Kallimachos, the Assyrian River and the Bees of Demeter

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At the end of his Hymn to Apollo (2.108ff Pf.) Kallimachos says that the god, having spurned Envy with his foot, declared:

"'Assyrian river' poetaio mou megas rosos, alla ta polla

liuma ghe kai pollon ef' uidati eupheton elkei.

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Δηνό δ' ouk atopo pantos ódor foroive melissai,

all' hteis kathari te kai anerantos anerpetei

πιθανος e' ierhe olughe livas akron awton.'

In the scholia to line 108 we find: 'Accepto poetaioi: to toν

Pereiow legei toν kaloumeino Euphrateiν. Similarly, Wilamowitz1 comments: "Als der große Fluß lutulentum fluens wird der Euphrat genannt—der Nil lag am nächsten, aber der war heilig."

The identification of 'Assyrian river' in the Hymn with the Euphrates is, however, not obligatory. For in Greek ethnography there were also Leukosyroi, Syroi or Assyrioi in northern Asia Minor, who lived in Pontos, far from the mouth and some distance from the headwaters of the Euphrates. Sinope was one of their towns, and their territory extended along the coastlands of the Euxine at least as far eastwards as the mouth of the Thermidonus.2 There are in fact positive arguments showing that Kallimachos has Pontic Assyrians in mind at the end of the Hymn to Apollo. He is known to have written Peri ton kata tηn

'Asiai poetaioin (fr.459)3 and to have mentioned the Halys and the Iris rivers (fr.501).4 But the strongest evidence for a river in contemporary

1 Hellenistische Dichtung II (Berlin 1924) 86 n.1.
2 See F. Jacoby on Hekataios, FGrHist 1 f 200-08 and Der kleine Pauly III (1969) 600-01.
3 The contexts of Kallimachos fr.506 ημιν μεν Περσαι, ημιν δ' 'Assyrios and fr.505 η μεν

ap' 'Assyrios ημεδηπη στοχείν are not certain, and fr.506, with its awkward hiatus, may not even be by Kallimachos. Pfeiffer considers the possibility that 'our land's in fr.505 means the Amazonian army. If it does, then the Pontic Assyria is intended in the line.
4 = Etym. Gen. A,B s.v. 'Allos: the statement here that Kallimachos identified the Halys with the Iris is mistaken (see Pfeiffer on fr.501), but there is no doubt that Kallimachos discussed both these rivers of Pontic Assyria.

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poetry—a river that is silt-bearing, copious and Assyrian—is to be found in the Argonautika of Apollonios.

In Argonautika 2.946-47 the heroes come to the Assyrian land where Sinope, daughter of Asopos, had settled. Later, after leaving the alluvial deposit at the mouths of the Halys and Iris, they arrive at the river of the Thermodon, whose peculiarities are described in a laboriously detailed digression, wherein the poet displays his geographical learning.

The Thermodon has ninety-six diverging courses. It is tortuous and many of its branches are nameless. The poet does not know where they are drained off. The main course itself joins openly with a few of its streams and belches into Pontos the Inhospitable. This is a striking, but odd, digression. The theme is not elevated; and the description in lines 978 to 983 of the waters’ courses is not lucid. Even without the unnecessary όπεξαφύνονται, even without the unnecessary ἄχην for ἄκρην in 984, leaves an unpleasant impression—the river belches into the sea. Similarly, in 2.367 the streams of Halys δεινὸν ἐρεύγονται: they do not simply roar,

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6 Arg. 2.963-64: λέιπων "Ἄλων ποταμῶν, λέιπων δ’ ἀγχάρρους, Ἰπν | ὡδὲ καὶ Ἀκουρής πράξειν χθονὸς. ΣΛΠ 963-5b note the ancient variant (it need not come from a προέκδος): λέιπων Ἀλων ποταμῶν, λέιπων δ’ ἀλμυρᾶ χώραν | Ἀκουρής ἀνέχονται ἀπὸ χθονὸς.

6 H. Fränkel, in his Noten zur den Argonautika des Apollonios (Munich 1968) 258–59, gives drawings of possible symmetrical arrangements of the 96 courses. It is important to remember, however, since the drawings do not make the point clear, that only one course (fed by a few of the smaller streams) leads into the sea. The others dry up or imperceptibly flow underground before the sea is reached—ὑπεξαφύνονται. Professor W. M. Calder III kindly drew my attention to Fränkel’s discussion.
they belch; for they, like the Iris, bear silt to form the Ακκυρίνες πρόχυνεως χθονός (964) in the land of Pontos that takes its name from the adjacent sea.

In view of Apollonios' great emphasis on size and silting, the muddiness and copious flow of Pontic Assyrian rivers looks to be a typical and well-known feature of them. As the Thermodon belches, so also do its neighbours the Iris and Halys deposit silt. Likewise the Assyrian river pointedly criticized by Kallimachos drags downstream 'filth of earth' and 'rubbish', and its flow is abundant; it is a μέγας ῥόος like the Thermodon of Apollonios, which spreads over the countryside (ἐπικινδύνει).

It is hard to believe, as M. T. Smiley pointed out long ago,8 that Kallimachos does not write with Apollonios' account of the Halys, Iris and Thermodon in mind. The identification gives point to the mention by Envy of πόντος immediately before the 'Assyrian river' in Apollo's reply:

\[\delta \ Φθόνος 'Απόλλωνος ἐπ' οὕτως λάθριος εἶπεν, οὐκ ἀγαμάς τὸν ἀοιδὸν ὡς οὐδ' ὅσι πόντος ἀείθει.\]

Kallimachos means Pontic Assyria, and Apollo gently criticizes the geographical pretensions of Argonautica Book II.10

Smiley also supposed that the allusion to the Assyrian river was evidence for the alleged dispute between Kallimachos and Apollonios. Here he was on less certain ground. The ancient evidence for the dispute is very thin; and the lost Ibis is the one work of Kallimachos in which Apollonios, it is alleged, was his principal enemy.11 At the end

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7 G. W. Mooney, The Argonautica of Apollonius Rhodius (repr. Amsterdam 1964) 206, correctly explains the three words as "the alluvial deposit at the mouths of these rivers forming Leucosyria."
8 Hermathena 17 (1913) 288-90. Smiley's suggestion was summarily rejected by A. W. Mair in his Loeb ed. Callimachus and Lycophron (London 1921) 23.
9 οὐ τάσσει Meineke, οὐχ ὅσι Reiske, and see Barber in CR 4 (1954) 229. οὐδ' ὅσι is difficult to translate: perhaps, "I admire not a poet who sings a song not even as great in numbers as Pontos"—let alone a really extensive epic theme. 'Not even as great as the sea' is hardly to be expected here, for the sea is boundless. ὅσι may well be a hit at the pedantic precision of the ninety-six courses of the Thermodon.
10 There is a valuable discussion of other points of contact between the Hymn to Apollo and the Argonautika by E. Eichgrun, Kallimachos und Apollonios Rhodios (Diss. Berlin 1961) 167–69, but Eichgrun does not explore the Pontic context of the Assyrian river. He comes near to the truth when he considers (pp. 169–71) the rivers of Asia Minor that bear gold as well as mud and are choked with reeds.
11 Suda s.v. Καλλιμήκος (= T 1 Pf.). Testimonia 23, 39, 40, fr.381 and 382 add nothing
of the Hymn Kallimachos does allude to Apollonios, but the tone is of agreement to differ about poetical practice or of gentle reproof; there is no personal rancour. If rancour there was, it came later, after the Hymn had been written.

We can now consider the bees in the Pontic context of Apollo’s remarks. Melissai are priestesses, but here bees are bees, as in the Alexipharmaka of Nicander, where the creatures (450–51)

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\mu\nu\nu\zeta\alpha\mu\nu\nu\nu\nu\Delta\nu\nu\nu\nu \pi\lambda\upsilon\omega\pi\tilde{e}\alpha\nu \tilde{e} \nu \nu \upsilon \upsilon \tilde{e} \nu \upsilon \upsilon
\]  

Only the purest sources of water, Apollo says, are visited by bees who make honey for Demeter. Thus the god implies that Pontic honey made with water from the tainted Assyrian streams is not the best—nor is it a giver of pure poetical inspiration.

Pontos was well known for its honey. Aristotle singles out for mention the bees who live beside the Thermodon and in Pontos (Historia Animalium 5.22.14). The Pontic bees are white and make honey twice a month. Those who live in Themiskyra by the Thermodon produce a thick honey with little wax.

But there is another quality of Pontic honey, which Aristotle does not mention; it is sometimes poisonous. Xenophon’s troops ate some near Trapezous and were for a while deprived of their senses (Anab. 4.8.20–21): τα δὲ εμήνη πολλὰ ἤν αὐτόθι, καὶ τῶν κηρίων δοι ἐφαγὼν τῶν στρατιωτῶν πάντες ἀφρονέτες έγήγοντο καὶ ἤμουν καὶ κάτω διεχώρει αὐτοὶ καὶ ὄρθος οὐδεὶς ἐδύνατο ἰσταθαι, ἀλλ’ οἱ μὲν ὀλάγον ἠθηνόκτονες εφόδρα μεθύουσιν ἐφόκεσαν, οἱ δὲ πολὺ μαινόμενοι, οἱ δὲ καὶ ἀποθνήσκοντων. ἔκειντο δὲ οὕτω πολλοὶ ὠστερ τροπῆς γεγενημένης, καὶ πολλὴ ἦν ἀθυμία. τῇ δὲ ὑπεραιρᾷ ἀπέθανε μὲν οὐδεὶς, ἀμφὶ δὲ τὴν αὐτὴν πως ἄραν ἀνεφρόνων. τρίτη δὲ καὶ τετάρτῃ ἀνίστατο ὠστερ ἐκ φαρμακοποιῶν. Pontic honey makes the healthy mad but cures epileptics, according to the Περὶ θαυμασίων ἀκουσμάτων (18), and the Pontic people called Sanni, reports Pliny (NH 21.45.77).12 called it certain. For doubts about the alleged quarrel see R. Pfeiffer, History of Classical Scholarship (Oxford 1968) 143, and Hermes 63 (1928) 341 (= Ausgewählte Schriften [Munich 1960] 132). See also H. Erbse, Hermes 83 (1955) 427.

12 For other evidence of poisonous honey in Pontos, see J. André, Pline l’Ancien, Histoire naturelle XXI (Paris 1969) p.125. The honey has been traced to the blooms of Azalea pontica, “which grows in profusion in the valleys at the back of Trebizond”: see H. F. Tozer and M. Cary, A History of Ancient Geography (Cambridge 1935) 118. The correct name of Azalea...
maenomenon. Pliny adds that the madness was ascribed to the flower of the *rhododendron*.

Kallimachos, however, would have connected the madness with the local waters. Apollo's judgement is thus re-emphasized by the mention of the bees in the Pontic context: those who seek inspiration for large, traditional epics from copious, impure sources are in danger of losing their critical standards.

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*pontica* is *Rhododendron luteum*, which is a different plant from, though akin to, *Rhododendron ponticum*. Mr M. J. McGann kindly discussed these plants with me.