Lelantine War, Eretria and Chalkis, and the Contest of Homer and Hesiod

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Classical Inquiries

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For example:

This post is about a poetic competition or Certamen ‘Contest’ that took place, story has it, between Homer and Hesiod. In all attested versions of the story, Hesiod won and Homer lost. In some versions, as we will see, the setting for Hesiod’s victory was memorialized in the city-state of Chalkis, located on the island of Euboea, and this detail is relevant, as we will also see, to stories about a protracted conflict involving Chalkis and a rival city-state, Eretria, which was located on the same island of Euboea. Such a conflict, which historians date as ongoing from around 750 to 506 BCE, is commonly known as the Lelantine War. The ancient historian Thucydides (1.15.3) draws attention to the grand dimensions of this protracted conflict, observing that many other city states got involved and took sides by making alliances with either Eretria or Chalkis. Such conflicting alliances, it can be argued, correspond to conflicting appropriations of Homeric and Hesiodic poetry by city-states that sided with Eretria and Chalkis respectively. Thus the Lelantine War can even be viewed as a stylized conflict between "team Homer" and "team Hesiod" respectively.

In a most perceptive article centering on ancient narratives about a primordial contest between Homer and Hesiod, Andrea Debiasi (2012:490) refers to an article of mine about Life of Homer traditions (Nagy 2004). In that article, I highlighted "Vita 1," a text generally known as the "Herodotean" Life of Homer, which is of special relevance to studying the early reception of Homeric poetry in Asia Minor—and which, as Debiasi shows (2012:491–493), reveals the existence of links between Homer and the city-state of Eretria on the island of Euboea, to be contrasted with links between Hesiod and the city-state of Chalkis, located on the same island (I have more to say about the politics and the poetics of Euboea in Nagy 2011b). In the post that I present here, I will update some of the points I made in my original article (Nagy 2004) about "Vita 1" and also about "Vita 2," a text generally known as the Contest of Homer and Hesiod. In this update, I will also draw on further points I made later about Life of Homer and Life of Hesiod traditions in the book Homer the Preclassic (Nagy 2010|2009, hereafter abbreviated as HPC). Besides the points I made there (especially at HPC 29–55), I will also draw on still further points I made in the article "Hesiod and the Ancient Biographical Traditions" (Nagy 2009; also in Nagy 2011a:292–293).
From the analysis of Debiasi (2012:491–493), we see that Vita 1 of Homer occasionally narrates examples of negative reception for the poet Homer in some of the city-states of Asia Minor, most notably in Cyme (1.95–96, 123–192), Erythrai (1.225–276), and Samos (1.399–483). Of these states, Samos was clearly an ally of Chalkis and an enemy of Eretria in the Lelantine conflict, as we read in Herodotus 5.99 (Frame 2018 §4; Bershadsky 2018.05.22 §3); further, as we read in Herodotus 1.18.3, Erythrai was an enemy of Chios, which was an ally of Miletus (Frame 2009:535n50; Debiasi 2012:492); still further, to round out the picture by returning to the testimony of Herodotus 5.99, Miletus was an ally of Eretria in the Lelantine conflict, while Samos, as already noted, was an ally of Chalkis (Frame 2018 §4; Bershadsky 2018.05.22 §3).

Whereas the narrative of Vita 1 shows negative aspects of the reception experienced by Homer in his interactions with the people of Cyme, Erythrai, and Samos, the poet’s experience in interacting with the people of Chios is shown to be unquestionably positive (1.276–399). The story of such positive reception of Homer by Chios can be linked with the historical fact that Homeric poetry was mediated in Athens by way of Chios and, indirectly, by way of Miletus, which was the primary ally of Eretria in the Lelantine conflict, just as Homeric poetry was mediated in Sparta by way of Samos, which was the primary ally of Chalkis in the same conflict (Frame 2009:551–582; 2018 §4). And it was in Chalkis, as we read in the narrative of Vita 2, that Homer was defeated by Hemed (2.68–211; commentary by Debiasi 2012, especially pp. 471, 474, 481–482 n67 and n70; see also Nagy 2009:304 and 2015.12.24 n10). That is why, in terms of the Lelantine conflict, Debiasi (2012:491–493) can describe Chalkis as anti-Homeric and pro-Hesiodic, while Eretria as an ally of Miletus would be pro-Homeric and, by implication, anti-Hesiodic. Another way to say it, as I have already done here in the introductory paragraph above, is that the Lelantine War can be viewed as a stylized conflict between “team Homer” on the side of Eretria and “team Hesiod” on the side of Chalkis.

Bibliography


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Notes
Credit for cover image: Engravings of the heads of Homer and of Hesiod, in the collection of the British Museum.

Tags: Chalcis, Eretria, Hesiod, Homer, Lelantine War, Life of Homer

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