

STEPHANIE WEST

NESTOR'S BEWITCHING CUP

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## NESTOR'S BEWITCHING CUP\*

τὸ Νέστορος ποτήριον πολλοὶ κεραμεύουσι. Ath. 11.16 (781d).

Νέστορός: ἐ[ἰμ]ι : εὔποτ[ον] : ποτέριον.  
 ἠὸς δ' ἄν τοδε πίεσι: ποτερί[ο] : αὐτίκα κένον  
 ἡμέρος χαιρέει : καλλιτε[φά]γο : Ἄφροδίτες.

Forty years after its discovery the eighth-century skyphos from Pithekoussai conventionally known as "Nestor's cup" continues to excite lively interest.<sup>1</sup> The general acceptance of this designation marks the rejection of the interpretation of its inscription favoured in the original publication, where it was argued that this vessel is contrasted with Nestor's famous cup as described in the Iliad (11.632ff.); it is now agreed, apparently *nem.con.*, that this cup claims Nestor as its owner.<sup>2</sup> Since it has been found difficult to take seriously this and other features of the cup's self-predication, the inscription is, as it seems universally, interpreted as a joke, demonstrating a delightfully sophisticated sense of humour in this western outpost.<sup>3</sup> We may also observe increasing confidence that the inscription provides a *terminus ante quem* for the composition of the Iliad. Whereas earlier discussions took the inscription to imply merely that Nestor's cup was a familiar item in the epic repertoire,<sup>4</sup> it now appears to be widely accepted that a specific allusion to Nestor's entertainment of Machaon and Patroclus was intended.<sup>5</sup> This interpretation, while enhancing the appealing zaniness of the joke, implies that already by 725 our Iliad must have been current for some time, and that its composition can therefore hardly have been

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\* In the preparation of this article I have benefited greatly from Peter Hansen's kindly scepticism and have also been much helped by Bryan Hainsworth and Martin West.

<sup>1</sup> Ed.pr. G.Buchner and C.F.Russo, *Rendiconti Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei*, ser. 8, 10 (1955), 215-34; CEG 1.454 (see also CEG 2. p.304 (Addenda et corrigenda ad CEG 1)). Of the secondary literature I have found particularly useful K.Rüter and K.Matthiessen, "Zum Nestorbecher von Pithekussai", *ZPE* 2 (1969), 231-55; P.A.Hansen, "Pithecan humour. The interpretation of 'Nestor's cup' reconsidered", *Glotta* 54 (1976), 25-43; A.Heubeck, *Schrift (Archaeologia Homericum X)* (1979), 109-16, 199f.

<sup>2</sup> As was suggested by T.B.L.Webster, *Glotta* 38 (1959), 253f.

<sup>3</sup> Since Hansen's careful and attractive exegesis (op.cit. n.1) further subtleties have been suggested: see L.H.Jeffery, *CAH*<sup>2</sup> 3, Plates (1984) 294 (No.378), J.Latacz in W.Kullmann and M.Reichel (edd.), *Der Übergang von der Mündlichkeit zur Literatur bei den Griechen* (Tübingen, 1990), 232-5; B.B.Powell, *Homer and the Origin of the Greek Alphabet* (Cambridge, 1991), 163-6.

<sup>4</sup> Thus, e.g. Russo, op.cit. (n.1) 234, D.L.Page, *CR* 6 (1956), 96 n.2; W.Schadewaldt, *Von Homers Welt u. Werk*<sup>3</sup> (Stuttgart, 1959), 413ff.; W.Kullmann, *Die Quellen der Ilias* (Wiesbaden, 1960), 257; Hansen, *Glotta* 54 (1976), 43.

<sup>5</sup> Thus Rüter-Matthiessen, op.cit. (n.1), 249-54; Heubeck, op.cit. (n.1), 114; G.S.Kirk, *The Iliad: a commentary*, I (Cambridge, 1985), 4; A.I.Zaitsev, *Philologia Classica* 3 (1987), 59-65; Latacz, *Homer: der erste Dichter des Abendlands*<sup>2</sup> (Munich, 1989), 80-82; E.Pöhlmann in Kullmann-Reichel, op.cit. (n.3), 15 n.20; Powell, op.cit. (n.3), 208f.

later than the mid-eighth century. The cup has thus come to assume a significance far greater than appeared when it was first published.

The Pithekoussan sense of humour is clearly a serious matter, and in calling it in question I must risk raising doubts about my own. But on unfamiliar ground our sense of the absurd and incongruous is an unreliable guide to humorous intention. "Im übrigen wird man zu bedenken haben, daß das aufgeklärte Auge leicht in den Irrtum verfällt, das Urtümliche 'komisch' zu finden, in Dichtung wie in bildender Kunst." Schadewaldt's warning against potential misconception in dealing with Homeric theology<sup>6</sup> has a wider application. In any case, the general consensus that the inscription is funny becomes less impressive on closer analysis. The joke obviously appears differently to those who see a specific allusion to Iliad 11 and to those who do not. Some see a tribute to Nestor's sympotic stamina, some to his virility; for some the humour lies in burlesque of epic exaggeration, or in the evocation of ideas not normally associated with the venerable king of Pylos; for a few the essence of the joke lies in homonymity, the cup's owner himself being supposed, somewhat unusually, to have borne that grand epic name. There is a strong appeal in the diagnosis of *παρὰ προδοκίαν* parody of the solemn formulae of a primitive criminal law. These interpretations are not all mutually exclusive, and there is much to be said for the idea that this text is a collaborative effort, the creation of a witty trio whose skill in capping one another's verses was judged worth preserving as a souvenir of a memorable dinner party, thus affording us a priceless glimpse of the manners and customs of Euboean émigrés in the late eighth century.<sup>7</sup>

Greek humour, it might be thought, had reached a pinnacle of sophistication from which it could only decline. Yet the complexity and multifarious application of this joke are a little disquieting. We are of course well used to being perplexed in reading ancient comedy; we may recognize that a joke is intended, but the point escapes us; allusions and innuendoes which no doubt seemed uproariously funny to a contemporary audience inevitably pass over our heads. But here the problem is rather an *embarras de richesse*; there are too many possibilities, not all mutually compatible. Certainly, if the lines are taken to be a multi-authored composition, the problem of determining the (main) point of the joke is reduced; the emphasis may be allowed to shift as symposiast B takes over from A, and C from B, to produce a masterpiece of sophisticated zaniness which, even when script was a novelty and the labour of incising these lines not lightly to be undertaken, might understandably have seemed to those involved in its creation to merit permanent record. But another scenario may deserve consideration.

Nothing about the cup's design or the circumstances in which it was discovered would lead us to expect a forerunner of the modern humorous coffee-mug: are we justified in our

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<sup>6</sup> Iliasstudien<sup>2</sup> (Leipzig, 1943), 119 n.1.

<sup>7</sup> So first Jeffery, loc.cit. (n.3).

confidence that a joke was intended? I should like to suggest that its inscription was meant to serve a practical purpose, and that we should take more seriously the cup's pose as a hero's cup fraught with aphrodisiac potency.

Grand self-predication is commonplace in magical texts, where it is a regular ploy for the operator to identify himself as a divinity; by elevating himself to the status of a god he makes himself equal or superior to the object of his enchantments and so may control the power he conjures up.<sup>8</sup> Of course, such extraordinary self-predication represents the culmination of an elaborate sequence of spells and ritual practices; it is not enough just to say *ἐγὼ εἶμι θεὸς θεῶν ἀπάντων κτλ.* and hope for the best. Admittedly the magical techniques attested in papyri of the Roman period may well be more elaborate than the practice of the Greek archaic age; but magic tends to be highly conservative in its general principles. We can only speculate as to the procedure required to transform a skyphos into a magically efficacious vessel. Φίλτρα of one sort and another were familiar enough in fifth-century Athenian life;<sup>9</sup> love-magic had surely been practised time out of mind. Whether the cup was meant for the administration of a love-potion or of a cure for impotence, it should, I suggest, be interpreted as a piece of magical apparatus.<sup>10</sup>

It is a common magical practice to appeal to a precedent seen as a timeless source of supernatural power. The magician includes in the spell what folklorists call a *historiola*, a brief mention of a legend or myth, or even a tale invented *ad hoc*, involving an analogous situation which he (or she) hopes to reactivate.<sup>11</sup> Such, I suggest, is the function of the reference to Nestor in our inscription. We are not meant to see humour in the contrast between the clay vessel and the elaborate artifact suited to an epic hero; the inscription expresses a supernatural reality lying beneath an unassuming surface.

Epigraphically, the black magic of curses is much better attested than aphrodisiac magic, and I cannot cite a parallel. But I suspect that highly desirable, though somewhat different, psychological effects were claimed for a roughly contemporary cup recently discovered in

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<sup>8</sup> See further W.M.Brashear, *Magica Varia* (Brussels, 1991), 19,44 (n. on ὅτι ἐγὼ εἶμι κτλ.), where further bibliography may be found.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Xen.Mem. 2.6.10: εἶναι μὲν τινὰς φασι ἐπειδὰς, ἃς οἱ ἐπιτάμμενοι ἐπάιδοντες οἷς ἂν βούλωνται φίλους αὐτοὺς ποιοῦνται, εἶναι δὲ καὶ φίλτρα, οἷς οἱ ἐπιτάμμενοι πρὸς οὓς ἂν βούλωνται χρώμενοι φιλοῦνται ὑπ' αὐτῶν; cf. E.Hipp. 509ff.; see further G.O.Hutchinson, *Hellenistic Poetry* (Oxford, 1988), 154f. Alcman's *Ainesimbrotia* (1.73ff.) appears to be an expert in love-magic; see M.L.West, *CQ* 15 (1965), 199f.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. A.Dihle, *Hermes* 97 (1969), 261: "Der Inhalt der Inschrift ist ohne Zweifel als ein - wie weit auch immer ernst zu nehmender - Liebeszauber zu verstehen."

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Brashear, *op.cit.* (n.8), 9; A.A.Barb in A.Momigliano (ed.), *The Conflict between Paganism and Christianity in the Fourth Century* (Oxford, 1963), 122f.; Gow on *Theocr.* 2.44ff. (Achilles' version of the story of Niobe (Il. 24.601ff.) serves a related purpose.)

excavations at Eretria.<sup>12</sup> Two fragments of a Rhodian bird-bowl, dated c.735-725, preserve a small part of a three-line incised inscription written, like that of "Nestor's cup", retrograde:

vac?].οθυμοκα[-----]  
 vac.?)ηδαντο[-----]  
 ?2 ]μαλ [-----]

The editor, by analogy with "Nestor's cup", tentatively suggested τὸ θυμοκάρτο ἐμι in line 1;<sup>13</sup> but this approach is rather unpromising. It may be worth considering the possibility that the cup claimed the power to deal with feminine (ἦ δ' ἄν κτλ.) bad temper (τ]οῦ θυμοῦ). This type of spell (τὸ θυμοκάρτοχον) was later an important item in the ancient magician's repertoire.<sup>14</sup>

The magical use of writing does not presuppose literacy in its beneficiaries or victims. Consider the following remedy for equine colic: "Si equi intestina doluerint <et> fuerit tortionatus, remedium incredibile quod Persae ostendere: nomen domini eiusdem animalis in corona pedis dextri grafio perscribito" (Pelag. 7.129).<sup>15</sup> It would not be necessary for those who drank from the Pithekoussan cup to read its message for themselves in order for the draught to achieve the appropriate results; but writing imparts to words dignity and solemnity, and the effect was no doubt the more powerful when alphabetic writing was a fascinating novelty.<sup>16</sup>

What relevance, on this interpretation, has the Pithekoussan inscription to the Iliad? Nestor's entertainment (11.624ff.) could not possibly be supposed to be intended to stimulate concupiscence; the meal served by Hekamede is rather designed to promote the wounded heroes' rapid recovery and return to the battlefield. Of course, Hekamede's

<sup>12</sup> See A.W.Johnston and A.K.Andriomenou, "A geometric graffito from Eretria", *ABSA* 84 (1989), 217-20.

<sup>13</sup> "The name Thymokrates is attested later in Euboea, and is perfectly well formed; the transposition of consonants, Thymokartes, need not unduly worry us. On the analogy of Nestor the reading of the first part of the line might then be τὸ θυμοκάρτο ἐμι, but I put this suggestion forward more *exempli gratia* than out of total conviction. I find the apparent use of the article, whether *ho*, τὸ or τὸ particularly worrying."

<sup>14</sup> See the detailed discussion by F.Maltomini in *Papyri Graecae Wessely Pragenses* (P.Prag. 1): *Papyrologia Florentina* xvi (Florence, 1988), 41ff. (with bibliography). The word itself is not attested before the Roman period, but we should expect that long before then magicians would have seen the need for a procedure to deal with this problem.

<sup>15</sup> On non-rational uses of writing in antiquity see further R.Thomas, *Literacy and Orality in Ancient Greece* (Cambridge, 1992), 19f., 78-88; F.Dornseiff, *Das Alphabet in Mystik u. Magie*<sup>2</sup> (Leipzig-Berlin, 1925), *passim.*, G.Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes* (1986) 60 n.48. For magical uses of writing in mediaeval and early modern England see M.T.Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record: England 1066-1307*<sup>2</sup> (Oxford, 1993), 317, 333f.; Sir Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (Harmondsworth, 1978), 212f., 216, 328f.

<sup>16</sup> We might wonder whether this use of script was, like the alphabet itself, an import from the east. On the extensive Greek debt to Near Eastern magic and medicine incurred at this period see W.Burkert, *The Orientalizing Revolution: Near Eastern influence on Greek culture in the early archaic age* (Cambridge, Mass., 1992), 41-88.

presence implies Nestor's continued virility,<sup>17</sup> but we are not encouraged to attribute this happy effect to his δέπας.

However, the Iliad's description is not altogether plain sailing; here too we meet a puzzle in which some modern interpreters have seen a joke. I doubt if this is mere coincidence. Archaeologists have enjoyed a virtual monopoly of the discussion of this marvellous vessel; but comparison with actual artifacts is unlikely to throw light on a couplet which, as the scholia show, was found perplexing in antiquity (636f.): ἄλλος μὲν μογέων ἀποκινήσασκε τραπέζης πλεῖον ἔόν, Νέκτωρ δ' ὁ γέρον ἀμογητὶ ἄειρεν. "This couplet comes in very strangely" comments Leaf; "so far from being represented as of unusual physical strength, Nestor is always lamenting his departed vigour."<sup>18</sup> How, we might ask, did Hekamede manage? We seem to be faced with a variation on a motif otherwise reserved in the Iliad for Achilles: only he could easily manage his horses (10.404), his spear (19.389), and his doorbar (24.456).<sup>19</sup> Von der Mühl, somewhat dubiously, suggests a humorous intention.<sup>20</sup> No such interpretation is contemplated in the scholia, and here again we should be cautious in trusting our sense of the absurd.

δεῖ ... νοεῖν ὅτι καὶ τοῦτο τῶν ἐπαίνων λεγομένων Νέκτορος ἐστὶ, καθάπερ καὶ τὸ "Νέκτωρ δὲ πρῶτος κτύπον ἄιε φώνησέν τε" (Schol. A on 636); this is probably the best solution to the problem, an intimate connection between hero and prized possession being seen as characteristic of the heroic age. But cups with supernatural properties, objects which can be moved only by their rightful owners or by persons endowed with some unique quality (like the sword which can be drawn only by the best knight in the world) are the common currency of traditional narrative<sup>21</sup> and we might wonder whether Nestor's

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<sup>17</sup> Hekamede is called Nestor's concubine by later writers: cf. Arist. F 144 R. (Ath. 556d): θαυμάσαι δ' ἄν τις, φησὶν Ἀριστοτέλης, ὅτι οὐδαμοῦ τῆς Ἰλιάδος Ὅμηρος ἐποίησε Μενελάωι συγκοιμημένην παλλακίδα πᾶσι δοῦναι γυναῖκα. κοιμῶνται γοῦν παρ' αὐτῶι καὶ οἱ γέροντες μετὰ γυναικῶν, Νέκτωρ καὶ Φοῖνιξ, οὐ γὰρ ἦσαν οὗτοι ἐκλελυμένοι τοῖς σώμασιν ἐν τοῖς τῆς νεότητος χρόνοις ἢ διὰ μέθης ἢ δι' ἀφροδισίων ἢ καὶ διὰ τῆς ἐν ταῖς ἀδηφαγίαις ἀπεψίας, ὥστε εἰκότως ἔρρωνται τῶι γήρῳ. Cf. schol.ad Il. 1.250, Suda s.v. Ἐκαμήδη. Polykaste, who helps Telemachus with his bath (Od. 3.464ff.), being specifically described as Nestor's youngest daughter, might more reasonably be supposed to have been born after his return from Troy than before his departure.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. 7.132ff., 11.668ff., and the sympathetic comments of other heroes at 8.102f., 23.621ff.

<sup>19</sup> Similarly with Odysseus' bow, which he alone can string.

<sup>20</sup> "Ist das nun Humor Bs nach dem Typus P 141ff., M 447ff., den B z.B. Ω 453ff. verwertet, oder meint er's ernst? Die Entscheidung wird sich danach richten, wie man B einschätzt." Similarly B.B.Powell (Class.Ant. 20 (1989) 339) sees literary parody, a burlesque of epic exaggeration, and argues that the lines were so understood by the composer of the Pithekoussan inscription.

<sup>21</sup> Ossete legends of the heroic Nartā offer a particularly fine example in the cup or bowl *Uatsamongae* "the bowl which reveals the hero"; when a man spoke truth about his many achievements the bowl (or the liquor in it?) rose of its own accord to the speaker's mouth, but otherwise was unmovable. See further G.Dumézil, *Le livre des Héros* (1966), 206f., Sir Harold Bailey in A.T.Hatto (ed.), *Traditions of Heroic and Epic Poetry* i (1980), 252f. A vessel with similar properties would have a peculiar usefulness for a hero given to lengthy reminiscence.

marvellous cup, more like a mixing bowl than a wine cup,<sup>22</sup> had a long history behind it before it entered the Iliad which, as is well illustrated by its treatment of Meleager's story, characteristically plays down magic and the supernatural.<sup>23</sup> It is worth remembering that Nestor's heroic achievements belong to a period before the Trojan War; like the Greater Ajax he appears to have been drawn into the Matter of Troy from a quite different body of saga.<sup>24</sup> A tradition about his wonderful cup belonged, I believe, to the poetry, less sophisticated than the Iliad, which celebrated the exploits of his youth;<sup>25</sup> from that tradition the Iliad and the Pithekoussan skyphos drew elements which the modern reader finds it hard to take seriously.

Nestor's background in Pylian saga may be relevant to our appreciation of the style of the skyphos' hexametric couplet. ποτήριον and καλλιτέφανος are not to be found in the Iliad and Odyssey; the convenient-looking phrases αὐτίκα κείνον and ἕμερος αἰρήσει do not figure in the Homeric stock of formulae. But it would be misleading to label these lines as non-formulaic; we are in no position to judge. So long as oral composition remained a living tradition, different bards must have had somewhat different formulaic repertoires,<sup>26</sup> and apart from personal idiosyncrasy a narrative of warfare in the Peloponnese in the generation before the Trojan War would certainly have required a formulaic stock deviating somewhat from the Homeric. It would be absurd to postulate a self-imposed economy restricting deviation to the necessary minimum, and for all we know the unhomeric καλλιτέφανος and ποτήριον come from epics celebrating Nestor's earlier career.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Here, and at Od. 10.316, δέπας is used exceptionally of a vessel evidently more capacious than a normal cup; Nestor's δέπας seems to correspond to a transitional stage between the Mycenaean di-pa, apparently "vat, storage jar", and the usual Homeric sense of "cup"; see further N.R.Collinge, BICS 4 (1957), 55-9.

<sup>23</sup> See further J.B.Hainsworth on Iliad 9.524-605; J.Griffin, JHS 97 (1977), 39-53; id., *Homer on Life and Death* (Oxford, 1980), 165-7.

<sup>24</sup> See further P.Cauer, *Grundfragen der Homerkritik*<sup>3</sup> (Leipzig, 1921), 291-5; H.L.Lorimer, *Homer and the Monuments* (London, 1950), 329-31.

<sup>25</sup> Welcker suggested (*Der epische Cyclus* ii (1849) 99) that the sensational narratives with which, according to the Cypria, Nestor regaled Menelaus were suggested by an artifact used during a meal, a mixing bowl or a cup: καὶ πρὸς Νέστορα παραγίνεται Μενέλαος. Νέστωρ δὲ ἐν παρεκβάσει διηγείται αὐτῷ ὡς Ἐπωπεὺς φθείρακύτην Λυκούργου θυγατέρα ἐξεπορθήθη, καὶ τὰ περὶ Οἰδίπου, καὶ τὴν Ἡρακλέους μανίαν καὶ τὰ περὶ Θησέα καὶ Ἀριάδην. (Cf. F 15 Davies.) We might conjecture that while legend regularly associated a marvellous drinking-vessel with the hospitable Nestor, its form and properties were not fixed by tradition. Though the Cypria itself must have been composed later than our Iliad, it embodied much material presupposed by the Iliad, and we need not suppose that this feature of Nestor's entertainment was a post-Homeric invention.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. A.B.Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge, Mass., 1960), 49-53.

<sup>27</sup> Risch (ZPE 70 (1987) 8f.) argues that καλλιτεφάνου Ἀφροδίτης echoes Od. 8.267 ἀμφ' Ἄρεος φιλότητος εὐστεφάνου τ' Ἀφροδίτης and 288 ἰχανῶν φιλότητος εὐστεφάνου Κυθερείης. "Man kann sich des Eindrucks kaum erwehren, dass das weit mehr als vage Anklänge sind, sondern der Dichter des Nestorbechers diese oder eine sehr ähnliche Stelle im Ohr, ja vielleicht sogar vor Augen hatte." But this resemblance is scarcely sufficient support for his attempt to argue that our Odyssey was already current by



Perhaps, indeed, the couplet as a whole there formed part of an invitation to drink; recycling was an essential part of oral composition, and we are hardly entitled to assume that these lines were composed specially for the Pithekoussan skyphos.<sup>28</sup> The inscription's format, giving each verse a line to itself, presupposes, as Burkert has pointed out, some familiarity with the lay-out of a book of Greek verse.<sup>29</sup> But it would be absurd to hold that the Iliad represented the first attempt to record hexameter poetry in writing.

As erotic magic goes, this cup may seem rather unexciting. But we might wonder whether it was buried with its owner not because it was thought to have been a prized possession but because it was felt that a supernatural force was inherent in the incised letters and that so uncanny an object should not be allowed to fall into the wrong hands.<sup>30</sup>

Hertford College, Oxford

Stephanie West

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725. Once we admit that a long tradition of oral narrative poetry lies behind our Iliad and Odyssey we need to be extremely rigorous in our approach to alleged echoes of or allusions to the two epics.

<sup>28</sup> Several scholars have felt a difficulty here in the use of ὄδε as a first-person demonstrative after εἶμι in line 1 (though see J.Svenbro, *Phrasikleia* (Paris, 1988), 39-44). If this inconcinnity is thought to be serious, it would support the hypothesis that the lines were lifted from another context.

<sup>29</sup> *Op.cit.* (n.16), 33. Should we infer that in early texts some attempt was also made to mark word-division?

<sup>30</sup> Similarly, perhaps, with Tataie's aryballos (675-50?); it would be imprudent to take any chances with an object labelled ἡὸς δ' ἄν με κλέφρει θυφλὸς ἔεται. Cf. W.V.Harris, *Ancient Literacy* (Cambridge, Mass. 1989), 29.