

How old is Nestor?

One of Nestor's prime characteristics in the epic poems is his age – 'Nestor' has even become synonymous with 'old man'¹. But how old is Nestor? There are two passages in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* which explicitly state his age. In *Il.* I 250-252 the Homeric narrator says:

τῶι δ' ἤδη δύο μὲν γενεαὶ μερόπων ἀνθρώπων
ἐφθίαθ', οἳ οἱ πρόσθεν ἅμα τράφον ἠδ' ἐγένοντο
ἐν Πύλῳι ἠγαθέηι, μετὰ δὲ τριτάτοισιν ἄνασσαν.

Two generations of mortal men had he already seen pass away, who of old had been born and reared with him in sacred Pylos, and he was king among the third².

Telemachus explains his respect for Nestor in *Od.* III 245f.:

τρὶς γὰρ δὴ μὶν φασιν ἀνάξασθαι γένε' ἀνδρῶν,
ὥς τέ μοι ἀθάνατος ἰνδάλλεται εἰσοράσθαι.

For thrice, men say, he has been king for a generation of men, and he seems to me like an immortal to look upon.

The two statements are generally thought to contradict each other³. While according to the *communis opinio* the first passage implies that Nestor belongs to the generation whose sons fight at Troy⁴, Telemachus' statement is taken to mean that Nestor

¹ In *Met.* XII 187f. Ovid even says: *vixi / annos bis centum, nunc tertia vivitur aetas*. F. Bömer, *Ovid. Metamorphoses*, Heidelberg 1982, 68f. on XII 188 lists ancient references to Nestor's age. On Nestor in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* s. R. Hampe, *Die Homerische Welt im Lichte der neuen Ausgrabungen: Nestor*, in R. Harbig (ed.), *Vermächtnis der antiken Kunst*, Heidelberg 1950, 11-70: 11-17; K. Dickson, *Nestor. Poetic Memory in Greek Epic*, New York 1995 and O. Primavesi, *Nestors Erzählungen. Die Variationen eines rhetorischen Überzeugungsmittels in der Ilias*, in C. Neumeister-W. Raack (eds), *Rede und Redner. Bewertung und Darstellung in den antiken Kulturen*, Möhnesee 2000, 45-64.

² This and the following translations are based on A.T. Murray, *Homer. The Iliad*, I-II, Cambridge, Mass. 1924 and A.T. Murray, *Homer. The Odyssey*, I-II, Cambridge, Mass. 1953.

³ See already the scholion **EMQR** on *Od.* III 245. Cf. K.F. Ameis-C. Hentze on *Od.* III 245; W. Leaf on *Il.* I 250; G.S. Kirk on *Il.* I 250-252.

⁴ See for example J. Latacz on *Il.* I 250; Kirk on *Il.* I 250-252; S. West on *Od.* III 245.

is at least two generations older than the other heroes of the Trojan War. Since the ten years between the actions of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* do not make a whole generation⁵, the Odyssean Nestor seems to be one generation older than Nestor in the *Iliad*. Of course, *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are two different poems which are both products of long oral traditions. Thus, we cannot expect the same consistency as in literate texts. Yet, given the parallels between the passages and given the fact that the different epic traditions formed one system with many links and cross-references, the discrepancy comes rather as a surprise and commentators have rightly felt the need for explanations.

Kirk suggests that the ‘reigning over’ is a misunderstanding of the ‘living among’⁶. West points to the evidence for the confusion of ordinal and cardinal numbers⁷. However, these explanations are not very satisfying. In what follows, I will first argue that there is no contradiction between the two passages, but that both contradict the epics’ implicit chronology, and then try to find an explanation for the chronological inaccuracy.

The generally accepted interpretation of *Il.* I 250-252 according to which Nestor is only one generation older than the other heroes can be traced back to the **bT**-scholion on *Il.* I 250a:

ἢ τε τῶν πατέρων, ὑφ’ ὧν γεννηθεῖς ἀνετρέφη, καὶ ἡ τῶν ἀδελφῶν.
 “ἐλθῶν γὰρ ἐκάκωσε βίη Ἡρακλεῖ / τῶν οἴος λιπόμην” (*Il.* XI 690
 et 693). τριτάτης δὲ ἄρχει τῆς τῶν παίδων ἑαυτοῦ γενεᾶς, οἳ σὺν αὐτῷ
 ἐστρατεύσαντο.⁸

Dickson (n. 1) is inconsistent. While at p. 10 he seems to assume that in both passages Nestor is two generations older than the other heroes of the Trojan War, he is undecided whether there is a contradiction or not at p. 65 n. 35. He does not elaborate on the question; moreover, his translation of *Il.* I 250-252 at p. 64 is wrong.

⁵ In antiquity one generation is taken to embrace 30 years, see the scholion **T** on *Il.* I 250a, the scholion **AbT** on *Il.* I 250b, the scholion **E** on *Od.* III 245 (Porphyrios); Eust. *Il.* 97,10-19. See, in addition, Hdt. II 142.

⁶ Kirk on *Il.* I 250-252.

⁷ West on *Od.* II 89.

⁸ The scholion **AbT** on *Il.* I 250a is very similar, but does not assume that Nestor’s generation was killed by Heracles. The scholion **AbT** on *Il.* I 250b gives another explanation, according to which γένος simply signifies a period of 30 years. Consequently, Nestor is said to be older than sixty. Both explanations are taken up and criticized or slightly modified by Eustathios. To the interpretation of γένος as an abstract measure of time, he objects that such a statement would be indeterminate and tie in badly with the relative clause in *Il.* I 251 (97,10-18). In his second explanation he does not refer to Heracles’ attack, but assumes that Nestor came to power very early. Then the second generation is to be identified with his own and the third consists of his children (97,18-25). Against this interpretation it must be noted that according to the narration of the Pylian raid (*Il.* XI 670-762) Neleus was still alive and reigning while Nestor was a young man. Eustathios quotes a third explanation which directly connects the three generations to Heracles’ attack: Heracles killed the old men and the men in their prime, but spared the children which then

One is the <generation> of the fathers, by whom he was reared after he had been born, and one the <generation> of the brothers. “For mighty Heracles had come and done much harm / of these I alone was left” (*Il.* XI 690 and 693). As the third <generation> he is ruling over the generation of his children, who went to war with him.

As the scholion shows, it is attractive to identify the two generations which have already died with the generations of Nestor’s father and his own, since in *Il.* XI 689-693 Nestor tells how Heracles killed many Pylians, among them all his brothers. However, this connection is problematic. There is not only no hint at Heracles’ assault in *Il.* I 250-252, but, what is more. Heracles does not extinguish the two generations in their entirety. Most prominently, Nestor’s father, Neleus, survives.

Thus, it is questionable to presuppose that the first generation which Nestor sees dying is the generation of his father. As there are three generations living at the same time in the epic poems (*e.g.* Priam, Hector and Astyanax; Laertes, Odysseus and Telemachus), it would be much more plausible that the first generation to die were the grandparents.

Another point which has been neglected has even more weight: the characterization of the two generations in *Il.* I 251f.:

οἱ οἱ πρόσθεν ἄμα τράφον ἢ δ’ ἐγένοντο
ἐν Πύλῳ ἡγαθέητι

who of old had been born and reared with him in sacred Pylos

The *hysteron proteron* τράφον ἢ δ’ ἐγένοντο⁹ excludes the possibility that the generation either of Nestor’s father or of his grandfathers is included among the generations mentioned. Since it is impossible that two generations were born and raised together with Nestor, οἱ ... ἄμα¹⁰ cannot strictly signify the simultaneity of birth and education. But the relative clause surely states that the two generations were raised and educated during Nestor’s lifetime. Evidently, this does not hold true for any generation before Nestor; the first generation which fulfills this condition is Nestor’s own. It follows that the third generation over which Nestor is said to be reigning in *Il.* I 250-252 must be that of his grandchildren.

That solves the contradiction to *Od.* III 245f., where Telemachus says that Nestor has ruled over three generations: since Neleus is still living when Nestor is

were ruled by Nestor (97,1-10). As Eustathios himself notes, according to this interpretation nothing is said about Nestor’s age. M. van der Valk regards this explanation as «minime probabilis» and suggests that it has derived from a misunderstanding of the **bT**-scholion on *Il.* I 250.

⁹ The same *hysteron proteron* can be found in *Od.* IV 723; X 417; XIV 201. See also *Od.* XII 134 τὰς μὲν ἄρα θρέψασα τεκούσά τε πότνια μήτηρ. On the *hysteron proteron* in the Homeric epics see Ameis-Hentze on *Od.* IV 723 and West on *Od.* IV 723 and III 467.

¹⁰ On the reference of ἄμα to οἱ see Latacz on *Il.* I 250f.

a young man winning his spurs in combat, here, too, the first generation Nestor reigns over is his own, the second the generation of his children and the third his grandchildren.

Once the discrepancy between *Il.* I 250-252 and *Od.* III 245f. is solved, a new contradiction arises. According to the implicit epic chronology, Nestor is just one generation older than the heroes of the Trojan War. His sons Antilochus and Thrasymedes could be late offspring¹¹, but he claims to have had his full strength when attending the funeral games for Amarynkeus who is the father of Diores, a hero of the Trojan War¹². There he competed with the fathers of other heroes who are fighting at Troy: Mege is Phyleus' son and the Molione-twins are the fathers of Amphimachos and Thalpios¹³. When Nestor chased the Molione-twins in the Pylian raid, he was even so young that Neleus forbade him without effect to join the battle¹⁴.

How do we explain these tensions in the epic chronology? I think, the temporal distortions in *Il.* I 250-252 and *Od.* III 245f. can be explained by their contexts. In the *Iliad* the conflict between Achilles and Agamemnon has just flared up and in gloomy words Achilles solemnly announces that he is withdrawing from the battle and will not return even at the moment of greatest misery of the Achaeans (*Il.* I 233-244). He emphasizes this oath by hurling the sceptre to the ground (*Il.* I 245f.). At this crucial point the narrator introduces Nestor, mentioning his eloquence and his age (*Il.* I 247-253)¹⁵. The narrator then has Nestor give the first *exemplum* in the

¹¹ Thrasymedes is called Nestor's son in *Il.* IX 81 and X 196 (see B. Hainsworth on *Il.* X 196); Antilochus in *Il.* V 565; VI 32f.; X 229; XIII 400; 554f.; XV 589; XVII 653; 681; XVIII 16; XXIII 301f.; 353f.; 541; 596; 755f.; both together in *Il.* XVI 317-321 and XIX 238.

¹² Nestor tells about the funeral games for Amarynkeus in *Il.* XXIII 629-643; Amarynkeus is named as father of Diores in *Il.* II 622.

¹³ Phyleus is named as father of Mege in *Il.* II 627-630. Amphimachos and Thalpios are mentioned as the sons of the Aktorione Kteatos and Eurytos (*Il.* II 620f.). See also the following note.

¹⁴ In *Il.* XI 709f. they are referred to as Molione, in *Il.* XI 750-752 as Molione and Aktorione. In *Il.* XI 717-719 Nestor mentions that Neleus did not want him to join the fight.

¹⁵ Only few heroes get such an introduction in the *Iliad* and this has been seen as an indicator that with Nestor a character from another mythical tradition is integrated, cf. H. Pestalozzi, *Die Achilleis als Quelle der Ilias*, Erlenbach-Zürich 1945, 35; M.L. Lang, *Reverberation and mythology in the Iliad*, in C.A. Rubino-C.W. Shelmerdine (eds), *Approaches to Homer*, Austin, Tex. 1983, 140-164: 140f. This, however, is a doubtful assumption and, as I try to show, the introduction carries meaning without it. Against attempts to connect the introduction of Nestor's figure with the assumption that he was an import from another tradition see Latacz on *Il.* I 247b-252. H. Erbse, *Nestor und Antilochus bei Homer und Arktinos*, «Hermes» CXXI (1993) 385-403: 392f. points out that Nestor is a firm element in the *Iliad*, but was not part of a pre-iliadic *Aithiopsis* or *Memnonis*. Nestor's age does not indicate that he stems from another tradition, but: «weil Nestor als überparteilicher Vermittler konzipiert ist, läßt ihn der Dichter zurückreichen in eine idealisierte Vergangenheit, in der alle griechischen Heroen die Eintracht pflegten».

Iliad. It is a *meta-exemplum*: in pointing out that even the greater heroes of the past heeded his advice, Nestor wants to persuade Achilles and Agamemnon to follow his suggestions now (*Il.* I 259-284). He lays claim to authority on account of his age.

The narrator's comment that he is living with the third generation which has been born and raised in his lifetime creates distance between Nestor and the other heroes. By exaggerating the gap between Nestor's horizon and the experiences of the other heroes the temporal inaccuracy serves to underscore Nestor's authority for the audience of the epic performance¹⁶.

While the chronological confusion in *Il.* I 250-252 can be explained at the extradiegetic level, the temporal inaccuracy in *Od.* III 245f. is meaningful at the intradiegetic level. It is not the Homeric narrator, but a character, Telemachus, who is speaking. I suggest that the exaggeration of Nestor's age is due to his perspective; young Telemachus is overwhelmed by Nestor's age. To him, Nestor appears as immortal. By making Nestor older than he is Telemachus underscores the awe in which he holds him.

As we see, the temporal distortions in *Il.* I 250-252 and *Od.* III 245f. serve particular functions. Yet, it is notable that such a lack of chronological accuracy is possible at all. Two points may help to explain it. Firstly, the medium of epic poetry ought to be taken into consideration¹⁷. We should not expect chronological accuracy in an oral tradition. Secondly, the neglect of chronology can be traced back to a special mode of memory which not only the epic heroes themselves, but also the Greeks, referring to the epic past, frequently employ¹⁸. As in the case of Nestor, the

¹⁶ There is another chronological confusion in Nestor's speech: while Peirithoos is the father of Polyipoites (*Il.* II 740f.; XII 129), Kaineus is the grandfather of Koronos (*Il.* II 746). Though belonging to different generations, they are mentioned together.

¹⁷ On the impact of orality on the representation of the past within the *Iliad* see Ø. Andersen, *The making of the past in the Iliad*, «HSPH» XCIII (1990) 25-45.

¹⁸ On *exempla* in the *Iliad* see J. Grethlein, *Das Geschichtsbild der Ilias. Eine Untersuchung aus phänomenologischer und narratologischer Perspektive*, Göttingen 2006, 43-63, 334-340 and the literature given by I. de Jong, *Narrators and Focalizers. The Presentation of the Story in the Iliad*, Amsterdam 1987, 82f. and M. Alden, *Homer Beside Himself. Para-narratives in the Iliad*, Oxford 2000, 295f. On the *Iliad* as an archive of *exempla* see J.G. Howie, *The Iliad as exemplum*, in Ø. Andersen-M. Dickie (eds), *Homer's World. Fiction, Tradition, Reality*, Bergen 1995, 141-173. On *exempla* as a mode of memory see J. Rüsen, *Die vier Typen des historischen Erzählens*, in R. Koselleck et al. (eds), *Formen der Geschichtsschreibung*, München 1982, 514-605: 547-551; K. Stierle, *Geschichte als Exemplum – Exemplum als Geschichte. Zur Pragmatik und Poetik narrativer Texte*, in R. Koselleck-W.-D. Stempel (eds), *Geschichte – Ereignis und Erzählung*, München 1983, 347-375. *Exempla* played a major role in antiquity and the middle ages; in the modern age, however, they have lost much of their plausibility. As R. Koselleck, *Vergangene Zukunft. Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten*, Frankfurt a.M. 1979, 38-66 and D. Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country*, Cambridge 1985, 47, 364f. argue, the strong focus on developments and the emphasis on the autonomy of epochs have undermined the possibility to directly juxtapose past and present events.

past is often remembered by way of *exempla*. Here, the focus is not on the temporal link between the past and the present; rather, events are directly juxtaposed to each other in order to derive some orientation for a present situation from a parallel in the past¹⁹. In that perspective the exact chronology is liable to be neglected and distortions easily slip in. Moreover, the use of the past as *exemplum* tends to distance recent events and thereby cast them in a larger frame, since conclusions *a maiore ad minus* add weight to arguments.

Freiburg i. B.

JONAS GRETHLEIN

¹⁹ Comparing the Romans' and Greeks' use of exempla, M. Stemmler, *Auctoritas exempli. Zur Wechselwirkung von kanonisierten Vergangenheitsbildern und gesellschaftlicher Gegenwart in der spätrepublikanischen Rhetorik*, in B. Linke-M. Stemmler (eds), *Mos maiorum. Untersuchungen zu den Formen der Identitätsbildung und Stabilisierung in der römischen Republik*, Stuttgart 2000, 141-205 argues that the Romans were inclined to value authority, while the Greeks focused more on analogy.