

MISZELLE

A LOST WORK OF ANCIENT HOMERIC
SCHOLARSHIP

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*It is very unfortunate ... that most ancient
scholarly works have been lost.*¹

The object of the present contribution is to draw attention to the existence of a lost work of ancient Homeric scholarship, which appears to have been overlooked by modern scholars.

A Melkite Christian scholar from Baalbek, named Qusṭā ibn Lūqā (d. 912), was fluent in Greek as well as Syriac and Arabic, and became well known for translating ancient Greek texts into Syriac and Arabic.² One of his surviving works is an Arabic letter written in correspondence with two of his contemporaries, a Muslim named Ibn al-Munāḡḡim, about whom little information survives, and Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq (d. 873), the famous Christian translator of Greek texts. The collection of letters between these three scholars has been assigned to a date roughly in the middle of the ninth century.³

In part of his letter, Qusṭā ibn Lūqā compares the poetry of the Quran with that of the Homeric epics (§ 208–211). This is the translation of the passage given in the standard modern edition of the text:⁴

Comparaison avec Homère.

[208] D'ailleurs, (étant donné la maîtrise d'Homère) dans la création (poétique), et vu qu'il n'est pas possible maintenant d'imiter sa poésie, Homère serait, pour toi, un prophète!⁵ D'autant plus qu'à cette poésie

1) E. Dickey, *Ancient Greek Scholarship*, Oxford / New York 2007, 4.

2) The fundamental biographical study is G. Gabrieli, *Nota biobibliografica su Qusṭā ibn Lūqā*, *Rendiconti della Reale Accademia dei Lincei*, ser. 5, vol. 21, 1912, 341–382. See now also the information in U. Rudolph / R. Hansberger / P. Adamson (eds.), *Philosophy in the Islamic World. Volume I: 8th–10th Centuries*, Leiden 2017, 104–105, 118, 156, 177, 249, 385, 394, 406, 665, 701–702.

3) These letters are introduced and edited with French translation in: K. Samir / P. Nwyia, *Une correspondance islamo-chrétienne entre Ibn-al-Munāḡḡim, Ḥunayn Ibn Ishāq, Qusṭā Ibn Lūqā*, *Patrologia Orientalis* 185, 40, 4, Turnhout 1981.

4) Samir / Nwyia (cit. no. 3) 666–667.

5) This refers to those who argued that Mohammed was a divine prophet because of the excellence and unimitability of his poetry.

il a su donner un contenu d'une très haute valeur et en a fait un des arts les plus nobles.

[209] A tel point qu'il y a inclus des renseignements médicaux vraiment étonnants. Il revint à Galien de les rassembler et d'écrire à leur sujet un livre qu'il a intitulé: Livre de Galien sur la médecine d'Homère.

[210] De même, il y mentionne des éléments de l'art dialectique qui sont réellement surprenants. Cela a été soutenu par un des spécialistes de la dialectique appelé Pilatus (*Bylātus*) qui dit avoir rassemblé ces éléments dans un ouvrage intitulé: Livre de la dialectique d'Homère.

[211] Pareillement, aucun Grec ne nie l'excellence de la part considérablement importante que contient (l'œuvre d'Homère) du point de vue des mots rares, de la science de la langue, de la maîtrise de l'art poétique, et de la rédaction des pièces épistolaires et des harangues.

This passage has received no attention at all. Its final lines describe the importance of Homeric poetry in Greek education. In the previous lines, Qusṭā ibn Lūqā dwells on the excellence of Homeric poetry, and then on the special knowledge it preserves, firstly in medicine and secondly in dialectic.

Each claim is supported by a reference to an ancient author and a treatise written by him. The first of these, by Galen, is known. Alexander of Tralles names Galen as the author of the *Περὶ τῆς καθ' Ὁμηρον ἰατρικῆς* (*Therapeutica* XI.1 = II.475, 6–7 Puschmann), and a work of the same title is also mentioned by Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq in his *Risāla*, where he provides the additional information that it was written in two books.⁶ Qusṭā ibn Lūqā thus supplies a third testimonium for this lost Galenic treatise.

The other ancient author and treatise referred to in the above passage is as yet unknown. A certain Pilatus (*Bylātus*) is said to have written a work called *On the dialectic of Homer*. The original title was probably *Περὶ τῆς καθ' Ὁμηρον διαλεκτικῆς*, or *Περὶ τῆς παρ' Ὁμήρῳ διαλεκτικῆς*, because treatises of this type tend to be named after their subject matter using these formulae.⁷ Whether the title supplied by Qusṭā ibn Lūqā is accurate cannot, however, be established with any certainty.

The name Pilatus (*Bylātus*), if correctly transmitted, must be Roman. However, the name is rarely attested in antiquity except in the famous case of Pontius Pilatus. Epigraphy indicates that other individuals sometimes held the name in the early empire: e. g. *Pilatus IIIIuir* (CIL XI 4396, Amelia, Umbria, i AD), *M. Antonius Pilatus* (B. Pferdehirt, *Römische Militärdiplome und Entlassungsurkunden in der Sammlung des Römisch-Germanischen Zentralmuseums, Mainz 2004, no. 32,*

6) See G. Bergsträsser, *Neue Materialien zu Ḥunayn ibn Ishāqs Galen-Bibliographie*, Leipzig 1932, 97 n. 164.

7) One thinks of other treatises with similar titles – for instance, Philodemus' *Περὶ τοῦ καθ' Ὁμήρῳ ἀγα[θ]ο[ῦ] βας[ιλέως]* (P. Herc. 1507, col. XLIII.40–41 Dorandi), Proclus' *Περὶ τῶν παρ' Ὁμήρῳ θεῶν* (Suid. π 2473 Adl.), as well as a treatise entitled *Περὶ τῆς καθ' Ὁμηρον ῥητορικῆς* attributed to Telephus of Pergamum (ii AD): see Anon. in Hermog. XIV.189 Rabe and Suid. τ 495 Adl., with C. Wendel, *Telephus* (2), RE VA/1, 1934, 369–371.

Pannonia Superior, 151 AD), *Asidonius Pilatus Saracinus* (L'Année épigraphique 1992:1771 = L'Année épigraphique 1993:1733, Africa Proconsularis, 193–195 AD).

Judging from this onomastic evidence, a scholar named *Pilatus* probably also lived in the imperial period, perhaps some time around the date of Galen (the fact that he is named alongside Galen may or may not be relevant for dating purposes). Scholarly work on the Homeric poems was an industry in the early empire, as we know from the many grammatical treatises and commentaries on the subject which can be certainly dated to the period.⁸ It is therefore well within the bounds of possibility that a scholar named *Pilatus* lived in this time.

Qustā ibn Lūqā explicitly calls *Pilatus* ‘one of the specialists in the dialectic art’, that is to say, a dialectician. The title of the treatise is probably to be understood in the full philosophical sense of dialectic. The study of dialectic, a type of formal logic, was popular in antiquity. According to Chrysippus, it was made into an object of inquiry by Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, and later continued by Polemon and Strato, among others (Plut. Mor. 1045f = SVF II fr. 126). Other surviving titles mentioning the art of dialectic were written by philosophers – for instance, the *Περὶ τῆς διαλεκτικῆς πρὸς Ἀριστοκρέοντα β'* of Chrysippus (D.L. 7.202), the *Τέχνης διαλεκτικῆς βιβλία δύο* of Sphaerus (D.L. 7.178), and the *Περὶ διαλεκτικῆς* of Cleanthes (D.L. 7.175).

Qustā ibn Lūqā says that *Pilatus* in his treatise collected evidence for the elements of dialectic found in Homeric poetry. For an ancient scholar, this approach is not surprising. Among the Greeks, Homer was often regarded as the source of all knowledge.⁹ Thus, it would have been natural for an ancient scholar to look for the origins of dialectic in Homeric poetry.¹⁰ Indeed, Ps.-Plutarch suggests that Homeric poetry provided the beginnings and seeds of the study of τὸ φυσικὸν καὶ ἠθικὸν καὶ διαλεκτικόν, and this comment certainly hints at ancient scholarly interest in τὸ διαλεκτικόν in Homeric poetry.¹¹ *Pilatus* would not have been the only ancient scholar to study the Homeric contribution to philosophy. The Cynic philosopher Oenomaus of Gadara (ii AD) also examined philosophical aspects of Homeric po-

8) For a general discussion of the surviving evidence, see e. g. S. Matthaios, *Greek Scholarship in the Imperial Era and Late Antiquity*, in: F. Montanari / S. Matthaios / A. Rengakos (eds.), *Brill's Companion to Ancient Greek Scholarship*, I, Leiden 2015, 798–849.

9) M. Hillgruber, *Die pseudoplutarchische Schrift De Homero*, I, Stuttgart 1994, 5–35.

10) On Homer as an anticipator of aspects of later developments in Greek philosophy, see for instance E. Buchholz, *Die Homerischen Realien*, III Abt. 2, *Die Homerische Psychologie und Ethik*, Leipzig 1885, 200–207, especially at 201, where Homer is described as “ein Socrates ante Socratem”.

11) Ps.-Plut. *De Homero* β 92.2 ταῦτα δὲ μετεχειρίσαντο οἱ ἐν φιλοσοφίᾳ διατριψάντες, ἧς ἐστὶ μέρος τὸ φυσικὸν καὶ ἠθικὸν καὶ διαλεκτικόν. ἐν δὲ πᾶσι τούτοις τὰς ἀρχὰς καὶ τὰ σπέρματα ἐνδιδόντα Ὅμηρον εἰ καταμάθοιμεν. πῶς οὐκ ἂν εἴη πρὸ πάντων θαυμάζεσθαι ἄξιον; (J. F. Kindstrand, [Plutarchi] *De Homero*, Leipzig 1990, 44, with the commentary in: M. Hillgruber, *Die pseudoplutarchische Schrift De Homero*, II, Stuttgart 1994, 210–211).

etry in his *Περὶ τῆς καθ' Ὅμηρον φιλοσοφίας* (Suid. I 123 Adl.), of which nothing but the title survives.¹²

The work mentioned by Qusṭā ibn Lūqā must belong to this tradition. Even if the name Pilatus is a corruption, there is no reason to doubt the authenticity of the title of the treatise. No other evidence has previously come to light for ancient treatises dealing with the subject of dialectic in Homer. Discovery of this testimonium therefore adds modestly to our knowledge of ancient scholarship on the philosophical elements of Homeric poetry.

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12) On this treatise by Oenomaus, see J. Hammerstaedt, *Der Kyniker Oenomaus von Gadara*, ANRW II.36.4, Berlin 1990, 2834–2865, at 2851–52.