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A METRICAL PECULIARITY OF THE SIBYLLINE ORACLES

By J. M. Nieto Ibáñez

The *corpus* of the *Sibylline Oracles* which consists of 4239 hexameters, constitutes one of the essential documents to study the stylistic-metrical evolution of the Greek hexameter from the Alexandrian splendour till Nonnos' metrics reform.

My recent Doctoral Thesis¹ has been centred on an exhaustive study of these oracles from the metrical, prosodic and formulaic points of view. I have tried with it to fill in an important gap in the study of Greek metrics. The handbooks and specific works about the Greek hexameter almost completely ignore the poetic production of this period. Perhaps this deficiency is due to traditional opinion which qualifies these lines as very irregular and defective, along with the amount of textual problems that they present.

In this recent study I have verified that in the *Sibylline Oracles* we find a hexameter which, though it cannot be qualified as modelic or perfect, does not present inexplicable infractions to the traditional rules of verification either². In fact, in almost all the phenomena we have found precedents in epic poetry, even in the apparent anomalies. Besides it shows a deep connection with Homeric and Hesiodic poetry without losing a series of features belonging to the hexameter of the prophetic and gnomic literature and the early Christian Hymns in certain oracles.

It is an hexameter which exists within the limits fixed by the dactylic tradition and, to summarize, it does not represent a lack of rigour and normative. It only presents the natural difficulties of a poet who composes with a technical and archaic language in a very advanced age.

However, considering the textual problems which this *corpus* establishes, there are a series of lines that do not present a hexameter structure, but they could do so with the inclusion of certain variations to overcome their possible "metrical irregularities", such as the lack of a syllable on the third foot, or the presence of anomalous quantities.

To get to the point, we are going to concentrate now on a series of lines, exactly 36, which present a very conspicuous irregularity: each of them lacks one short syllable in the *biceps* of the third foot.

Such lines have been the focus of attention of editors and critics of the *Sibylline Oracles*, who have tried to solve and eliminate this metrical peculiarity, though the manuscripts generally maintain the irregularity³. The solution consists of introducing a short vowel in the third *biceps*, for which one can generally resort to the reconstruction of a short vowel elided in the preposition placed in this position or by the substitution of one form for another morphologically equivalent form within the possibilities of the epic language.

Let us take a look at these lines, which are classified according to the solutions that have been given to solve their metrical deficiencies⁴:

I - Non-elided preposition:

- I 394 ...βληθεις ὑπ' ἀνδρῶν... G
...βληθεις ὑπό... A
II 36 ...παμφαίνων ἀπ' οὐρανοῦ... G
...παμφαίνων ἀπό... A

- II 315 ...αἰρόμενοι δι' αἰθομένον... *G*
 ...αἰρόμενοι διὰ... *A*
 VIII 465 ...κραδῆς ὑπ' ἀγνώστοισιν... *G*
 ...κραδῆς ὑπό... *A*
 XII 89 ...ἄτοπον ἀπ' Ὠκεανοῖο... *G*
 ...ἄτοπον ἀπό... *A*
 XII 251 ...ἔνεκεν ἀπ' ἀντολῆς... *G*
 ...ἔνεκεν ἀπό... *A*
 XII 260 ...πόλεμον κατ' Ἀσσυρίων... *G*
 ...πόλεμον κατὰ... *A*
 XIII 76 ...ὄλλυμένων ὑπ' ἀντιπάλων... *G*
 ...ὄλλυμένων ὑπό... *A*
 XIV 123 ...πόλεις ὑπ' ἀνθρώπων... *G*
 ...πόλεις ὑπό... *A*
 XIV 172 ...ἄρξει ἀπ' Αἰγύπτιο... *G*
 ...ἄρξει ἀπό... *A*

2 - Substitution of one form for another morphologically equivalent:

- XI 196 ...ἀρχομένου γένους... *G*
 ...ἀρχομένοιο... *A*
 XI 243 ...βασιλεῖς ἐλώδεος... *G*
 ...βασιλῆς... *A, K*
 XI 299 ...ἔτεσιν τροπαιοφορέουσα... *G*
 ...ἔτέεσσι... *A*
 XII 220 ...ἀβουλεύτοις ἐπ' οὐχ... *G*
 ...ἀβουλεύτοισιν... *A*
 XIII 109 ...τούτοις μέγας... *G*
 ...τούτοισι... *A*
 XIV 180 ...στέφανοι μεσημβρίας... *G*
 ...στεφάνοιο... *Ω*
 XIV 247 ...βασιλεῖς ἐπ'... *G*
 ...βασιλῆς... *A*

3 - Introduction of particles, conjunctions, articles and so on...:

- I 105 ...τρίτανον ὑπερφιάλων... *G*
 ...τρίτανον τε... *Φ*
 I 189 ...ἅπας ἀπειρεσέων... *G*
 ...ἅπας τε... *Φ*
 II 187 ...Θεσβίτης ἀπ'... *G*
 ...Θεσβίτης γε... *Ψ*
 VII 76 ...ἀθανάτω θεῶ... *G*
 ...ἀθανάτω τε... *Ψ*
 VIII 123 ...ξοάνοισιν ἀργυρέοις... *G*
 ...ξοάνοισιν καὶ... *K*

- XII 98 ...κρατερῶ ὑπὸ στρατιῆς... *G*
 It can be corrected by the conjecture of K.
 Buresch⁶:
 κρατερῶ καὶ ὑπὸ...
 XII 174 ...μέτοχος θεμιστοπόλος... *G*
 ...μέτοχος τε... *A*
 XII 218 ...ἄναξ ἐρωτομανῆς... *G*
 Mendelssohn's proposal solves the problem?:
 ...ἄναξ ὁ...

4 - Substitution of one form for another:

- I 240 ...πόλον μέγαν... *G*
 ...πόλοιο μέγαν... *A*
 I 261 ...Φρυγίης ἐπ' ἠπειροιο... *G*
 ...Φρυγίοισιν... *K*
 VII 69 ...γεγένετο λόγος... *G*
 ...γεγένητο λόγος... *A*
 ...ἐγένετο λόγος... *Ψ*
 XI 70 ...ἀντολῆς διὰ κρατερὰς... *G*
 ...ἀντολίησι... *A*
 XII 209 ...ἔξει περισσοτέρῳ... *G*
 ...σχῆσειε... *A*
 XIII 157 ...ἀριθμόν, ὁ δὲ... *G*
 The possible solution is A. Rzach's
 proposal⁸:
 ...ἀριθμόν, ὅς δὲ...
 XIV 35 ...φειδωλή· ὄλος... *G*
 ...φειδωλή· ὄλοος... *A*

In most cases these solutions are not verified by the manuscripts, but they are editors and critic' proposals to these conspicuous cases.

Notwithstanding, perhaps it is not necessary to look for a textual emendation, considering that it is possible that these lines have been composed this way originally. The irregularity of these lines is not surprising at all, as similar examples can be observed in old poets. As is known, ancient metricians compile six different forms of hexameter, in which each of them presents some type of alteration⁹. One of these variations is the line called *λαγαρός* that contains a short syllable instead of a long one in the middle of the line.

At first sight it might be thought that we find examples of *λαγαρός* line in the *Sibylline Oracles*, although the peculiarities which surround them make this classification difficult. On one hand we have the late chronology of this hexameter, very far from the traditional oral type of composition¹⁰, and on the other hand, the textual problems inherent to this *corpus*, and the fact that such irregularity always happens in the same position¹¹. It is significant that a short vowel occurs instead of a long one, precisely, in the middle of the line on the third *biceps*. Perhaps we might be dealing with a treatment of this position as the end of a line, and it would be then an example of indifference of syllabic quantity similar to that of the last syllable of a line¹².

Therefore, we think that it is more suitable to consider these lines as a peculiarity of the Sibylline hexameter, as a particular way of composition of a late poet, with no necessity to look for extraneous solutions for a line. Besides, these lines are concentrated in books I, II, VII, VIII, XI, XII, XIII and XIV, the ones which contain more metrical-prosodic irregularities¹³. In fact, there is not any line with this structure in books III, IV and V, the original nucleus of this *corpus*, and therefore the closest to the traditional normative of the epic Greek hexameter¹⁴.

In spite of the homogeneity and metrical correction of all and every one of the books in the *Sibylline Oracles*, however we must not omit these irregular lines, as they constitute a peculiarity of the epic hexameter without parallel in other authors, and which we have to consider for a complete study of the metrical-stylistic development of late Greek hexameter.

Jesús-M. NIETO IBANEZ
Universidad de Valladolid - España

1. *El hexámetro de los Oráculos Sibílicos*. Unpublished Doctoral Thesis, Valladolid 1990.
2. Traditional opinion qualifies these lines as very irregular and defective, full of textual problems, *vid.*, for example, R. Volkmann, *De oraculis Sibyllinis Dissertatio*. Leipzig 1853.
3. We follow the edition of J. Geffcken (*G*), *Die oracula Sibyllina*. Leipzig 1902, completed with Ch. Alexandre (*A*), *Oracula Sibyllina*. Paris 1869, and A. Kurfess (*K*), *Sibyllinische Weissagungen*. Berlin 1951. To solve the problematic cases we have used the critical assistance of Geffcken's edition which collects the readings of the different manuscripts.
4. We only reproduce the central part of the line, the *longum* (3) and the *biceps* third. Beside each line we specify the edition from which the reading has been taken.
5. The inclusion of the particle *τι* is not due to logical line syntax. It might imply proposing as an alternative solution the inclusion of the article between the epithet and the noun, which implies scanning *θηῶν* with synizesis.
6. *Cfr.* Geffcken, *ad loc.*
7. *Cfr.* Geffcken, *ad loc.*
8. *Cfr.* Geffcken, *ad loc.*
9. *Cfr.*, for example, W. Schulze, *Quaestiones Epicae*. Gutersloh 1892 (reimpr. Hildesheim 1967), pp. 411-430 with Homeric examples.
10. Many of these lines can be explained by the evolution of language and epic diction, *cfr.* A. H. Hoekstra, *Homeric Modifications of formulaic Prototypes*, Amsterdam-London 1969, and "Metrical lengthening and Epic Diction", *Mnemosyne* 31, 1978, pp. 1-26.
11. The examples of *ζαυροῦς* line in Homer which Schulze compiles, offer this irregularity in different line positions.
12. This is what the ancients called *ἀοράφορος* syllable, syllable which is indifferent to the scansion and which has not any importance for the rhythmic structure of the line. The problem with this peculiar *type of anceps*, which goes back to the old metricians, is still prevalent in the modern authors of Greek metrics, *vid.*, for example, M. Ruipérez, "Cantidad silábica y métrica estructural", *Emerita* 23, 1955, pp. 79-95, P. Maas, *Greek Metre*, trad. ingl., Oxford 1966, p. 29, and, mainly, L. E. Rossi, "Anceps: vocale, sillaba, elemento" *RFIC* 91, 1963, pp. 52-71, and A. M. Devine and L. D. Stephens, "Anceps", *GRBS* 16, 1975, pp. 197-215.
13. *Vid.* my Doctoral Thesis.
14. To solve the problems of chronology and authorship the work of J. Geffcken, *Komposition und Entstehungszeit der Oracula Sibyllina*. Leipzig 1902, is still essential.