



*Homer and Rhetoric in Byzantium: Eustathios of Thessalonike on the  
Composition of the Iliad.*

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**Homer and Rhetoric in Byzantium:  
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This thesis studies the rhetorical analysis of the *Iliad* by Eustathios of Thessalonike, a widely celebrated intellectual, teacher, and orator in twelfth-century Byzantium. More specifically, I explore Eustathios' analysis of the composition of the *Iliad*, i.e. the way in which Homer has selected, arranged, and presented his subject matter. My aim is to shed light on the rhetorical programme that Eustathios reads into the *Iliad* and to identify the rhetorical lessons that he wishes to teach the readers of his *Parekbolai on the Iliad*. What, in Eustathios' view, defines a skilful composition such as the one constructed by Homer, the consummate orator? What does he identify as the principles and techniques underlying Homer's successful composition, to be implemented by the twelfth-century writer of rhetorical prose? I also examine Eustathios' discussion of the gods as devices employed by the poet to compose his poem as he wishes. By taking key texts that provided the Byzantines with concepts to think and speak about the composition of rhetorical discourse as my starting points, I aim to study Eustathios' analysis within the context of his own conceptual framework. The results of my analysis can deepen our understanding of the principles underlying the many rhetorical discourses that survive from the Komnenian period, many of which remain to be studied for their literary merit.

The first chapter explores Eustathios' hermeneutic programme as set forth in the proem of the *Parekbolai on the Iliad*. The first part of the proem underscores the importance of studying Homer by praising the poet for the enchanting allurements of his work as well as the great wisdom that is found in the *Iliad*. Homeric poetry is alluring like the Sirens' song and impressive like an acoustic World Wonder. The poet is like an Ocean of wisdom, from which all later authors and scholars drew, and like a host offering his guests a rich banquet of learning. Eustathios compares his own merits as exegete to those of cooks: he has collected information from many sources and has presented it in a convenient manner so that the reader has at hand all he needs when studying the *Iliad*. He is like Odysseus, who protects his companions from being swept away by the enchantment of the Sirens' song and teaches them the wise lessons he has learned from their song. By way of table of contents, Eustathios enumerates the different kinds of information that he has included in the *Parekbolai*: thoughts, methods, words, gnomes, historical narratives, myths, and many other useful things. Eustathios defines the usefulness of Homer and his own *Parekbolai* largely in terms of usefulness for authors of rhetorical prose, who wish to imitate The Poet in their own writings. Moreover, throughout the *Parekbolai*, he ascribes to Homer didactic intentions that are very similar to his own.

In the proem, Eustathios explains what, in his view, is the correct method for interpreting Homeric myths. In his definition, myths are fictional stories that reflect truth through the plausibility of their invention. The lessons to be learned from studying Homeric myth are therefore first of all rhetorical: how to compose plausible discourse. Some myths, moreover, contain a philosophical lesson, as intended by the author of the myth. It is the exegete's task to retrieve this deeper layer of meaning by means of allegorical interpretation. The allegorical meaning as constructed by the author can be explained either in terms of 'anagogical' allegory, i.e. natural and ethical allegory, in which the gods stand for elements of the cosmos or aspects of the human intellect, or historical allegory, in which the historical event that formed the starting point for the mythical narrative is identified. This two-stage approach toward myth – first the mythical narrative

as told by Homer is to be studied, next one can look for a potential allegorical meaning – underlies Eustathios' interpretation of the many myths of the *Iliad*.

The second chapter studies the principles that, in Eustathios' view, underlie the 'skilfulness' (δεινότης) of Homer's composition of the *Iliad*. These principles, moreover, are the principles that Homer kept in mind when composing his poem. In other words, Eustathios' analysis of the composition of the *Iliad* is in fact a reconstruction of Homer's composition process. According to Eustathios, the historical events of the Trojan War form the basis of the *Iliad*. Therefore, the poet has to follow certain historical facts. The arrangement of the narrative, however, is completely at Homer's discretion. Eustathios' basic idea of the arrangement of the *Iliad* is that the poet started *in medias res* and inserted earlier and later events, as well as additional material of various types, into the basic storyline. Of prime concern is the honour of Achilles, around which the entire *Iliad* revolves. Eustathios identifies various other principles which the poet aimed to accomplish: creating variation and avoiding monotony, displaying and imparting knowledge, soothing the pro-Greek listener, playing with the audience's expectations with surprising and novel twists and turns of events, and expanding the poem. The poet used many different techniques to implement these principles: fictional episodes, historical narratives, similes, προαναφήνησις ('announcement in advance') and προέχθεις ('presentation in advance'), duels, διασκευαί (i.e. detailed descriptions of a scene), and questions about the causes of a certain event. The last part of the chapter studies Eustathios' analysis of the Catalogue of Ships as a case study, in which many of the principles and techniques discussed in the preceding sections converge.

Homer's composition is not only skilful but also plausible. The third chapter explores how Homer, in Eustathios' view, imbued the *Iliad* with 'plausibility' (πιθανότης) as the most important virtue of rhetorical discourse. It discusses techniques concerning the content of the poem as well as techniques concerning its presentation and formulation that contribute to the overall plausibility of the composition. The course of events is plausible if it corresponds to reality: plausibility comes into being when the events follow the usual patterns of the world around us and if people and anthropomorphic gods behave as people normally behave in certain circumstances. The *Iliad* also contains marvellous events that clearly do not tally with reality. Such events belong to the poetic τερατεία ('marvel tales') that the poet is free to include in his poetry to entertain and amaze the audience. Homer lends plausibility to such events by referring to precedents within the 'microcosm' of the *Iliad* or within the world of pre-Homeric mythology, in order to demonstrate that his inventions are neither singular nor extravagant. As far as presentation and formulation are concerned, Eustathios pays much attention to the power of detail: a wealth of (specific) details creates the impression of truthfulness *qua* historicity, a lack of detail suggests truthfulness *qua* trustworthiness. That Homer knows certain things *en detail* and is not afraid to admit that he does not know other things for certain, lends plausibility to his composition at large. Homer, moreover, strives to make his formulation plausible and safe – he makes sure that his words are unambiguous and open for one interpretation only. In this way, plausibility and safety of formulation are closely related to Eustathios' conception of *enargeia* as complete clarity.

It is a clear indication of Homer's rhetorical excellence that he does not always play it safe but at times takes a risk and displays daring by playing with the limits of plausibility. Homer makes sure that his daring inventions are safe at the same time, that they remain within the boundaries of plausibility, by carefully preparing them in advance. The same holds for daring formulation, existing in ἐπιφωνήματα and daring metaphors. By way of a rhetorical κατασκευή ('confirmation') of the plausibility of the *Iliad*, Eustathios continuously demonstrates how Homer's composition is

plausible in content and formulation. The final part of the third chapter studies the plausibility of *Iliad* 24, where Priam goes to Achilles to ransom Hector's body. Eustathios indicates that earlier critics found fault with this episode on many points and disputed its plausibility. He demonstrates how the *Iliad* is plausible on all these points and how Homer, the *summus orator*, never failed to accomplish this most important virtue of discourse.

Eustathios' interpretation of the Homeric gods is the subject of the fourth chapter. In line with the allegorical method set forth in the proem of the work, Eustathios explores the myths about the gods as first of all the narratives told by Homer. The gods 'in bodily form' are characters in the narrative and belong to the *τερατεία* characteristic of poetry, which the poet can construct and use at his own discretion. In Eustathios' view, Homer motivates the course of events with the plans of the gods and steers his narrative in the desired direction by means of their interventions, especially when he has deliberately created difficulties by developing his narrative in an unhistorical and implausible direction. In allegorical terms, the gods represent the mental and rhetorical capacities of the poet. Zeus is an allegory of the poet's mind: when Zeus deliberates in which direction he wants the Trojan War to evolve, we in fact see the poet at work, deliberating how he wants to develop his narrative. In a similar vein, the Muse stands for the poet's knowledge, Athena for his prudence and rhetorical skilfulness, and Hermes for his eloquence. Similar interpretations of the gods are found in Tzetzes' *Allegories of the Odyssey*. Such interpretations tie in well with the tendency of twelfth-century authors to refer to and assert themselves in their writings. Eustathios (and Tzetzes) delineate an image of Homer as a self-conscious and self-confident author, who gives his audience a glimpse into his own excellent composition process.

The meaning of the gods in terms of 'anagogical', i.e. natural and ethical, allegory is closely connected with the plausibility of the *Iliad*. According to Eustathios, the poet kept the allegorical meaning of the gods in mind when composing his poem. In other words, he strove to make his mythical narrative correspond to the allegorical meaning of the gods. As a result, the narrative is plausible, since it reflects universal truths cloaked in allegory. It is characteristic of Eustathios' approach to primarily focus on the mythical narrative as related by Homer. In this respect, his approach differs from Tzetzes', as a comparison of interpretations by the two twelfth-century Homerists illustrates. For Tzetzes, the mythical narrative is an unimportant substitute for the *real* message of the poet, which is to be retrieved by means of allegorical interpretation.

For his analysis, Eustathios uses concepts from a variety of earlier sources. He appropriates these concepts so as to use them as tools for his own, Byzantine reading of Homer. His analysis is characterised by a sharp eye for detail as well as systematic attention to certain phenomena throughout the entire *Iliad*. The image of Homer that emerges from the *Parekbolai* is that of a word artist, who composed his masterpiece purposefully and carefully. This, we may assume, in fact is the image of the ideal twelfth-century author. Affinities between the *Parekbolai* and Eustathios' rhetorical output underscore the practical function of the *Parekbolai* within its twelfth-century context and point to interesting paths for further research.