NESTOR'S ADVICE AND ANTILOCHUS' TACTICS

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T HE FUNERAL GAMES in *Iliad* 23 start with a chariot-race.[1] After the five contestants volunteer, Nestor gives advice to his son Antilochus, who is to compete with Diomedes, Eumelus, Menelaus, and Meriones. Nestor points out that, whereas Antilochus' horses are the slowest, none of the entrants surpasses him in μῆτις. Nestor tells Antilochus that the application of μῆτις in this particular race is required for ensuring his success (311–318). He proceeds to give a detailed description of the nature and location of the *terma* and the fastest and safest way of rounding it. The *terma* is a dry stump not rotted by the rain, situated ἐν ξυνοχῆσιν ὁδοῦ, and the hippodrome beside it is smooth for driving (319–333). While rounding the turning-post Antilochus should assume a posture of leaning to the left, encourage and give a full rein to the horse on the right, keeping the horse on the inside as close to the stump as possible; he himself should be on guard lest the wheel touch the post and thus break the axle and harm him. Nestor ends his admonition by telling his son that if at the turning-post Antilochus overtakes the rest of the contestants, there is no man that will be able to catch him in a burst of speed (333–345).

The order of Nestor's advice—the application of μῆτις followed by the elaborate description of the rounding of the turning-post—has led scholars to believe that Nestor advises Antilochus to apply his μῆτις at the turning-post, and thus has created some difficulty since Antilochus, as the text states, overtakes Menelaus on the straight home-stretch, and not around the post (373 f.). The text tells us that on the way back towards the sea Antilochus notices a narrowing in the hollow road (στεῖνος ὁδοῦ κοίλης; there is a rift [ῥωχμός] in the ground where winter rain broke a part of it and hollowed the entire area [419–421]). Menelaus drives into the narrow path hoping not to let anyone drive abreast of him, but Antilochus turns aside and passes him.

This feeling of a lack of *exact* correlation between Nestor's advice and Antilochus' applied strategy in overtaking Menelaus was apparently already felt by the ancient commentators. They claim that the lowering of the ground where Antilochus passes Menelaus (the ῥωχμός) was a place "a little beyond the turning-post" and that "Menelaus drove on the right of it" (Σ bT on 420a). The ancient commentators say further that Antilochus succeeded in over-taking Menelaus by "holding a more direct course on the inside and getting to the turning-post first. Menelaus took the safer course more to the outside" (bT on 423b, παρατρέψας). The ancient commentators thus try to make

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Antilochus' strategy agree with what they assume to be Nestor's advice. Since the pivotal spot in the race, according to Nestor, is the turning-point, it is precisely *there* that the overtaking of the closest competitor should take place. Both Eustathius (1309.19) and Erbse in their remarks find the scholia's explanation "unclear;" they do not expound, however, at any length on this lack of clarity (bT, 423b).[2] My intention is to show that Antilochus overtook Menelaus not while rounding the turning-post, but in the straight stretch of the returning leg, *as the text states*, and that there is no discrepancy between Nestor's advice and Antilochus' strategy.

Justification for pointing out the improbability of the suggestion of the ancient commentators is its reappearance in modern scholarship. In a recent note M. Gagarin embraces the idea that Antilochus overtakes Menelaus not on the return leg, as the text states, but while rounding the turning-post—on the assumption that this is what his father told him to do.[3] Antilochus, he maintains, was able to do this although his horses were slower than Menelaus' by closely following Nestor's advice and with the help of the information on the terrain that his father had given to him but not to the other contestants. In Gagarin's view Antilochus owed his victory to his skill in horsemanship and to his father's advice; no trickery or cheating was involved, Menelaus' claim notwithstanding (570–585).

In order to accept the explanation that Antilochus passed Menelaus at the turning-point, one has to assume that ξυνοχῆσιν ὁδοῦ (330) in Nestor's speech means "narrowing of the road" and that it refers to the same place that both Antilochus and Menelaus describe as στεινωπός (416, 427), where Antilochus overtook Menelaus.[4] But the text gives us no reason to believe that these are indeed the same places. The traditional and more probable understanding of ξυνοχῆσιν ὁδοῦ is "joinings" of the track, i.e., "a point where the two straight parts meet at the turn."[5] The text tells us that the narrowing of the track where Antilochus passed Menelaus was the result of stagnating winter rain making the ground sink to form a gutter or a narrow channel (ῥωχμὸς ἔην γαίης, 420). The ground must have sunk in the middle of the road where the water concentrated, and the sides of the track must have caved in towards the center, thus narrowing the track.[6] Such a contraction may occur in a straight track in an open plain or anywhere else in a road where

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[2]*Scholia graeca in Homeri Iliadem (scholia vetera)* 5, ed. H. Erbse (Berlin 1977) *ad loc.*

[3]M. Gagarin, "Antilochus' Strategy: The Chariot Race in *Iliad* 23," *CP* 78 (1983) 35–39.

[4]Gagarin 36, n. 11, 38, n. 18. He believes also that στεινωπός recalls στρέφει ἐγγύθεν (323), which in my view has nothing to do with the track's width.

[5]The phrase does not occur elsewhere in Homer. Cf. W. Leaf, *The Iliad* (London 1900–1902) *ad loc.*; B. D. Monro, *Homer. Iliad: Books 13–24* (Oxford 1897) *ad loc.*

[6]There is no support for the view that the track ran through a stream bed, nor is there any need to assume that it was the side of the road that was hollowed out by the rainwater. See, however, Leaf *ad loc.*; Gagarin 36, n. 12.

the ground for some reason gives way and sinks more than elsewhere.[7] In a sandy coastal area such a phenomenon should not at all be surprising. The text gives us no reason to believe that the contraction could have occurred only at the turning-point. In his description of the *terma* at the ξυνοχῇσιν ὁδοῦ, Nestor says nothing of stagnating winter rain which has concentrated at the στεινωπός. If ξυνοχῇσιν ὁδοῦ is identical to στεινωπός, as the ancient commentators and Gagarin assume, it would ste odd for Nestor not to mention the effect of stagnating rain water, especially since he comments on the quality of the ground of the hippodrome on both sides of the turning-post (λεῖος δ' ἱππόδρομος ἀμφίς, 330) and considers the impact of the rain on the dry stump chosen as the turning-post (τὸ μὲν οὐ καταπύθεται ὄμβρῳ, 328). It is also most unlikely that Nestor, concerned as he is about his son's rounding the *terma*, should not have drawn Antilochus' attention to such a contraction at the rounding spot. Furthermore, having a ῥωχμός right next to the *terma*, as the scholia and Gagarin suggest, contradicts the very information Nestor gives to his son that around the *terma* the hippodrome is smooth (330).[8]

Moreover, the suggestion of the ancient commentators and Gagarin forces us to assume that the *terma* stood in the middle of the hollowed road, which was narrower than the rest of the track. But would it not be unnecessarily dangerous to place the *terma* at the narrowest part of track? The *terma* would undoubtedly be rounded at maximum possible speed, and, since the proximity at which a charioteer rounded the *terma* was one of the measures of his skill, it would be rounded as closely as possible. The combination of speed and proximity would make the *terma* a risky enough place in any event, especially were one to try to pass a rival there. To place it at the narrowest part of the road would certainly seem to be tempting fate.

The only advantage of the interpretation of an overtaking at the turning-post is that one can thus easily explain Antilochus' ability to pull even with Menelaus' in spite of having slower horses. The underlying assumption is that Antilochus made a smaller circle at the *terma*. The text tells us that Antilochus "turned aside" (παρατρέψας, 423) "off the track" (ἐκτὸς ὁδοῦ, 424) and pulled even with Menelaus. The proposed interpretation requires that between the

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[7] The claim that the στεινωπός, or place where the road narrows, could not be the straight leg because the break in the ground which narrowed the road could not be in open plain "since the track can simply skirt the edge of the depressed area or, if it is very large, cross through it without becoming any narrower" (Gagarin 37), is simply conjectural.

[8] It is perhaps noteworthy that in 1943 J. Cuillandre, *La droite et la gauche dans les poèmes homériques* (Paris 1943) 261–263, tried to explain how Antilochus overtook Menelaus by suggesting that Menelaus drove around the ῥωχμός, which he reads as an actual break in the road, while the bolder Antilochus cut a straight path through it. Such an explanation does not coincide with the information we are given. The road in such a case would have had to be a winding one, which nothing in the text indicates. Moreover, it is clearly stated that Menelaus went through the hollowed place to which the word ῥωχμός must refer: ῥωχμὸς ἔην γαίης . . . τῇ ῥ' εἶχεν Μενέλαος ἁματροχιὰς ἀλεείνων (420–422).

two lanes in the track there be a kind of free area, and, moreover, that the *terma* be situated in that space (Gagarin 35, n. 6). There is, however, neither textual nor archaeological evidence for such a free area in Homeric times. Moreover, since the charioteers were all expected to get as close to the *terma* as possible (cf. 338–341), it would have had to be located within touching-distance and not *off* the track.

In a related point Gagarin claims that it is unclear how Antilochus, with slower horses, can pull even and threaten collision in a straight stretch, for if Menelaus keeps to the center of the road and Antilochus veers, he would lag even further behind. But the text actually offers a clear enough explanation. It tells us that Antilochus succeeded in pulling even with Menelaus thanks to a special exertion on his horses' part, which lasted only for a short time: οἱ δὲ ἄνακτος ὑποδείσαντες ὁμοκλὴν / μᾶλλον ἐπιδραμέτην ὀλίγον χρόνον (417 f.). Antilochus, behind Menelaus, turns off the track and through a brief but extraordinary effort of his horses does not lag further behind but gains speed and catches up with Menelaus, threatening to collide with him. Menelaus, sensing the danger, slows down by not pressing his horses (433–437), and Antilochus, because of the short burst of speed, drives on and succeeds in overtaking him. It seems that Antilochus did not pass Menelaus all that fairly, but rather closed in on him enough to force him to move out of the way and let him go by. Menelaus later rebukes him for this manoeuvre, saying that Antilochus thrust his horses forward: τοὺς σοὺς πρόσθε βαλών (572).[9] There is thus no real difficulty in accepting the text's statement that Antilochus passed Menelaus on the straight stretch.

The text is also explicit about Menelaus' being overtaken in the return-leg (373 f.). Gagarin (37) asserts that if Menelaus is overtaken in the straight stretch of the return leg, we must make the improbable assumption that Antilochus missed passing him at the same narrow point on the first leg. The objection seems trivial, however, and there is actually nothing improbable about that having happened. It is not at all impossible that Antilochus spotted a narrowing in the road on the first leg of the race and took advantage of it to pass Menelaus only after the turn. It is quite conceivable that Antilochus did not know about the narrowing of the road when he began the race and discovered it only as he rode. Appropriately, it is only on the way back that he mentions the στεινωπός (415 f.).

To regard Nestor's instructions as binding in every detail seems to me an oversimplification. It would be better, I believe, to read them as guidelines which Antilochus can apply to himself wherever the situation makes them appropriate. Nestor begins his instruction by emphasizing the importance of his son's παντοίη μῆτις, which, he implies, may well compensate for his

[9]For the same complaint of Nestor against the two sons of Actor, see *Il.* 23.639. See the explanation of R. L. Howland, "Nestor and the Chariot-Race (*Iliad*, XXIII, 638–42)," *PCPS* 181 (1950–51) 30.

having slower horses (310–314). The attribute παντοίη clearly commends versatility: Antilochus should adapt to any situation that arises and solve it by his own judgment. Nestor points out the services μῆτις renders in other professions, and ends his opening remarks with customary Homeric ring-composition, coming back to the role of μῆτις in which one charioteer differs from another (315–317).

From here on Nestor's instructions become more detailed. A charioteer who has skill (κέρδεα εἰδῇ, 322) does certain things while avoiding others. He should avoid swerving (319–321), which is not easy because the two horses pulling the chariot do not have equal strength and speed. When he rounds the turning-post, he should keep a sharp eye on the post and hold his horses under tight rein. Nestor reminds his son to watch the man in front of him so as to avoid any collision. Then, referring once again to the turning-point, Nestor describes its location (326–333) and proceeds to give Antilochus detailed instructions how to round it (334–343), emphasizing both skill and safety: drive as close to the post as possible, but do not touch it, as that may wreck your carriage, he tells his son. Nestor ends by saying: "For if at the turning-post you shall pass the rest in your course, there is no one who will be able to pass you by a burst of speed" (344 f.). This last remark of Nestor is more relevant to the importance of the *terma* in general in chariot races than to the circumstances of this particular race. For, given the acknowledged fact that Antilochus had the slowest horses, he could hardly have reached the *terma* in a position to pass all the other contestants at that point.

Antilochus follows his father's advice so far as he can.[10] He observes topographical features of the hippodrome while racing and at the same time contrives a strategy of how to take advantage of them (τεχνήσομαι ἠδὲ νοήσω, 415) His μῆτις and κέρδεα as a charioteer are thereby indicated. He closely watches the charioteers ahead of him, particularly mindful of Menelaus, who

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[10]Since Eumelus' chariot came to grief on the same stretch on which Antilochus overtook Menelaus, one should consider Idomeneus' words in 465 f. He raises the possibility that Eumelus failed at the turning point. One could conclude then that Diomedes overtook him at the same spot, a possibility that might lend some force to the claim that the same happened in the case of Antilochus and Menelaus. Yet one should note the confusion in Idomeneus' words. In 462 he claims that he saw Eumelus' horses sweeping around the turning-post. If he could indeed follow Eumelus with his eye so far, he would also have seen something that happened there. Idomeneus himself is not sure *where* Eumelus failed and his assumption results most probably from the fact that the turning-point is the most likely place for accidents. The *terma* was far away and it is most unlikely that Idomeneus could see it (see Monro, *ad* 462). It is noteworthy that Achilles sent Phoenix to watch what happens at the *terma*. He must have assumed that it was impossible to judge confidently from the spectators' seats. The distance is such that Idomeneus himself says he cannot clearly discern the approaching contestants even when on the return-leg (469 f.). Lastly, Aias claims that the horses are still far away and that Idomeneus cannot possibly see them clearly (474–481). Aias' mistake about Eumelus attests to the distance.

immediately precedes him, and also of Diomedes, who precedes Menelaus.[11]
Antilochus employs great skill in controlling his horses, as is shown by his
ability to hold them on course when they are speeding alongside Menelaus *off*
the track. Given the depression in the ground, Antilochus is probably higher
up than Menelaus and his chariot must have been leaning slightly to one side
(παρακλίνας, 424) towards the track, where the ground was hollowed.
Antilochus is thus employing his μῆτις to good effect and proves his
knowledge of κέρδεα. That is to say, he is able to take full advantage of his skill
in horsemanship and thus to improve his standing in the race despite his
slower horses.

In spite of the considerable emphasis given to the *terma* in Nestor's speech,
nothing is said in the text about Antilochus' rounding the post. Nor is
anything told of any other charioteer's rounding the post either, except for
some general remarks by Idomeneus and Alas acknowledging that Eumelus
rounded it first (459–464, 480 f.). The most logical interpretation is that
nothing eventful worth mentioning happened at the *terma* in this particular
race.[12] Indeed, it is a tribute to the inventiveness of the poet that he has
skipped over what was considered the most exciting part of the race and
succeeded in creating suspense and excitement when these were least
expected, namely, in the straight home-leg. In fact, it seems that he packs all
the excitement into this part of the race, which is also where Diomedes
overtakes Eumelus. The omission is even more impressive in light of the
build-up Nestor had given the first part of the race. As attested in the later
literary tradition, a lengthy discussion of the rounding was part of the usual
description of a horse-race.[13]

The question, however, remains why rounding the *terma* is so strongly
emphasized in Nestor's speech. Some possibilities suggest themselves. One is
that as a father Nestor is naturally worried about his son's safety at what is the
most dangerous place on the track. Another is that, given both the danger and
the possibilities for passing at the *terma*, it would be a shame for a storyteller
to forfeit the potential excitement of such a moment altogether (i.e., he does
mention and describe it, but *outside* the actual account of the race). Lastly, if
later works are any indication, it seems not unlikely that the rounding of the

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[11]R. Dunkle, "Nestor, Odysseus and the *Metis-Bie* Antithesis: The Funeral Games, *Iliad 23*,"
CW 81 (1987) 1–17, at 3–6, maintains that in his advice to Antilochus Nestor underestimates the
importance of βίη and overestimates the function of μῆτις.

[12]One might conjecture that Antilochus' veering aside in 423 was partially inspired by
Diomedes' act of turning aside to avoid collision with the broken and swerving chariot of
Eumelus (παρατρέψας, 398).

[13]The lack of any eventful occurrence during the turn may have been the reason that Phoenix
was not mentioned again after he was sent as umpire by Achilles (358–361). If Antilochus had
overtaken Menelaus during the turning of the post, why was Phoenix not summoned as a witness
in the dispute that arose later between the two charioteers?

terma was a commonplace in descriptions of chariot races.[14] One is readily reminded of the story of Orestes (cf. Soph. *El.* 720–722, 743–748). The extensive discussion of the turning-point seems thus a topical, almost generic feature of accounts of races, and at the same time a fitting part of the instructions of a loving father concerned about the safety of his son.

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[14]On the relationship between the funeral games in *Iliad* 23 and previous epic tradition see M. M. Willcock, "The Funeral Games of Patroclus," *BICS* 20 (1973) 1–11.