

Hellenistic papyri of Homer, down to approximately 150 B.C.E., are known as the ‘wild’ or ‘eccentric’ papyri. They display a degree of variation from the medieval vulgate that is comparable to the indirect tradition. Stephanie West (1967) subscribes to the belief that such variation decreased markedly after 150 B.C.E. – the approximate death date of Aristarchus – because, although few of Aristarchus’ readings were adopted, his students encouraged others to delete the lines deleted in his edition. She offers in support of this theory the possibly equal *numerus versuum* of the vulgate and Aristarchus’ edition, and the decrease in orthographic variation that began around the same time that the overall text stabilized.

My paper serves as a preview to a larger study, in which one of my goals has been to develop a methodology for interpreting Hellenistic variants, which came to light at a period from which most of the evidence for the condition of the text of Homer is available. This evidence includes papyrus texts of Homer, the comments of Homeric scholars such as Zenodotus and Aristarchus, preserved in the scholia, and the work of Hellenistic poets such as Apollonius, whose poetry reflects contemporary texts. In my paper, I offer a close reading of *Iliad P 53* as an example of the method I have developed in order to make the best use of this evidence. The papyrus in question corresponds to *Iliad* 1. 484-494 in the vulgate, a description of the landing at Chryse, which it expands by three lines, inserted after the vulgate’s line 486.

West (1967: 32) presents as a certainty that these three lines have been interpolated from the *Hymn to Apollo* 505-507. She fails to provide, however, any reconstruction of how this might have taken place. She overlooks one possible explanation, namely that the scribe might have read or been familiar with the text of the hymn, and then (wittingly or unwittingly), expanded the Homeric text before him with lines that are reminiscent of the hymn. Such a practice would be similar to what Katherine O’Brien O’Keefe, in dealing with variants in Anglo-Saxon poetic texts, has called ‘oral reading’ – that is, a type of reading that was highly inferential due to the formulaic nature of Old English poetry (*Visible Song*, 1990). Such an occurrence would be consistent with the fact that none of the ‘interpolated’ lines of the papyrus perfectly match the lines from the *Hymn*. West’s final word on the necessity of the extra lines being an interpolations rests on the same aesthetic criteria that have guided many an editor in both the Hellenistic and the modern era: “The text of the papyrus is surely inferior to the Vulgate; we have already had a full description of a landing at A 432ff., and there is no point in repeating this ...” (1967: 34). However, we have no proof that the composer of the *Iliad* viewed redundancy in the same way we do.

At this point, my argument turns to Apollonius, who is writing epic verse while involved in work on the text of Homer. Campbell’s *Echoes and Imitations of Early Epic in Apollonius Rhodius* lists one possible allusion to *Iliad P 53*, and four lines that may allude to the vulgate text of *Iliad* 1.484-494 (1981 *ad loc*). He also cites four lines in the *Argonautica* that may allude to *Hymn to Apollo* 505-507 (1981 *ad loc*). Two of these lines overlap with those cited above (4.1365, 2.1282), and there is no clear reason why the other two do not. I see nothing here to indicate anything other than a typical scene presented with more detail in one version of the Homeric text, and less detail in the other. I would argue that this papyrus demonstrates that the Homeric tradition was still flexible and open-ended. Different texts are in circulation; some or many of these text’s differences may be due to the highly inferential mode of reading practiced by scribes who are familiar with or even fluent in the language of a formulaic epic tradition.