

THE REMAINS OF THE WORKS OF CHOERILUS OF IASUS

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A series of unfortunate events has obscured the oeuvre and even the very existence of the epic poet Choerilus of Iasus, who accompanied Alexander the Great as a member of his court entourage. One problem, not unique to Choerilus but shared by all contemporary witnesses to the larger-than-life figure of Alexander, is that his work is no longer extant, but survives only in sparse and scattered citations by later authorities, the earliest dating to the Roman imperial period. Furthermore, Choerilus has the added misfortune of sharing a name with a fifth-century epic poet from Samos, who also wrote an encomiastic celebration of a Hellenic victory over an eastern opponent (Xerxes) and had a Macedonian patron (Archelaus). It is easy to see how the two Choerili became entangled in the biographical tradition in antiquity (and the existence of a third person with the same name, a late sixth-century tragic poet from Athens, further complicates matters). The time is ripe for a reassessment of the life and work of Choerilus of Iasus, particularly in light of the recent surge of scholarly interest in Alexander and his reception on the one hand and post-classical poetry on the other.

P.'s comprehensive study is therefore most welcome. The volume opens with the first stand-alone edition (accompanied by a translation into Italian) of the *testimonia* and fragments ascribed to Choerilus of Iasus, updating the entry in the *Supplementum Hellenisticum* (333–6) and expanding it with the addition of new fragments (with varying degrees of likelihood). This revised edition represents already a major contribution (marred only by the accidental substitution in the Greek text of F 5 of a passage from Aristotle's *Topica*, already cited at Test. 22, for a passage from Diogenes Laertius).

P. begins the commentary proper by tackling head-on the *Suda*'s (χ 595 Adler) apparent conflation of the two Choerili. He argues convincingly that the references in this confused entry (which mainly concerns Choerilus of Samos) to a birthplace of Iasus (or nearby Halicarnassus), the authorship of a work on the Lamian War and the payment of a gold stater per line correspond with 'la tradizione "oraziano"' (found mainly in Horace and his commentators) on a mediocre poet called Choerilus, whose verses Alexander rewarded with gold coins. Stephanus of Byzantium (t 16 Billerbeck-Zubler) corroborates the separate existence of a Choerilus from Caria. P. offers the tantalising but ultimately speculative suggestion (pp. 51–60) that a recently discovered inscription praising the Hecatomnid dynasty (included here as Epigram 2) was authored by Choerilus and brought him to the attention of Alexander when he restored Ada to the Carian throne upon his arrival in Asia Minor in 334 BCE.

Interestingly, it is only the *Suda* and Stephanus who preserve Choerilus' Iasian origins. The pervasive tradition that he was the worst of the poets (*pessimus poeta*) who flattered Alexander (cf. W.W. Tarn's notorious dismissal of Choerilus along with the rest of Alexander's court poets as 'poetasters') is found solely in Latin sources (Test. 3–14), appearing first in two closely related passages from Horace (Hor. *Epist.* 2.1.232–4 and *Ars P.* 357–9 = Test. 3 and 4). P. proceeds to demonstrate systematically how the elements attested in Horace – Alexander's rewarding of Choerilus with gold coins and the implicit

contrast of his poorly composed verses with Homer, the gold standard of epic poetry in antiquity – crystallise into separate but complementary traditions. In the first (Test. 5–7 and 10; cf. Test. 18) Choerilus was rewarded only for his good lines of poetry (of which there were seven) and received blows for the bad ones, which so outnumbered the good ones that he was ultimately beaten to death or died from hunger in captivity (an alternative fate clearly intended to parallel that of Alexander's erstwhile court historian Callisthenes). According to the second (related) tradition Alexander recognised Choerilus' inability to praise him on the Homeric model, quipping (Test. 6a, 7 and 12) that he would rather be Homer's Thersites than Choerilus' Achilles. These traditions appear simultaneously to absolve Alexander of being an inept judge of poetry and to enshrine Choerilus in the 'canon' of the worst poets.

P. contends that these invented traditions originated in Hellenistic literary debates, a reasonable enough supposition in light of the negative comparison between Choerilus and Homer in two fragments of Philodemus (*Poem.* 2, col. 208,5–15 Janko and *Poem.* 3, fr. 28,18–27 Janko = Test. 8–9). He further suggests that their roots can be traced back to the Peripatetic School's hostility to Alexander in the wake of his condemnation of Callisthenes (Aristotle's relative). One intriguing hypothesis that he offers in this connection is a posited 'missing link' between Choerilus and the Horatian tradition in a previously overlooked passage from Plautus' *Curculio* (438–41). The meeting between the stereotypical parasite Curculio and the banker Lyco in Caria contains a reference to Philippic gold (cf. Hor. *Epist.* 2.1.234), a detail hinting that the scene could be read as a parody of Alexander as the seemingly appreciative paymaster of Choerilus' execrable verses. Although Menander may well have been the original source of this scene, the contention that he, or the Peripatetic school in general, was antagonistic towards Alexander seems unlikely, given their ongoing connections with Alexander's successors, as well as the traces that can be discerned of an apologetic strand in the so-called Horatian tradition as well as a hostile one. Furthermore, it is probably not a coincidence that these invented traditions on Choerilus were elaborated in an imperial Roman context, which suggests that the real issue underlying all of these texts was not so much literary aesthetics as the fraught relationship between an autocrat and the literati who benefited from his patronage. In the final sentence of the volume (p. 208) P. concedes as much, commenting that it is not surprising that the link between poetry, ideology and power attracted Horace's attention.

The extant fragments of the works of Choerilus of Iasus are fewer than the *testimonia*; even more problematically, none can be securely attributed to him rather than to his better-known Samian namesake (or the Athenian tragedian or other later poets). Nevertheless, P. does a valiant job in setting each one into its literary, intellectual and historical context, and assessing the degree of likelihood of his authorship. Choerilus' encomiastic poem on Alexander's expedition was probably a typically Hellenistic *Kleinepos*, where he attempted to portray Alexander's exploits in Homeric terms (presumably in accordance with his patron's wishes). The ancient sources attest that Choerilus wrote a work on the Lamian War (likely commissioned by Antipater), of which nothing but the title survives. Finally, Choerilus is alleged to have versified (probably a translation of) the famous epitaph of Sardanapalus when Alexander visited his tomb in 333 BCE (F 1 = *SH* 335). P. makes the attractive suggestion that a papyrus fragment (*P. Paris* 2, col. 2.4–11 = F 2) in which the speaker rejects the mindset (*dianoia*) of Sardanapalus belongs to Choerilus' poem on Alexander, in the context of the king defending himself against opposition to his increasing incorporation of eastern court ceremonial.

In the final chapter P. offers an overview of the modern reception of Choerilus. It remained uncertain whether he was a separate figure from his Samian namesake until

A.F. Naeke definitively distinguished the two in 1817. More recent attempts to deny his separate existence, however, have made it necessary to re-open the question. This volume settles the 'questione chaerilea' once and for all, adds potential new fragments to the scanty remains of Choerilus' oeuvre and sheds new light on his life and work as well as his later reception.

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