

## BATTUS AND BATOΣ

### Word-play in Theocritus' fourth Idyll

In Theocritus' Idyll 4, 50–57 the goatherd Battus runs a thorn (ἄκανθα) into his foot while helping Corydon round up his calves. Corydon extracts the thorn and cautions him against going barefoot on the hill as the place abounds in prickly shrubs (56–57):

εἰς ὄρος ὄκλ' ἔρπης, μὴ νήλιπος ἔρχεο, Βάττε·  
ἐν γὰρ ὄρει ῥάμνοι τε καὶ ἀσπάλαθοι κομόωντι.

It is sheer irony, I think, that the character involved in the thorn incident should be called Battus. The proper name Battus, regardless of its etymology<sup>1</sup>, seems in this context to conceal a play on βάτος (bramble), a plant well-known for its noxious thorns since Homer, *Od.* 24, 230<sup>2</sup>. Βάτος is mentioned three times in Theocritus. In two occurrences (1, 132 and 7, 140) it combines with ἄκανθα (thorn or thorny plant). Additional evidence for the Battus/βάτος word-play is provided by the third occurrence of βάτος at 24, 89–90. There βάτος combines with ἀσπάλαθος, another kind of thornbush, while in the lines quoted above the goatherd Battus is advised to watch out for ἀσπάλαθοι on the hill. These are the only references to ἀσπάλαθος in Theocritus. Finally, the association of Battus with ῥάμνοι and ἀσπάλαθοι at 4, 56–57 looks like a variant of the group of the three thorny plants at 24, 89–90: ἀσπαλάθου/ παλιούρου/ βάτου.

Appraisals of the character of Battus vary considerably. Ott for instance portrays his attitude as aggressive, ironical and mocking and describes his conversation with Corydon as “ein Spiel zwischen Provokation und ruhiger Antwort”<sup>3</sup>). In the context of such an approach one feels tempted to see in the Battus/βάτος pun a probable allusion to Battus' “prickly” remarks and in the thorn incident an ironic reversal of things whereby the “sharp-tongued” Battus ends up with being literally pricked by a thorn.

Rethymno

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1) See Bömer on *Ov. Met.* 2,688 with literature; Gow on *Theocr.* 4,41; S. Lattimore, Battus in Theocritus' Fourth Idyll, *GRBS* 14 (1973) 319–324, 323; L. Stankiewicz, *De Theocriti Bucolicorum personis eorumque nominibus*, *Eos* 67 (1979) 267–278, 270 f.

2) Cf. M. C. P. Schmidt, *RE* III (1897) 887, 28 ff., s.v. “Brombeerstrauch”; K. Lembach, *Die Pflanzen bei Theokrit*, Heidelberg 1970, 74–75.

3) U. Ott, *Die Kunst des Gegensatzes in Theokrits Hirtengedichten*, Hildesheim/New York 1969, 46–47.