REVIEW


From 1991 to 1993 the authors were part of a group of doctoral students from the Department of New Testament and Early Christian Studies at Harvard Divinity School, who gathered weekly to read Philostratus’ Heroikos under the direction of Professor Helmut Koester. By that time Maclean and Aitken were also teaching fellows for Professor Gregory Nagy’s course in Harvard’s Core Curriculum ‘The Concept of the Hero in Hellenic Civilisation’, where they felt the need for an English translation of the Heroikos, thus far unavailable, so as to make this highly significant but opaque text more accessible to students and scholars alike. The present volume is the eminent result of their efforts and the basis of a broader Heroikos Project, which includes the international conference ‘Philostratus’s Heroikos, Religion, and Cultural Identity’, held on May 4-6, 2001 in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and the publication by the Society of Biblical Literature of a collection of essays on the Heroikos, forthcoming in 2003 under the title Philostratus’s Heroikos: Religion and Cultural Identity in the Third Century C.E.

Both mentors signed for the short essays that frame the body of the volume. The Prologue (The Sign of the Hero, xv-xxxv) by Nagy analyzes the mysticism of initiation associated with hero cult in the era of Philostratus and the continuum between myths and rituals associated with heroes. The Epilogue (On Heroes, Tombs, and Early Christianity, 257-264) by Koester explores the relation between worship at tombs of heroes, the importance of tombs in scripture, and the emerging cult practices around the tombs of saints in ancient Christianity. Both essays form the broad cultural and religious background against which the Heroikos should be read. This fictional dialogue between a Phoenician trader and a vinedresser is indeed remarkable testimony to the hero cult and heroic tradition. It is set in Elaiious in Thracian Chersonesos, in the gardens around the tomb of Protesilaos, the first hero to die in the Trojan war. The vinedresser, the initiate, tells the trader all about the epiphanies of Protesilaos, who occasionally helps him on the land while discussing the Trojan war and Homer’s poems.
In the Introduction (xxxvii-xcii) Maclean and Aitken provide a summary of the plot of the *Heroikos*, a short *status quaestionis* of the authorship and dating of the work and its place in the sophistic tradition. The figure of Protesilaos in literature, art and cult, and the central features of the *Heroikos*, i.e. homeric criticism and the retelling of the heroes’ stories, are dealt with. Most stimulating is the inquiry into the purposes for which Philostratus composed the work. The authors quite rightly observe that ‘discussions of the purposes of the *Heroikos* tend to speak little of the text’s historical and political aspects, in favor of religious and literary questions’ (lxxxii). They themselves perceive a strong anti-Persian perspective in the text and suggest that it may have been written around the time of Alexander Severus’ campaigns against the Sassanians in order to promote Greek (and hence Roman) identity and piety. However, a comparison with Philostratus’ account on mystical and orientalizing tendencies in the *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, which is lacking, could have shed more light on this question.

All the observations about the literary, religious, cultural, historical and political aspects involved in interpreting the work are kept concise, but they are well documented and clear. The pedagogical concern shows particularly in the section *On Reading the Heroikos*, where the student is made aware of the different kinds of expertise demanded on the part of the audience, even provided with a good translation. Apart from being familiar with the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* the reader is indeed expected to have a broad knowledge of ancient geography, to possess a certain inculturation into the basic patterns of hero cult, and to be able to recognize references to contemporary events and figures among others. Here the two maps showing the location of all the places that occur in the text, the extensive glossary with entries for every proper name and the footnotes meant to elucidate obscure points, clarify matters of translation and supply references to the works of Homer and other ancient literature, are most helpful. A complete index of Greek words and a good select bibliography are useful tools for students and scholars alike.

The English translation itself is facing the Greek text, a reprint of the critical edition of Ludo de Lannoy published by Teubner (Leipzig 1977), provided with three separate numbering systems for smooth
consultation and conveniently arranged with headings, which appear also in some of the manuscripts but were left out in the critical edition. The translation is highly readable, although quite close to the Greek idiom, with a minimum of paraphrase, and with sensitivity to wordplay and respect for technical vocabulary.

The summary of the Heroikos, the relevant maps, the bibliography and more information on the Philostratus conference can equally be found on the website http://www2.roanoke.edu/religion/maclean/Heroikos/HomePage.html.

Christopher P. Jones, 'Time and Place in Philostratus’ Heroikos’, Journal of Hellenic Studies 121 (2001), 141-149 might have been added to the bibliography.

Maryse Waegeman
Ghent, Belgium