s speeches, we see that he praises victories in battles against neighbouring peoples (Epeans, Arcadians), successful cattle raids, victories in athletic contests and in particular in chariot races. Let us have a short review of these narratives.

Iliad 11.670–762 offers the most extended passage of ‘Pylian Epic’. Nestor tells a very complicated story which can be divided in two main sections.⁶ In the first one he reports how he seized a huge number of cattle, fighting against the Epeans and killing Itymoneus, and how he drove this booty down to Pylos, where on the day after it was divided among the Pylians. Neleus takes the major

1 Hom. *Il.* 7.132–156, 11.670–761, 23.629–642.

2 Bölte 1934; Hainsworth 1993, 296–298; Vetta 2003; Nobili 2009, 105–110.

3 Vetta 2001, 23–30.

4 Ahlberg-Cornell 1992, 32–35.

5 Vetta 2003, 22–27; Aloni 2006, 67–75; Nobili 2009, 110–113.

6 Hainsworth 1993, 296.

portion for himself, in retaliation for the loss of his four race-horses, stolen from him by the Epean king Augeas. In the second section Nestor tells how the Epeans came down towards Pylos to take revenge and how the Pylians, warned by Athena, left their city and marched out against the enemies: here the tale is very rich in topographic details, so that it is not difficult to reconstruct the geographic setting.

1. The Epeans move to the river Alpheus, which marks the border of the Pylian territory, and attack Thyroessa.

Iliad 11.711–713:

ἔστι δέ τις Θυρόεσσα πόλις αἰπεῖα κολώνη
τηλοῦ ἐπ' Ἀλφειῶ, νεάτη Πύλου ἡμαθόεντος
τὴν ἀμφестρατόωντο διαρραῖσαι μεμαῶτες.

Now there is a city Thyroessa, perched on a steep cliff, overlooking the Alpheus, on the far border of sandy Pylos, and there they camped, aiming to destroy it.⁷

2. The Pylians set out; the cavalry in a few hours reaches the river Minyeios (a minor stream, presumably flowing about 20 kilometres south of the Alpheus).⁸ Once the infantry has also arrived (shortly after daybreak), they all move to the Alpheus, where they offer sacrifices to the gods, take their evening meal and bivouac under arms.

Iliad 11.722–732:

ἔστι δέ τις ποταμὸς Μινυήϊος εἰς ἄλα βάλλων
ἐγγύθεν Ἀρήνης, ὅθι μείναμεν Ἡῶ διαν
ἰππῆες Πυλίων, τὰ δ' ἐπέρρειον ἔθνεα πεζῶν.
ἔνθεν πανσυδίη σὺν τεύχεσι θωρηχθέντες 725
ἔνδιοι ἰκόμεσθ' ἱερὸν ῥόον Ἀλφειοῖο.
ἔνθα Διὶ ῥέξαντες ὑπερμενεῖ ἱερὰ καλά,
ταῦρον δ' Ἀλφειῶ, ταῦρον δὲ Ποσειδάωνι,
αὐτὰρ Ἀθηναίη γλαυκῶπιδι βουὴν ἀγελαίην,
δόρπον ἔπειθ' ἐλόμεσθα κατὰ στρατὸν ἐν τελέεσσι, 730
καὶ κατεκομήθημεν ἐν ἔντεσιν οἷσιν ἕκαστος
ἀμφὶ ῥοᾶς ποταμοῖο.

A river, Minyeios, meets the sea near Arene, and there the chariots waited for the dawn, and then the infantry arrived. From that point, travelling armed and at speed, by noon we reached Alpheus' holy stream. There we sacrificed fine victims to mighty Zeus, bulls to Al-

⁷ The English translations from the *Iliad* are taken from the on-line text of A.S. Kline.

⁸ Hainsworth 1993, 302.

pheus and Poseidon, and a heifer to bright-eyed Athena. Then each company ate supper, and we slept in battle-gear on the bank.

3. On the following day there is the battle. The text is not explicit on this point, but we must think that the two armies fight on the northern shore of the Alpheus, because the Pylians, after defeating the Epeans, chase them until Bouprasion, well to the north of the river. This means that Nestor and his men have crossed the Alpheus, immediately after their arrival and before the night which they spend bivouacking on the shore: the sacrifices to the gods, and in particular to the god of the river, are διαβατήρια.⁹

Iliad 7.132–156 is the account of another exploit of young Nestor, this time in an one on one fight against the Arcadian champion Ereuthalion. The context is a battle between the Pylians and the Arcadians; Nestor doesn't explain the reasons for the conflict, he only says that the two armies gathered together near the wall of Pheia and along river Iardanus. It is not clear to which part of the western Peloponnesian shore these geographic markers point;¹⁰ we don't know, in particular, which river is meant by the name Iardanus (and the same goes for the other stream mentioned just before, the Keladon);¹¹ but Pheia should probably be identified with the town which in other epic passages¹² is called Pheai, about fifteen kilometres north of the mouth of the Alpheus, in southern Elis.¹³ If it is so, then this struggle between Pylians and Arcadians takes place not far from the location where Nestor kills Itymoneus and seizes his cattle in *Iliad* 11: the setting of both episodes is the plain along the northern shore of the Cyparissian Gulf, north and south of river Alpheus; and we can argue that the Alpheus – in this context too – is meant to mark the northern border of the Pylian territory.

Nestor's opponent is Ereuthalion, whose favourite weapon is an iron mace; we are told that in the past it was the property of Areithoos, who used to massacre his enemies with this club; but Lycurgus killed him by trapping him in a narrow place where he had no room to swing it; then it was Lycurgus who wore Areithoos' armour, until he grew old and gave it to his friend Ereuthalion. It is very likely that Areithoos was originally an Arcadian brigand (or an Arcadia-related brigand):¹⁴ from a fragment of Pherecydes (fr. 158) we learn that he came to Arcadia and accumulated a huge booty, until he was killed by Lycurgus, who

⁹ Hainsworth 1993, 303.

¹⁰ Robert 1920, 191.

¹¹ Kirk 1990, 252 (“the rivers remain mysterious”).

¹² Hom. *Od.* 15.297; Hom. *Hymn. Ap.* 427 (φεράς codices, Φεάς editores).

¹³ Aloni 2006, 38–39.

¹⁴ Nobili 2011, 34–36; see also Kirk 1990, 253.

led his Arcadian troops against him to recover their stolen property. Lycurgus' attack against Areithoos has therefore much in common with the killing of Itymoneus by Nestor. And because Ereuthalion uses the same iron mace (that is to say, the typical weapon of a brigand), the fight between him and Nestor can also be seen as an episode of a story of cattle raids: we can imagine that the Pylians are attacking the Arcadians of Ereuthalion in response to their incursions.

Iliad 7.132–156:

αἶ γὰρ Ζεῦ τε πάτερ καὶ Ἀθηναίη καὶ Ἄπολλον
 ἠβῶμ' ὡς ὄτ' ἐπ' ὠκυρόω Κελάδοντι μάχοντο
 ἀγρόμενοι Πύλιοί τε καὶ Ἀρκάδες ἐγχεσίμωροι
 Φειᾶς πᾶρ τείχεσσιν Ἰαρδάνου ἀμφὶ ῥέεθρα. 135

τοῖσι δ' Ἐρευθαλίων πρόμος ἴστατο ἰσόθεος φῶς
 τεύχε' ἔχων ὤμοισιν Ἀρηϊθόοιο ἀνακτος
 δίου Ἀρηϊθόου, τὸν ἐπὶ κλησιν κορυνήτην
 ἄνδρες κίκλησκον καλλιζωνοὶ τε γυναῖκες
 οὐνεκ' ἄρ' οὐ τόξοισι μαχέσκετο δουρὶ τε μακρῶ, 140
 ἀλλὰ σιδηρεῖη κορύνῃ ῥήγνυσκε φάλαγγας.

...

ἀλλ' ἐμὲ θυμὸς ἀνήκε πολυτλήμων πολεμίζειν
 θάρσει ᾧ· γενεῇ δὲ νεώτατος ἔσκον ἀπάντων
 καὶ μαχόμεν οἱ ἐγώ, δῶκεν δέ μοι εὖχος Ἀθήνη.
 τὸν δὴ μήκιστον καὶ κάρτιστον κτάνον ἄνδρα 155
 πολλὸς γὰρ τις ἔκειτο παρήρορος ἔνθα καὶ ἔνθα.

Oh, Father Zeus, Athena and Apollo, if only I were young again as when our Pylian host was fighting the Arcadian spearmen by swift-running Keladon, under Pheia's walls, at the streams of Iardanus. Ereuthalion was their champion. Like a god he was, clad in the armour of noble King Areithoos whom men and fair women called the Mace-man, because he ignored long-spear or bow, and shattered the lines with his iron mace.

...

Though the youngest there, in my boldness my doughty heart spurred me to fight him, and Athena granted me glory. He was the tallest and strongest I ever slew: yet he lay sprawling there in all his mighty breadth and height.

So these two narratives of 'Pylian Epic' which we find in *Iliad* 7 and 11 seem to refer to the same situation and to the same geographic environment. In both cases the Pylians are engaged in military actions in the northern area of their land, in proximity to the Alpheus. The Alpheus is explicitly referred to in Book 11, whereas it is only evoked through the mention of Pheia and of the river Iardanus (perhaps one of its tributaries) in Book 7; but its presence is a core element in both stories. The role of the river is double. First, it is the boundary line that cattle raiders cross as they drive their booty from the foreign land to their own land: crossing the river is something that must necessarily happen,

but is also the symbolic image of a successful raid. Second, the river is the setting of the battle that is a consequence of the raid, as the victims come to rescue. The report of Book 11 is a complete one, as the two segments of the story (raid and battle) are narrated at length. The narrative of Book 7 is shorter, because the purpose of Nestor is to encourage the Achaean warriors to accept Hector's challenge: so he focuses his report on the scene of himself coming out to fight against the Arcadian champion. But the scenery of the fluvial battle is clearly alluded to: Pylians and Arcadians are fighting beside the swift-flowing Keladon and on the stream of the Iardanus. Thus in this case too the river is the line of contact between the two armies and defines the battlefield.

We may suppose that exactly this topic, i.e. the abduction of cattle and the heroic actions connected with this (fights during the raids and struggles in consequence to the raids) was a standard theme (a kind of 'typical scene') of the 'Pylian Epic'. As Cecilia Nobili has shown, there is a very large number of myths in which stories of cattle raids have Messenian heroes as their protagonists or are located in Messenia.¹⁵ The existence of such mythical accounts is of course very significant and can be explained as a survival of a local epic tradition. We can therefore argue that in the songs performed in the so called 'Palace of Nestor' the lords of Pylos were celebrated for their bravery¹⁶ in collecting booty with successful raids or in defending their property from hostile incursions. I would suggest – and this is a core point of my contribution – that in these songs a river was often the background of the heroic action.

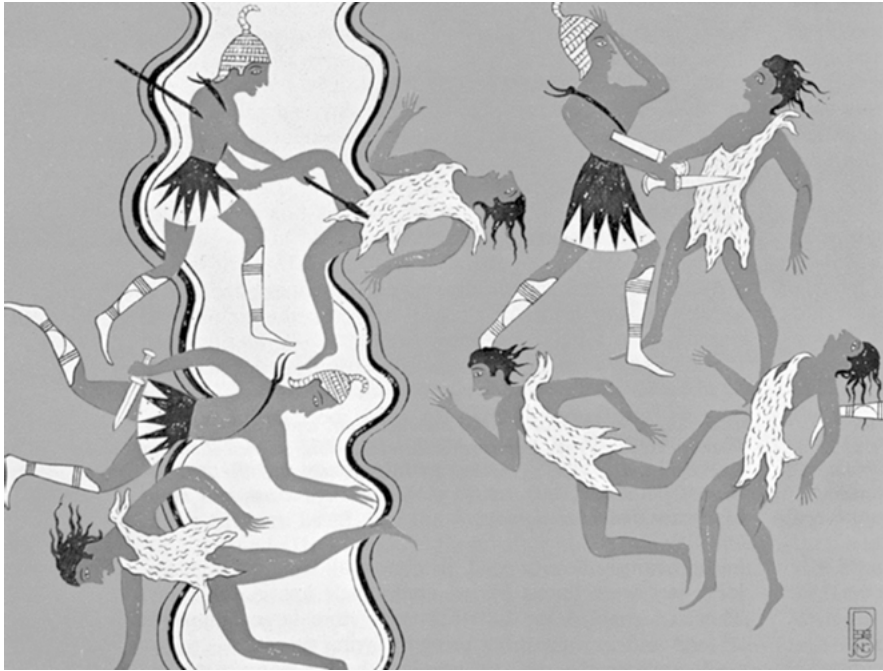
One of the wall paintings which decorated Hall 64 of the palace of Ano Englianos seems to confirm this idea: it depicts a battle between two armies, the one in the typical Mycenaean armour and the other dressed in animal skins; in the background a curvilinear decoration brings to mind the meandering stream of a river.¹⁷ The archaeologist Nikolaos Yalouris suggests that this painting refers exactly to the struggle between Pylians and Arcadians which is narrated by Nestor in *Iliad* 7:¹⁸ the Arcadians were well known in antiquity for wearing sheepskins, so Yalouris thinks that the visitors of the palace immediately associated this painting with that famous battle which was a favourite object of poetic performances. The style of the narration is in fact close to the epic mode, because the battle is split into individual fights, to focus on the bravery of the champions. And it is a fluvial battle, if Yalouris is right in interpreting the curvilinear shapes on the background as a river.

¹⁵ Nobili 2011, 23–70; see also her contribution in this volume.

¹⁶ Vetta 2001, 21–24.

¹⁷ Lang 1969, pls. 16, 117.

¹⁸ Yalouris 1989.



Palace of Nestor, 'The battle' – Fresco from Hall 64 (Watercolour by Piet de Jong)

Against this interpretation there is an obvious argument: the plain of the Alpheus (at which the mention of Pheia and of the Iardanus points) is very far (about 100 kilometres) from the Messenian 'Palace of Nestor'. Our fresco has been dated by Reinhard Jung and Mathias Mehofer to 1250 BC;¹⁹ so it was *in situ* on the wall when the final destruction of the palace occurred. Why should a poet, performing for the lords of the Palace, have set the battle in a geographical area which was outside their authority (and presumably outside their usual military activity)? From the documents written in Linear B we can infer that the northern boundary of the Pylian Kingdom was marked by the river Neda, well to the south of the Alpheus.²⁰

The same can be said also in relation to the other episode of 'Pylian Epic' in *Iliad* 11. Here too – as we have seen – the setting of Nestor's exploits (the fight with Itymoneus and the battle against the Epeans) is the plain of the Alpheus, well outside of the Pylian Kingdom. From Nestor's account, however, it is clear

¹⁹ Jung and Mehofer 2008, 121.

²⁰ Kelder 2010, 8–9; see also Niemeier 1991, 126–132; Bennet 1998, 117; Bennet 2011, 151–155.



Reconstruction of the Pylian Kingdom according to the Linear B Texts (from Kelder 2010)

that the Alpheus is only a few hours' march from Pylos, because the Pylian cavalry leaves at night and arrives at the river before daybreak. This means that the poet is not thinking of a Messenian Pylos. The problem of the position of the Homeric Pylos was discussed already in antiquity (by Strabo, for example)²¹ and has been discussed also in modern times.²² A brilliant and influential paper on this issue has been published by Massimo Vetta.²³ In Vetta's opinion the Homeric (or at least the Iliadic) Pylos is not the Messenian one, but the other town with the same name which the Pylians founded and inhabited in Triphylia, near modern Kakovatos, after the fall of Mycenaean society.

²¹ Strab. 8.3.7 p. 339c.

²² Meyer 1951; Kiechle 1960; Brillante 1993; Frame 2009, 651–686.

²³ Vetta 2003.

The Pylian colonists, as it was the rule in ancient Greece, brought with themselves in the new site not only the goods that they had saved from the destruction but also their habits and their cultural identity, as it was registered in their traditional songs. But the setting of these songs had to be adapted to the new geographical context. This is the reason why the ‘Pylian Epic’ was – in Vetta’s words – re-located, so that it could fit with the new Triphylian location.

The narratives of the ‘Pylian Epic’ needed a river as their setting. The relocation forced the poets to look for a river that could be an eligible option for the new context. The Alpheus, which marks the border between Triphylyia and Elis, only 30 kilometres north of Kakovatos, became the new setting of the Pylian exploits. Nestor’s accounts in *Iliad* 7 and 11 are clearly the result of this re-location and refer therefore not to the primary version but to the sub-Mycenaean re-styling of the ‘Pylian Epic’. The Arcadians are still there, because they are plausible opponents for the Pylians of Kakovatos too. But now the standard competitors for Nestor and the Neleids become the Epeans, who live beyond the Alpheus and can make raids against the Pylians or be the target of Pylian raids.

But once the Alpheus has been incorporated into the ‘Pylian Epic’ (and the ‘Pylian Epic’ has been absorbed into the Panhellenic poetry), the Alpheus plays an active role in also ‘attracting’ narratives which are not originally ‘Pylian’ but have to do with cattle theft or cattle abduction. This is the reason why, for example, in the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes* the Alpheus is the final destination of the god’s journey, after the abduction of Apollo’s cattle.²⁴

One last point. The proximity of Kakovatos to Elis also makes possible the attraction of the Pylians into narratives which are specifically Eleian. The new ‘Pylian Epic’ develops stories in which the Neleids turn out to be brilliant charioteers. We know that chariot races were a typical Eleian tradition: the competition between Pelops and Oenomaus is the mythical counterpart of horse races that took place in the plain of the Alpheus long time before the foundation of the Olympic games. In our ‘Pylian Epic’ there are two passages in which the Pylians seem to share the Eleian love for chariot races. In *Iliad* 11 there is the mention of the four race horses sent by Neleus to Elis and abducted by Augeas (699–702). In *Iliad* 23 Nestor remembers another glorious episode of his youth, as he went to Bouprasion to take part in the splendid funeral games for king Amarynceus and won all the competitions. His only defeat

²⁴ *Hom. Hymn. Herm.* 101; Nobili 2011, 28–29.

was in the chariot race, where the twins Moliones had the great advantage of being two on the same chariot.

Iliad 23.629–642:

εἴθ' ὡς ἠβώοιμι βίη τέ μοι ἔμπεδος εἶη
 ὡς ὀπότε κρείοντ' Ἀμαρυγκέα θάπτον Ἐπειοὶ 630
 Βουπρασίῳ, παῖδες δ' ἔθεσαν βασιλῆος ἀεθλα
 ἔνθ' οὐ τίς μοι ὁμοῖος ἀνὴρ γένετ', οὔτ' ἄρ' Ἐπειῶν
 οὔτ' αὐτῶν Πυλίων οὔτ' Αἰτωλῶν μεγαθύμων.
 πύξ μὲν ἐνίκησα Κλυτομήδεα Ἴηνοπος υἱόν,
 Ἄγκαϊον δὲ πάλῃ Πλευρώνιον, ὅς μοι ἀνέστη· 635
 Ἴφικλον δὲ πόδεσσι παρέδραμον ἐσθλὸν ἐόντα,
 δουρὶ δ' ὑπερέβαλον Φυλῆά τε καὶ Πολύδωρον.
 οἷσιν μ' ἵπποισι παρήλασαν Ἀκτορίωνε
 πλήθει πρόσθε βαλόντες ἀγασσάμενοι περὶ νίκης,
 οὔνεκα δὴ τὰ μέγιστα παρ' αὐτόθι λείπετ' ἄεθλα. 640
 οἱ δ' ἄρ' ἔσαν δίδυμοι· ὁ μὲν ἔμπεδον ἠνιόχευεν,
 ἔμπεδον ἠνιόχευ', ὁ δ' ἄρα μᾶστιγι κέλευεν.

I wish I were as young and strong as that time when the Epeans were interring King Amarynceus at Bouprasion, and his sons held funeral games in his honour. Then no man proved himself my equal, Epeans, Pylians or proud Aetolians. I beat Clytomedes, the son of Enops, in the boxing and Ankaïos of Pleuron, who took me on in the wrestling. In the foot race I outran Iphiclus, good as he was, and my spear out-threw Phyleys and Polydorus. Only in the chariot race did the two Moliones beat me, by their combined superior strength, forcing their team to the front, begrudging me the victory since the race carried the best prize. They were twins, and one could drive with a sure hand, while the other plied the whip.

To sum up, the Alpheus of the renewed 'Pylian Epic' is a real river, because it is the boundary of the 'New Pylos' territory; but it is at the same time a literary river, because it plays a pivotal role in defining and suggesting stories.²⁵

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²⁵ Zanetto 2004, 151.

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