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THE CYCLOPS AND HIS «DEAR RAM»

Homer's powers of observation and the general veracity of his words in matters of everyday life have been generally recognized for quite some time now. An example of these characteristics is discussed in the article «Achilles... a raw man»¹. Yet there are still a few small points which seem problematic, possibly because we do not know what exactly Homer meant to say. After Odysseus has blinded Polyphemos, the Cyclops, with a red hot spit, the poet has the latter say some kind and truly touching words to his «dear ram» in Book ι of the *Odyssey* (447 ff.):

«Κριε πέπον, τί μοι ὄδε διὰ σπέος ἔσσο μῆλων
ὔστατος; οὐ τι πάρος γε λελειμμένος ἔρχεαι οἰῶν,
ἀλλὰ πολὺ πρῶτος νέμειαι τέρεν' ἄνθηα ποίησ
μακρὰ βιβιάς, πρῶτος δὲ βροῶς ποταμῶν ἀφικάνεις,
πρῶτος δὲ σταθμόνδε λιλαίειαι ἀπονέεσθαι
ἔσπέριος· νῦν αὔτε πανύστατος. ἦ σὺ ἄνακτος
ὀφθαλμὸν ποθέεις, τὸν ἀνὴρ κακὸς ἐξάλᾶσε
σὺν λυγροῖς ἐτάροισι, δαμασσάμενος φρένα οἴνω,
Οὔτις, ὃν οὐ πῶ φημι πεφυγμένον ἔμμεν ὄλεθρον.
εἰ δ' ἄν ὁμοφρονέοις ποτὶ φωνήεις τε γένοιο
εἰπεῖν ὅππῃ κείνος ἐμὸν μένος ἠλασκάζει!
τῷ κέ οἱ ἐγκέφαλός γε διὰ σπέος ἄλλυδις ἄλλη
θεινομένου βραίοιτο πρὸς οὔδει, καὶ δέ κ' ἐμὸν κῆρ
λωφῆσειε κακῶν, τὰ μοι οὐτιδανὸς πόρεν Οὔτις.»

My good ram, why are you coming forth thus, the last of the sheep from the cave? Up to now you have not been wont to stay behind the others, but you were always the **first** to feed on the tender bloom of the grass, taking long strides,

1. E m m. P a p a m i c h a e l, 'Αχιλλεύς ... ὠμηστῆς ἀνὴρ, ἀνάτυπο ἀπὸ τὸν Θ' τόμο τῆς Δωδώνης (Ἐπισημονικῆς Ἐπετηρίδας τῆς Φιλοσοφικῆς Σχολῆς τοῦ Πανεπιστημίου Ἰωαννίνων), Ἰωάννινα 1980, pp. 131-135.

and you were the **first** to reach the streams of the rivers, and the **first** to long to return to your station in the evening. But now you are the last. Certainly you feel sorry for the eye of your master, that an evil man together with his baneful fellows blinded when he had overpowered my wits with wine. Noman was his name, who, I tell you, has not yet escaped destruction. If only you could feel the way I do and could speak and tell me where he is hiding himself from my wrath, then his brains should be dashed on the ground in an instant, throughout the cave, when I had struck him, and my heart would be relieved of the pains the worthless Noman has caused me.

These words are spoken with deep and brutal feeling, although Polyphemus has shown himself to be a cannibal in previous scenes. The problem here is that, judging by the Cyclops' words, his ram is presented as being very unusual. The reader, if he knows enough about sheep, may have already understood wherein the peculiarity of this ram is to be found.

This, in short, has to do with the place that rams commonly hold within the flock. Unless one knows certain things about what actually happens, one may have the impression that a ram, if not always at least usually, goes in front of the other animals of the flock, being in a way their leader¹. This would be expected to apply to Polyphemus' exceptional sheep more than to any other.

Thus, what the Cyclops says appears to be quite natural and does not surprise at all those who come across these words. Nevertheless, this is not what in reality takes place, for the good rams, the 'ἐνορχα'², i. e. those that have not been castrated, very seldom lead the flock. This conclusion is based on my personal observations and research undertaken for a considerable period of time in an effort to compare what Homer says on the subject with what actually happens.

1. W. B. Stanford, *The Odyssey of Homer*, 2nd ed., London 1959, p. 362 (448-9), comments on 'λελειμμένος...οἶων': «... In Mediterranean countries flocks usually have a ram or a he-goat as their recognized leader.» This is inaccurate and misleading; in the light of the examination of the question, it is proved to be largely false. It may be true that in past years a he-goat may occasionally have been seen to lead the flock, but he must in all likelihood have been castrated; if not, then the reason or the motive of the shepherds was rather to obtain a sort of cross-bred lambs. They maintain that this is possible and the ewes that had for their father a he-goat produce more milk, as indeed goats do.

2. Homer uses this term in the *Iliad*, Book Ψ 147: «...ἐνορχα...μῆλ' ἱερεύσειν.»

About fifty shepherds, mainly here in Epirus and partly in Thessaly, have given more or less the same answer, that, in general, is as follows: The good ram, the 'βαρβάτο' or the 'ένορχο', the uncastrated male, goes in the middle or farther back and usually behind the ewes. He can practically always be in a state of sexual excitement, and his role of mounting the ewes does not allow him, or at least not very often, to seek the first place at the front. The male leading the flock, the bell-wether, is 'χαλασμένο, στριμμένο', castrated, known as 'γκισέμι'⁴. A ewe may often get this leading position and be called an A, the name zoologists and ecologists apply to animals that exhibit such good qualities.

One may wonder why there is a leader in the flock at all. This no doubt is deeply rooted in the biological and evolutionary development of the species and has to do with its survival. Thus a leader is indispensable, and intelligence and other mental qualities are more important in such an animal than physical strength. It is enough to say that when the animal at the head of the flock, which is recognized by the entire flock as their leader, stops, all the other animals stop, too. If the leader starts, they move on. Let it cross a stream, the others follow behind. This has become proverbial: 'They follow like sheep' denotes a lack of initiative. Only a strong leader is necessary to make them obey and follow him. Very often or at least some of the time the good ram may not be in a position to play this role, for he is called upon to play a far more important one, i. e. to impregnate the females. This in turn guarantees the preservation of the species. If there is not a wether, and in the natural state of things we would not expect there to be one, quite often a ewe, very likely the most intelligent, assumes the initiative and responsibility of leading the flock and imposes her leadership by means of some instinctive mechanism functioning within its hierarchical organization. We would accordingly expect every sheep to have acquired a

4. "Η 'κεσέμι', a word of Turkish origin, see N. Π. 'Ανδριώτη, 'Ετυμολογικό λεξικό της Κοινής Νεοελληνικής, Θεσσαλονίκη 1967² (1971), s. v. κεσέμι (Turk. kösem, kösemen); it is also called 'μπροστάρης' from the adverb μπροστά - see Δ. Δημητράκου, Μέγα Λεξικόν όλης της Ελληνικής γλώσσης, Αθήνα 1956, s.v. μπροστάρης -, or 'σούρτης, σουρτάρης' (the ewe 'σουρταριάρα') from the verb σούρνω <σύρνω. N. Cazantzakis, 'Ο Χριστός Ξανασταυρώνεται, 10η έκδ., Αθ. 1974, p. 295, names it 'μπροσταρόκριος', but apparently he was not aware of the difference in the place within the flock which a ram and a wether normally occupy («Ζύγωσε ό Δάσος, ό μπροσταρόκριος, και τή μύρισε, τή γνώρισε, μεπεμπέρισε κι αύτός σαν τό άφεντικό του και στάθηκε πλάι τους άναγλείφοντας τή γλώσσα...»).

more or less specific place in this order¹ on the basis of its own natural qualities. Thus the dullest animal would in all probability be the last one in the flock.

The role of the leader is no less significant for the shepherd, who trusts this animal. He addresses himself primarily to it and his dog in a language limited to whistling, inarticulate shouting, and gestures.

But this is not the whole picture. Things are not so simple in nature, and individual differences are present here as elsewhere. Among the answers to my questions there were a few notable exceptions which are particularly interesting:

An old man near Calampaca, Polyzos by name, who has had seven rams said that some of them went ahead of the other animals when he let them out of the shed. He added, however, that when they were small he gave them a bit of bread, and so they became accustomed² to going first.

A shepherdess at Coutselio, a place about seven kilometres distant from Ioannina, was taking her flock of sheep to pasture the other day. The ram was well ahead of all the other animals, and I asked her if that proud animal with its twisted horns was a wether or an uncastrated ram used for reproduction. To my surprise she said it was a good ram indeed, an uncastrated one.

A shepherd, Alexis Photiadis of Stavradi, a suburb about three kilometres from Ioannina, said that his ram goes ahead of all the others when it is with barren ewes or with those that are not receptive or in heat 'δὲ μουρκαλιούνται'³.

Finally, a shepherd, named Panos Phloros, in Aetorachi, a small

1. In this sort of hierarchical order the rights of the individuals are questioned from time to time, especially by the young members that have not yet found their more or less permanent place within the group and try to test their innate and acquired qualities. Thus one very often sees rams butting heads; the same also occurs between ewes, but not between ram and ewe, once the male has established his position of mastery. If he intervenes at all in feuds of females, it is mainly to pacify, as good-natured arbitrator, his quarrelling subjects.

2. Cf. p. 105, note 1.

3. Verb μουρκαλάω, μαρκαλίζω, μουρκαλιέμαι, μαρκαλιζομαι; see Εὐαγ. Ἄθ. Μπόγχα, *Τὰ γλωσσικὰ ἰδιώματα τῆς Ἠπείρου* (E.H.M.), Ἰωάννινα 1966, s. v. μουρκάλος (ὁ), μούργκαλος, ὁ ἄλλου μαρκάλος, μαρκάλους, ὁ γενετήσιος ὄργασμὸς ἢ ἡ συνουσία μεταξύ ἀίγοπροβάτων; according to him and G. Meyer from the Slav. mrk, mrkamu, according to N. Π. Ἀνδριώτη, op. cit., from the Alban. marr-kal. Personally I am inclined to relate it to μοῦρορ μυχός (Hesych. Alex-ander. Lex. 1730. 55, rec. M. Schmidt, Amsterdam 1965).

mountain village twenty kilometres or so distant from Ioannina, declared that in his flock he has a relatively young ram which exhibits a clear tendency to go ahead of all the rest, but, as it charges the shepherd himself and has become dangerous for him, he has struck it several times on the nose and thinks that this will keep the aggressive animal from developing the habit of going in front of the others.

The question now is this: Was Polyphenos' ram then a castrated male, a bell-wether, or was it one of those exceptionally rare uncastrated rams that lead the flock, either because they are trained¹ to do so or because of their own natural inclinations? The emphasis on the fact that it was the usual practice of the Cyclops' ram to go first would suggest *prima facie* and on probability grounds something that was expected mainly from a wether. If that, however, was the case, we should be really sorry. That consideration would greatly reduce our admiration and would make us wonder why on earth Polyphemos speaks such words of praise for a castrated animal which is only doing what all wethers do - going in front of the other animals. Yet the matter is not altogether as it seems, and Homer gives us some other helpful indications as to the real situation. Thus, before the words stated above, he says in verses 437 ff.:

Ἦμος δ' ἠριγένεια φάνη ῥοδοδάκτυλος Ἥως,
καὶ τότε ἔπειτα νομόνδ' ἐξέσσυτο ἄρσενα μῆλα,
θήλειαι δ' ἐμέμηκον ἀνήμελκτοι περὶ σηκούς·
οὔθατα γὰρ σφαραγεῦντο.

As soon as the rosy fingered Dawn appeared, then the male sheep rushed forth to the pasture, while the females bleated un milked about their pens, for their udders were bursting (felt heavy and swollen).

The Cyclops, it seems, let out the male sheep separately and kept the females apart, at any rate during the time when they had to suckle their lambs, or he usually milked the ewes to prevent their udders and teats from becoming swollen. He may also have done this to avoid early and undesirable pregnancies, which might have resulted in weakening and degeneration of his livestock. It is very probable that in the old days a

1. Habit seems to play a considerable part here; some of the people I questioned said, «this depends on how you train the young ram». Apparently this answer agrees with that of the old man Polyzos near Calampaca, who gave or, presumably more correctly, was giving his young rams some bread to establish that pattern of behaviour.

sort of check was made. If so, things were arranged more carefully and systematically than is the case with some shepherds nowadays.

Be that as it may, certain points in Book ι of the *Odyssey* support the explanation that is given here (verses 217 ff.):

...ἄλλ' ἐνόμει νομὸν κάτα πίοια μῆλα.
 ἐλθόντες δ' εἰς ἄντρον ἐθήμεσθα ἕκαστα·
 ταρσοὶ μὲν τυρῶν βρῖθον, στείνοντο δὲ σηκοὶ
 ἀρνῶν ἢ δ' ἐρίφων· διακεκριμένα δὲ ἕκασται
 ἔρχατο, χωρὶς μὲν πρόγονοι, χωρὶς δὲ μέτασσαι,
 χωρὶς δ' αὖθ' ἔρσαι· ναῖον δ' ὀρῶ ἄγγεα πάντα,
 γαυλοὶ τε σκαφίδες τε, τετυγμένα, τοῖς ἐνάμελγην.

But he (Polyphemos) was pasturing his fat sheep in the fields. When we went into the cave, we gazed with amazement at all things there. The baskets were laden with cheeses, and the pens were crowded with lambs and kids. Each kind was kept separately: the firstlings were penned apart from the later lambs, and again the newly-weaned were kept by themselves. All the well-wrought vessels, the milk-pails, and the bowls into which he milked, were swimming with whey.

Therefore, when the Cyclops addresses his ram with words of praise because it earlier always went ahead of the rest - aside from its other praiseworthy qualities such as its size, thick fleece, and the like, which made possible Odysseus' safe escape while each of his six companions needed three rams - one should probably understand that its not going first in this instance was unusual, perhaps unique. The male sheep were very likely pasturing by themselves or with barren females (or at most with non-receptive ones) apart from the receptive females. And this might generally have been the case except for the breeding season. It seems rather certain from passages in the text that the ewes with their lambs, and probably also during pregnancies, were kept apart from the other sheep for safety reasons.

Judging by the number of rams, Polyphemos must have had quite a large number of sheep. Nineteen males ($6 \times 3 + 1$) were needed for only the six surviving companions and Odysseus to escape from the Cyclops' cave. Obviously there were many more that came out and were seized and taken to the ships (verses 461 ff.):

ᾠς εἰπὼν τὸν κριὸν ἀπὸ ἔο πέμπε θύραζε.
 ἔλθόντες δ' ἤβαιὸν ἀπὸ σπείους τε καὶ αὐλῆς
 πρῶτος ὑπ' ἀρνειοῦ λυόμεν, ὑπέλυσα δ' ἑταίρους.
 καρπαλίμως δὲ τὰ μῆλα ταναύποδα, πίονα δημῶ,
 πολλὰ περιτροπέοντες ἐλαύνομεν, ὄφρ' ἐπὶ νῆα
 ἰκόμεθ'...

(469) ... ἀλλ' ἐκέλευσα θεῶς καλλιτριχα μῆλα
 πόλλ' ἐν νηϊ βαλόντας ἐπιπλεῖν ἀλμυρὸν ὕδαρ.

So he said (those words he addressed to his ram above) and sent the ram forth from him. And when we had come a short distance from the cave and the court, I first loosed myself from under the ram and freed my companions. Hurriedly we drove those long-shanked sheep, rich with fat, to the ship, turning around very often as we went... but I ordered them (i. e. my comrades) to throw speedily on board the many sheep with goodly fleece and sail to the open salt water.

Since the main diet of the Cyclops, as it is described in Book ι of the *Odyssey*, is meat and milk, he must have needed huge quantities of both. The meat surely came from his rams and barren ewes. No doubt he kept the fertile females, which provided him with milk, cheese, and other dairy products, for breeding and used them for food only when they became too old to bear young.

The observations and information above do not present a very clear picture. This picture agrees, however, with the information Homer gives. In Book Γ of the *Iliad* (verses 196 ff.) we read: «...

αὐτὸς δὲ κτίλος ὡς ἐπιπλεῖται στίχας ἀνδρῶν
 ἀρνεῖῳ μιν ἔγωγε ἔϊσκω πηγεσιμάλλω,
 ὅς τ' οἰῶν μέγα πῶϋ διέρχεται ἀργεννάων.»

Priam, after he has seen Odysseus, asks Helen to tell him the name of that man,

who like a ram¹ went through the ranks of the warriors. He seems to Priam like a thick-fleeced ram that went through the great flock of white ewes.

1. Cf. *Iliad* N 492 f., λαοὶ ἔπονθ', ὡς εἶ τε μετὰ κτίλον ἔσπετο μῆλα / πτόμεν' ἐκ βο-
 τάνης· γάνυται δ' ἄρα τε φρένα ποιμήν.

This is a typical picture of the uncastrated ram among the females, especially when these are receptive or in heat.

After this testimony, the leading position of the first and best ram of Polyphemos can be explained in the following way: This excellent animal, of which Homer has the Cyclops speak so admirably, is one of those rare rams that are both good for breeding as well as for leading the flock. His going in front of the others coincides mainly with the time when only males or barren ewes are present, or when any fertile females present are not in a receptive state. Yet it is practically impossible for a good ram to be at the front of the flock at breeding time, when some of the ewes are usually receptive. At any rate it seems very improbable that Polyphemos' ram was a bell-wether. Homer would not have made a castrated male behaving like practically any other of its kind the subject of such an excellent scene and such touching compliments. It must, therefore, have been in fact a very special animal of which Polyphemos had good reason to be proud¹.

1. Cf. Odysseus' own words, ι 432 : ἀρνεῖός γάρ ἔην, μῆλων δὲ ἀριστος ἀπάντων.