Proceedings of the Danish Institute at Athens VI

Edited by *Erik Hallager* and *Sine Riisager*

Athens 2009

© Copyright The Danish Institute at Athens, Athens 2009

Proceedings of the Danish Institute at Athens
Volume VI

General Editor: Erik Hallager.
Graphic design: Erik Hallager.
Printed at Narayana Press, Denmark

Printed in Denmark on permanent paper
conforming to ANSI Z 39.48–1992

The publication was sponsored by:
NORDEA
FONDEN

ISSN: 1108–149X
ISBN: 978–87–7934–522–5

Distributed by:
AARHUS UNIVERSITY PRESS
Langelandsgade 177
DK–8200 Århus N
www.unipress.dk

Gazelle Book Services Ltd.
White Cross Mills, Hightown
Lancaster LA1 4XS, England
www.gazellebooks.com

The David Brown Book Company (DBBC)
P.O. Box 511
Oakville, CT. 06779, USA
www.davidbrownbookco.uk

Cover illustration: Reconstruction of the city of Kalydon
Graphics by: Mikkel Mayerhofer

Homeric listeners in Byzantium: Eustathios of Thessaloniki on Homer's similes

Christian Høgel

Many students of Homer will have come across the name Eustathios of Thessaloniki as a source for information and explanation of the Homeric texts. When trying to understand Homer today, we depend heavily on the tradition that right from antiquity has compiled and transmitted valuable information on the meanings and forms of particular words, on the stories behind names and places, on myths *etc.* Eustathios is one of these sources: writing in the Byzantine age he produced extensive commentaries on various authors, including Homer. Working on the basis of the ancient tradition, Eustathios used many of the ancient commentaries that are still known to us today, but he also had access to others that are now lost or only found in fragments. In quite a few of the Byzantine manuscripts of *e.g.* Homer – those that are now our actual source for the Homeric texts – commentaries were inserted on the margins of the text, often in compact and abbreviated form. These margin commentaries – or scholia as they are called – very often go back to ancient commentators, and their information on Homeric words and questions are extremely useful for us today, when trying to figure out what the Homeric texts actually say. This was also the case in the Byzantine age, where Homer was always favourite reading and appeared on any school program that taught its pupils literature.

These scholia – margin commentaries – were extensively used by the Byzantine orator, author, and churchman, Eustathios of Thessaloniki. Eustathios knew all the ancient scholia that we know today, as well as much more ancient and Byzantine literature on Homer. Probably writing and rewriting throughout most of his life on his own running commentary and interpretation of Homer's epics, Eustathios has left us very large commentaries on the Iliad and the Odyssey, as well as on authors such as Pindar, Dionysius Periegetes, and John of Damascus.[1] His commentaries on Homer are often mentioned in modern commentaries on Homer, for Eustathios transmits valuable information that may have appeared in ancient commentaries that are now lost. But, as I will try to show in the following, Eustathios' importance is not only to be seen as a transmitter of ancient knowledge. Eustathios had ideas of his own;[2] in fact, the last decades of scholarly work on Eustathios has revealed a very active personality who wrote treatises on contemporary historical events, had firm philosophical and theological beliefs, and was active in political life, not least in his last vocation as archbishop of Thessaloniki. In his commentaries on Homer, Eustathios is both proud – he speaks of the hard labour he has put into searching through all available sources – but he is also humble, and outright confesses that most of his information may be found elsewhere. But, as he says ironically or maybe even sarcastically in the introduction to his commentary on the Iliad, given the common ease with which many approach the Homeric problems, time will show whether many will not find it practical to be helped by a commentator who has done all the hard work already (*Comm. Il.* 3.31ff.).[3] It will be my contention that Eustathios was, to a large degree, right; in a sense, we have learned a great deal from Eustathios, if not for other reasons, then at

[1] The commentary on the Iliad is found in van der Valk 1971–87; the commentary to the Odyssey only in older editions. The prooimion to the Pindar commentary is edited in Kambylis 1991.

[2] See also Lindberg, 1985, esp. 125–6.

[3] See van der Valk, 4–5.

least because he for centuries was the only running, comprehensive commentary to Homer that existed. The actual texts of the ancient commentators were lost sometime in the Byzantine age, leaving only the excerpted information found in the scholia, the margin commentaries, as already described. Furthermore, when Homer was exported in the Renaissance to the West, Eustathios' commentary soon followed, and already in 1542 the first printed version of his commentaries in Greek appeared, the so-called *Editio Maiorani*.[4] Later followed printed versions of his commentaries in Latin translation.

But in order to show what influence Eustathios had on later reading of Homer I shall be looking at the way he discusses the Homeric similes.[5] Homer makes, as everyone who has read him will know, extensive use of similes, *i.e.* comparisons such as "this or that person went into the fighting just as a lion or some other animal would do", or, as in a famous simile "just as the leaves on the trees are the generations of man; the leaves fall but new appear each spring". The feature of the similes – including the linguistic aspect in the "just as" – also caught the attention of Eustathios, who with outstanding learnedness would discuss any feature of the Homeric texts at the best founded level that Byzantium could offer. But in order to understand the circumstances he worked under, a few biographical data are needed to place in his literary and social context.

Eustathios was – it seems – born around 1115.[6] We do not know where he was born, but he grew up and studied in Constantinople, probably under the *maistor ton rhetoron* Nicholas Cataphloron. In terms of career, Eustathios made his way through the bureaucracy, first as *hypografeus* under the patriarch Luke Chrysoberges, later as clerk in the judicial system. At some date he became deacon, thus member of the clergy. He is named deacon in his Pindar-commentary. Through long periods of his life he seems to have been under the protection of the later patriarch Michael III. Michael became *hypatos ton philosophon* – a sort of imperial professor in philosophy – in the mid-1160s, and this move may have helped Eustathios in reaching the important post of *maistor ton rhetoron,* the holder of which was to give an annual speech of praise to the Byzantine emperor. In his commentary to Dionysios Periegetes, Eustathios is referred to with this title. It used to be the common view that he attained the position of archbishop of Thessaloniki soon after. But it is more probable that a period intervened in which Eustathios was out of favour and out of job. It is clear from letters of his to Michael III, that it was his old protector who, after a period of distress, was helpful in procuring his appointment to the See of Thessaloniki. This took place probably not earlier than 1178, thus when Eustathios was already in his sixties. We hardly know anything about other events in his life, but from his years as bishop at least two striking events are connected to him. First, the Normans captured Thessaloniki in 1185, and the following year Eustathios wrote a breathtaking account of this event, showering most of the blame for the capture on the local Byzantine administrator, whose military lacks and conceited habits Eustathios paints with passionate aversion. The text has, however, many other qualities, not least its detailed account of events leading up to the capture.[7] The other major event we know of is that Eustathios was expelled for a period from Thessaloniki by his congregation. We do not know many details about this, but one of the reasons that appear in the sources to this is that they complained that Eustathios was a bad speaker and preacher. This may sound odd to us, knowing that he had made quite a career as imperial speaker, and clearly had literary gifts. We cannot say, but his love of difficult authors such as Pindar, whom he cites in all his introductions to literary treatises, may have exasperated the poor congregation of Thessaloniki. We do not know the date of his death, but he probably died a quite old man in 1195–96, around the age of eighty. Among his many writings – letters, homilies, funeral sermons, literary, historical, and political treatises – is a text that calls for reforms within

[4] See van der Valk, xxxi.

[5] On the definition of similes and comparisons, see Larsen, forthcoming.

[6] For this and the following biographic information, see Kazhdan 1984, 115–95.

[7] The latest edition is found in Kyriakides 1961. For other editions, see Kazhdan 1991 under 'Eustathius of Thessaloniki.'

the monastic system. He also expressed his opinions on the mismanaged water system in Constantinople, and *e.g.* on the need to ask converts from Islam to abjure their faith in the God of Mohammed.

Thus, we are clearly dealing with a person who was engaged in just about every aspect of Byzantine life, and yet his commentaries, not least those on Homer, show us a man who must have spent a great deal of his time bended over the manuscripts, well equipped with various philological tools pertaining to ancient literature. But also in these literary activities of Eustathios, the engaged, "no-nonsense" person shines through. Let us take a look at the way he, in the introduction to his commentary on the Iliad, discusses his predecessors in the field of Homeric interpretation:[8]

> But we need to preface our discussion with the following short remarks: Some have placed Homer's poetry completely in the shade and, as if they were ashamed of him, they have – whenever the poet speaks in a human way – spiritualized him completely and interpreted everything allegorically, and not only what has some mythical quality, but also what is commonly taken to be the historical entities, Agamemnon, Achilleus, Nestor, Odysseus, and the rest of the heroes, so that the poet seems to be speaking to us as in a dream. Others, on the other hand, have gone in the complete opposite direction and have torn off the Homeric wings and have not let him lift off in flight at all; instead, clinging only to face values and destroying the spiritual sublimity, they have not allowed the poet to be understood allegorically in any way. These people have left the stories as they are, which is a good thing, but have decreed that the myths should not be falsified into allegories. Among these, as will be shown in the following, we find also Aristarchus, who in this did not establish a good precedence. The more diligent interpreters are those who, just as they let the stories depend on themselves, will in the first place accept that the myths are as they stand and study their structure and reliability, through which some truth may be reflected in myths. Then, leaving aside the concrete imagery as being foreign to reality, they proceed to an allegorical treatment of the myth, either by trying to understand it in view of nature, as others have done extensively, or morally; in many cases also as part of history. For, quite a few myths have been treated successfully as history, as something that has actually taken place in our world, a truth which the myth has forced into something more spectacular. Taking this very course, the present work will certainly not let the myths pass unexamined, but will deal thoroughly with them in accordance with tradition. (Eust. *Comm. Il.* 3.13–34)

This passage shows us an engaged reader of the old interpreters of Homer. Eustathios mentions two extreme positions that he will not follow, and a third that he will. What I have now called the two extreme positions were in fact the best known in antiquity and in the Byzantine age. As Eustathios himself mentions, the famous Alexandrian philologist Aristarchus had insisted on understanding Homer on the basis of Homer, and had therefore in most cases avoided allegorical interpretation. This tradition is clearly attested in the group of scholia normally referred to as the A scholia.[9] Other scholia – known as the bT group, the probably very ancient D group, and the h group – in general take the same course, but expand more on moral issues. Eustathios knew all these scholia, as is apparent from his references. But he also knew, and this is the other group he attacks, the ancient tradition of allegorical interpretation of the Homeric texts. This tradition goes back at least to the 6th century BC, but is best attested in various Stoic and Neo-Platonic writers such as Herakleitos (not the famous philosopher) and Porphyrios. These authors may well be criticized for having changed everything in the Homeric texts into allegories. Odysseus becomes the human soul in search of truth, Hera's seduction of Zeus becomes exclusively the cosmic meeting of the aither and the aër – the sky and the air, we could say; and in Porphyrios' famous interpretation, the cave of the nymphs on Ithaca becomes an intricate representation of the Neo-Platonic order

[8] This and the following translations are by the author, based on the edition of van der Valk.

[9] For information on ancient scholia, see Snipes 1988, 196–204. See also Kathy 2008.

of the universe.[10] These are the interpretations that Eustathios knew and reacted against, and he had good reasons to do so. A century before him, the delicate literary wizard, Michael Psellos, had with success reintroduced allegorical interpretations of Homer in Byzantium. Eustathios was not against this, but he insisted, and here comes, I think, Eustathios' major contribution to Homeric scholarship even if he did not formulate it himself, on a distinction between history and myth (*historia* and *mythos*). He insists that a major part of the Homeric narratives are plain narratives that include such things as may happen in our ordinary human lives, and a later passage will be shown to prove this; but as to the myths, Eustathios already in the prooimion to the Iliad commentary writes:

> And if he, because he is so full of myths, is in danger of deviating from the praiseworthy, it must be stressed that the Homeric myths are not to be laughed at, but are rather shadows of, or screens before, noble meanings. Some of these myths have been fabricated by the poet for the sake of these texts and are therefore easily allegorized, whereas others have been instituted by tradition and have been brought usefully into his poetry; the allegorical understanding of these does not always fit into the Trojan context, but rather into what the original producers may have intimated. (Eust. *Comm.Il.,* 1.35–41)

Thus, myths may be ancient or be by Homer himself, and a distinctive mark in the myths is that they may refer to things that do not fit completely into the context in which they are found; this will be important later. Thus, in Eustathios' analyses of Homer a firm grasp on the philological (*i.e.* lexical, grammatical, geographical *etc.*) data is combined with a likewise firm intent on saving the story, the human and humanly recognizable story, as well as allowing – when appropriate – for allegorical flights on the Homeric wings, as Eustathios expresses it. Such knowledgeable and – at least in my view – well-balanced interpretations of any text, not least the Homeric, is hard to come across in antiquity or in the Middle Ages.

Eustathios is thus quite unique both in his approach, in his learnedness, in the size of his commentary – which of the Iliad runs into four very large volumes in the modern edition of van der Valk – as well as in the importance of the text he is commenting upon. Homer fascinated readers in Byzantium and was soon to have a similar success in the West, and Eustathios' contribution was not the least important in securing a very balanced reading of Homer. Here, both the Byzantine and the early western way of reading Plato may serve as a means of comparison. Plato had since the Neo-Platonists in antiquity been read in – what we today would normally deem – a very esoteric way, insisting on a whole lot of spiritual teaching that may only be gathered with great difficulty from the actual writings of Plato. This tradition flourished both in the Arabic and the Byzantine philosophical traditions, and became also part of the western interpretation of Plato.[11] One need only cast a glance at the works of Marsilio Ficino, who in the 15th century produced the first complete Latin translation of Plato, to see that Ficino's understanding of Plato is completely embedded in the esoteric, spiritualized understanding of Plato. Homer, despite being the object of much allegorical interpretation, was never really read that way in the west,[12] and since Eustathios' commentary was the best available tool for western readers, this may well be his merit. An obvious source for allegorical interpretation are the places where a poet offers glimpses of another world as a means to understanding a narrative or a description. In Homer, such glimpses are most commonly found in his similes. It is therefore interesting to see how Eustathios dealt with these.

We may from the start note that similes, on the basis of his distinction between history and myth, ought to constitute a problem to Eustathios' scheme. Similes are neither the story, the historical story, since they speak of anonymous characters and natural phenomena, often taken from the contemporary world of the poet, nor are they myths, as their actual content is often all too daily like.

---

[10] On Neo-Platonic interpretation of Homer, see Lamberton 1986, 108ff.

[11] For a fascinating account, see the introduction to Kaldellis 1999.

[12] Lamberton 1986, 234 speaks of "traces of awareness" of this tradition in Western literature.

Apparently they simply do not fit into Eustathios' distinction between history and myth, but there is no insecurity to be found in Eustathios' handling. In his introduction to his commentary on the Iliad, he does mention similes briefly, but as often in his commentary, he postpones or transfers more comprehensive discussions to the point where he is to comment on the Homeric passage that most emphatically calls on such a discussion. As to similes, this comes in book 2 of the Iliad, where we in v. 87 have the first great simile concerning the Achaean warriors. The poet likens them to a swarm of bees that fly from their hives and into the fields; in a similar way, Homer tells us, did the warriors swarm out into arrays. A bit later – just before performing what was probably in Homer's view a masterpiece of oral poetical performance, the Ships Catalogue, the long list of who, how many, and how many ships – Homer gives not less than five long similes in a row (v. 455–84).[13] Thus, the second book of the Iliad is certainly the place for Eustathios to delve on the theme of the similes and the frequent use of them in Homer. His definition runs thus:

> The poet seasons his poetry with many spices, and one of these excellent ingredients is the simile, through which he accomplishes many good things. Through the frequent use of similes, he explains the properties of animals and the nature of things, as will become clear in the following. And, all in all, the simile constitutes not only a philosophical element in the writings of the poet, but also a presentation of things that occur in daily life, things that convey vividness and produce great experiences. The object of the simile is also to elucidate the factual objects to which they are applied. For, suppose a person first hears that Hector was eager to face Achilleus, and then hears the poet saying that "just as a snake from the mountain that has eaten bad herbs awaits a man, and a terrible anger has come upon it, so did Hector not yield, having an unquenchable battle-rage"; the person who hears this will both have learned the story about the snake and about Hector's mighty eagerness. Thus, the simile makes what is said more trustworthy through what normally happens, or (to put it differently) it is a discourse that is pedagogical and which adds fidelity to the text through referring to what normally happens. It is called simile (*parabole*), because it sets beside (*paraballei*) – *i.e.* it compares and juxtaposes – some well-known thing that is wont to happen with what is being told; and for that reason the content of the simile must always be better known than what it is used for. (Eust. *Comm. Il.* 176.20–35)

This description, which could easily be used directly in a modern introduction to what a Homeric simile is, makes clear sense: similes are juxtaposed pedagogical entities that transmit knowledge and convey vividness. They both add to the story, by being juxtaposed stories in themselves, but they are also containers of knowledge, just as the myths. Thus, in order to get the conclusion of the present paper across already now, Eustathios retains his distinction between *historia* and *mythos* also in the case of the similes, by saying that similes are juxtaposed entities, containing both *historia* and *mythos*. They are self-contained stories, often from daily life, but they also display many similarities with myths, not least through their richness of information. For, like the myths, they go beyond what is needed for the Trojan context, as we heard was also the case for myths. The following passage will show how Eustathios acknowledges this:

> Among the similes [Homer] produces some very short and in plain style, as when he says that Thetis came up from the sea "as a mist." For the simile is just the passage "like a mist." In the same way we find such similes as "like birds" and "they rushed out like wolves." Other similes he extends elaborately, so that they relate the whole action as it normally takes place, in all details, for the sake of the story, and leaves it for the listener to select from the simile the things that are useful in the context and accept the rest as a completion of the narrative contained in the simile. (Eust. *Comm.Il.* 177.29–35)

Thus, Eustathios believes that Homer thought that he had an intelligent audience, who could think and make the correlations themselves and would

---

[13] See Larsen, forthcoming. For the bees (or wasps), see Kakridis & Kapsomenos 1960.

furthermore accept details that would not fit into the comparison; surplus details we could call them, various bits of knowledge that the poet would impart when telling myths and, as in the present case, when employing similes. In looking at the educational side of the similes, which is partly how they are related to the equally instructive myths, we may look at the passage where Eustathios discusses one of the five similes that appear in a row in book two of the Iliad:

> Here he compares the Greeks to flies that fly to the new milk, indicating that so many were the Achaeans standing on the plain – and not only this but they were also eager to crush the opponents – as are the many herds of flies which roam about the shepherds' huts in spring, when the milk wets the land. This indicates that the "so many" explains the quantity of the congregation, the "eager to crush" indicates the amount of persistence. And this means that the imagery of the flies does not apply to the strength of the Greeks, but that the simile only applies to their persistence and shamelessness. [Just like the preceding simile with the bees that illustrate the ordered movement of the Achaeans, from their tents to the place of assembly. This was not used to indicate anything dangerous, even if bees are more frightening than flies because they sting]. ..... But, in a sense, the "like the many bands of crowded flies" is a parody of "as are the bands of crowded bees". The kinship between these similes is known also to the farmers who, when they feel like, refer to bees as flies. (Eust. *Comm. Il.* 256.40–257.20 & 257.25–8)

Thus, we are introduced to a whole discussion about bees and flies, with reference – it seems – to farmers whom Eustathios must have met himself.

But the real surplus that Eustathios believes is connected to the similes is the reaction they create in the listeners. In his comments on a passage in book 4 of the Iliad, comes the following passage:

> (Agamemnon) scolds the Greeks who have been slow in getting into lines and are surprised, comparing them to young deer that run far away in panic and stand astounded. He says: "Why do you stand as astounded as deer that when they panic rush across the wide plain and stand still, and there is no force in their minds. Thus astounded do you stand and offer no fight." The simile is very successful, for deer are such by very nature. And he paints the attitude of the Greeks as well as their posture and appearance, by portraying the Achaeans as astounded, as is likely, due to what happens, which is also what the Homeric listeners experience due to the unexpected in what they hear. (Eust. *Comm.Il.* 468.16–24)

In Eustathios' view, the ultimate bonus in the Homeric similes was that they confronted the listener with the unexpected, even if well-known; it created a certain aesthetical tension, between the knowledge of how deer behave and its unexpected relevance for the story being told. And its final result would be that listeners would adapt to the reactions of the persons involved in the story. Thus, similes have an aesthetic, not an allegorical function in the Homeric poems.

So, to conclude: Eustathios is a fascinating well-learned, attentive, and multi-faceted reader of Homer. His importance in the Byzantine age is hard to assess. We possess quite a few manuscripts, including the very autograph (Laurentianus Plut. LIX 2 and 3)[14] of his commentary on the Iliad, *i.e.* the manuscript that he possessed himself, and into which he made further annotations; this explains the sharp brackets in the Greek text, taken from the splendid edition of van der Valk. The existence of other manuscripts show, and the great love of Homer in Byzantium further suggests, that he had many readers in Byzantium, but we cannot know. But his importance in the west is clearly visible in the many and even early printed editions of his commentaries and – it is my contention – in the non-allegorical reading of his texts that have been common in the west, and not least in the immediate familiarity with which we feel confronted when reading his interpretations of much Homeric, including his similes.

[14] See van der Valk p. ix.

Bibliography

Kakridis, J.T. & S. G. Kapsomenos 1960
'Das Wespengleichnis im Π der Ilias', *Hermes,* 88 no. 2, 250–3.

Kaldellis, A. 1999
The argument of Psellos' Chronographia, Leiden.

Kambylis, A. 1991
Eustathios von Thessalonike. Prooimion zum Pindarkommentar, Göttingen.

Kathy, L. Gaca 2008
'Reinterpreting the Homeric Simile of *Iliad* 16.7–11: the girl and her mother in ancient Greek warfare', *American Journal of Philology* 129, no.2, 145–71.

Kazhdan, A.P. 1984
'Eustathius of Thessalonica: the life and opinions of a twelfth-century Byzantine rhetor', in *Studies on Byzantine Literature of the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries*, A.P. Kazhdan & S. Franklin (eds.), Cambridge.

Kazhdan, A.P., *et al.* 1991
The Oxford dictionary of Byzantium. 3 vols., New York.

Kyriakides, S. 1961
La espugnazione di Tessalonica, Palermo.

Lamberton, R. 1986
Homer the Theologian. Neoplatonist allegorical reading and the growth of the epic tradition, Berkely.

Larsen, K.D., forthcoming
'Simile and comparison in Homer. A definition', *Classica et mediaevalia*, forthcoming.

Lindberg, G. 1985
'Eustathius on Homer: some of his approaches to the text, exemplified from his comments on the first book of the Iliad', *Eranos* 83, 125–40.

Snipes, K. 1988
'Literary interpretation in the Homeric scholia: the similes of the Iliad', *The American Journal of Philology* 109, no. 2, 196–222.

van der Valk, M. 1971–87
Eustathii archiepiscopi Thessalonicensis commentarii ad Homeri Iliadem pertinentes. 4 vols., Leiden.