Miscellanea

Coon or Cimon?
Pherecydes’ Homer: The Mythographic Possession of an Epic Past

Studies of early mythography, at least since the 17th century, have stressed the dependent relationship between the so-called logographers and epic archaic poetry. In general, it is accepted as fact that the first mythographical prose by logographers was a direct continuation of epic tradition, which it sought to complete, correct, adapt, comment on and interpret. Better knowledge of archaic and classic mythography in recent years, above all thanks to the publications and commentaries by Robert Fowler (2000 and 2013), have helped provide more accurate details of the context of the production and purposes of the fragmentary works by Hecataeus of Miletus, Acusilaus of Argos, Pherecydes of Athens and Hellanicus of Lesbos. For example, the origins of Pherecydes’ Histories seem firmly rooted in the Athens of the first third of the fifth century BC

1 On Pherecydes specifically, see Saumaise 1629, 846: “Eamdem plane materiam libris illis historicis & genealogicis exequutusuisse uidetur quam postea Apollodorus Bibliotheca sua pertractauit, antiquam scilicet μυθολογίαν omnium aetatum & Graeciae popolorum. Quod unicum fuit Ἐπικοῦ κύκλου argumentum. Pherecydes inter primos extitit qui fabulas illas historicas prosa oratione exposuit”. Cf. Sturz 1789, 74 (and Sturz 1824, 68). See also Bertsch 1898, 4: “Die Mehrzahl der Fragmente macht geradezu den Eindruck einer Ergänzung homerischer Angaben aus anderen Quellen oder durch eigene Kombination…Gegensätze zu homerischen Angaben finden sich allerdings auch…”; Severyns 1928, 310: “Phérécyde, une fois de plus, n’a fait que résumer un poème cyclique”. On the use of the term ‘logographer’ for the pre-Herodotean historians (or mythographers), see Pearson 1939, 5-8. Like Pindar’s logioi (vs. aoidoi), Herodotus’ logopoios (cf. epopoios and mousopoios), and Hippias’ syggraphai (vs. poietai), Thucydidies’ term logographoi expresses a “formal difference” with poets. The word, however, also suggests “writing down tales” (logoi, as Herodotus called the sections of his work). See Corcella 2006, 49 n. 54. Contra Grethlein 2004.

2 Fowler 2013, xvi: “the entirety of the archaic poetic tradition was their [mythographers’, sc.] raw material.”
(and specifically in the circle of the Philaidai). His work fits comfortably within the intellectual and artistic entourage (along with Polygnotus, Sophocles, Ion, Bacchylides, and the elegists Archelaus and Melanthius) surrounding Cimon and the Philaidai family, which helps reinforce the identity and political aspirations of that genos.

All of this prompts to reappraise the contribution made by mythographers to the process of appropriating myth. Although the use of writing made it possible to address an abstract audience, regardless of a particular place or time, each of them writes from the perspective of local histories and family memories. Hence, each has his own agenda and program, which has to be explained within its context and not—from a purely historic-literary perspective—as an appendix, a continuation or an exegesis of the epic tradition.

It is my contention that conditions of preservation, and means of transmission, of fragmentary mythographers have shaped the way we approach them. In other words, it is the actual process of reception of epic poetry through the exegetic and grammarian tradition that distorts our view and leads us to see mythography as being dependent on Homer or Hesiod. Fowler’s comment that Pherecydes “is cited seven times for his views on Homeric words, which must mean the grammarians saw him as a source of such information,” can be formulated the other way round: the fact that Homeric commentators and scholiasts cite Pherecydes as a source of information to illustrate or complete a passage from the Iliad or the Odyssey is what leads the modern scholar to believe that Pherecydes was referring to Homeric words or passages. Indeed, when the Homeric scholiast makes use of Pherecydes and quotes his words, there is usually no internal evidence that the Athenian mythographer made an explicit mention of the poet to correct him, comment on him or to explain him.

However, there is a fragment of Pherecydes that most probably presupposes the Homeric text, and with respect to which the mythographer takes a critical stance. In this regard we could speak, in the strictest sense, of an appropriation of Homer in the sense that, for instance, Gregory Nagy gave to “possession of an Epic past”, when he claims that “the application of the past to the here and

3 Dolcetti 2001. To be precise, Pherecydes’ work can be dated to the early 470s (see also Huxley 1973).
5 Fowler 2013, xvi.