

Kallimachos, the Assyrian River and the Bees of Demeter

George Huxley

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

110 Ἐκκυρίου ποταμοῖο μέγας ῥόος, ἀλλὰ τὰ πολλὰ
λύματα γῆς καὶ πολλὸν ἔφ' ὕδατι κυρφετὸν ἔλκει.
Δηοῖ δ' οὐκ ἀπὸ παντὸς ὕδαρ φορέουσι μέλισσαι,
ἀλλ' ἦτις καθαρὴ τε καὶ ἀχράαντος ἀνέρπει
πίδακος ἐξ ἱερῆς ὀλίγη λιβάς ἄκρον ἄωνον.⁷

In the scholia to line 108 we find: <Ἐκκυρίου ποταμοῖο:> τὸν τῶν Περσῶν λέγει τὸν καλούμενον Εὐφράτην. 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 Thermodon.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 *Περὶ τῶν κατὰ τὴν Ἀσίαν ποταμῶν* (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 ἡμεῖς μὲν Πέρσαι, ἡμεῖς δ' Ἐκκυριοί and fr.505 ἡ μὲν ἀπ' Ἐκκυρίων ἡμεδαπὴ στρατιή 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. Ἄλυξ: 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.

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,⁵ they arrive at the *προχοαί* of the Thermodon, whose peculiarities are described in a laboriously detailed digression, wherein the poet displays his geographical learning.

τῷ δ' οὐ τις ποταμῶν ἐναλίγκιος οὐδὲ ρέεθρα
 τόσσ' ἐπὶ γαῖαν ἴησι παρέξ ἔθεν ἄνδιχα βάλλων·
 τετράδος εἰς ἑκατὸν δεύοιτό κεν, εἴ τις ἕκαστα
 975 πεμπάζοι. μία δ' οἷη ἐτήτυμος ἔπλετο πηγῆ·
 ἢ μὲν τ' ἐξ ὀρέων κατανίσσεται ἠπειρόνδε
 ὑψηλῶν, ἃ τέ φασι ν' Ἀμαζόνια κλείεσθαι,
 ἔνθεν δ' αἰπυτέρην ἐπικίδναται ἔνδοθι γαῖαν
 ἀντικρὺ τῷ καὶ οἱ ἐπίστροφοί εἰσι κέλευθοι,
 980 αἰεὶ δ' ἄλλυδις ἄλλη, ὅπη κύρσειε μάλιτα
 ἠπίρου χθαμαλῆς, εἰλίσσεται, ἢ μὲν ἄπωθεν,
 ἢ δὲ πέλας· πολέες δὲ πόροι νώνυμοι ἔασι
 ὅπη ὑπεξαφύονται, ὁ δ' ἀμφαδὸν ἄμμιγα παύροις
 Πόντον ἐς Ἀξεινον κυρτὴν ὑπ' ἐρεύγεται ἄκρην.

The Thermodon has ninety-six diverging courses.⁶ 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. *ἐρεύγεται* or *ὑπερεύγεται*, even without the unnecessary *ἄκρην* 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,

⁵ Arg. 2.963–64: *λεῖπον Ἄλυν ποταμόν, λεῖπον δ' ἀγχίρροον, Ἴριν | ἠδὲ καὶ Ἀκκυρίης πρόχυσιν χθονός*. SLP 963–5b note the ancient variant (it need not come from a *προέκδοσις*): *λεῖπον Ἄλυν ποταμόν, λεῖπον δ' ἀλιμυρέα χώραν | Ἀκκυρίης ἀνέχουσαν ἀπὸ χθονός*.

⁶ H. Fränkel, in his *Noten zu 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—*ὑπεξαφύονται*. 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 'Accυρίης πρόχυσιν χθονός (964)⁷ 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 (ἐπικίδναται).

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:

ὁ Φθόνος Ἀπόλλωνος ἐπ' οὔατι λάθριος εἶπεν,
οὐκ ἄγαμαι τὸν αἰοιδὸν ὃς οὐδ' ὄσα πόντος αἰεῖδει.⁹

Kallimachos means Pontic Assyria, and Apollo gently criticizes the geographical pretensions of *Argonautika* 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

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 τόσα Meineke, οὐχ ὄσα Reiske, and see Barber in *CR* 4 (1954) 229. οὐδ' ὄσα 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. ὄσα 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. Eichgrün, *Kallimachos und Apollonios Rhodios* (Diss. Berlin 1961) 167–69, but Eichgrün 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. Καλλιμάχος (= τ 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)

μνησάμενοι Διοῖ πολυωπέας ἤγνυσαν ὄμπας
βοσκόμεναι θύμα ποσσὶ καὶ ἀνθεμόεσσαν ἐρείκην.

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): τὰ δὲ σμήνη πολλὰ ἦν αὐτόθι, καὶ τῶν κηρίων ὄσοι ἔφαγον τῶν στρατιωτῶν πάντες ἄφρονές τε ἐγίνοντο καὶ ἤμουν καὶ κάτω διεχώρει αὐτοῖς καὶ ὀρθὸς οὐδεὶς ἐδύνατο ἵστασθαι, ἀλλ' οἱ μὲν ὀλίγον ἐδηδοκότες σφόδρα μεθύουσιν ἐώκεσαν, οἱ δὲ πολὺ μαινομένοις, οἱ δὲ καὶ ἀποθνήσκουσιν. ἔκειντο δὲ οὕτω πολλοὶ ὥσπερ τροπῆς γεγενημένης, καὶ πολλὴ ἦν ἀθυμία. τῇ δ' ὑστεραία ἀπέθανε μὲν οὐδεὶς, ἀμφὶ δὲ τὴν αὐτὴν πῶς ὤραν ἀνεφρόνουν. τρίτῃ δὲ καὶ τετάρτῃ ἀνίσταντο ὥσπερ ἐκ φαρμακοποσίας. 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*² (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.