

Ptolemy of Ascalon, Historian of Herod¹

Joseph Geiger

A single reference is all we have from a work by a certain Ptolemy who wrote about Herod. Hitherto, no cutting arguments have been brought forward by those who advocate the probability of his identification with the grammarian Ptolemy of Ascalon,² or those who view it skeptically. The following considerations speak for the identification with Ptolemy of Ascalon:³ the name, Herod's well known associations with Ascalon,⁴ the time, viz. it is preferable to seek a writer contemporary with the king or writing, at the latest, shortly after his death, and, of course, the wish not to multiply data.

The matter of Ptolemy of Ascalon's date, expertly discussed by Baege,⁵ is worth reaffirming. Stephanus (s.v. Ἀσκάλων) describes him as an acquaintance or pupil (γνώριμον) of Aristarchus — that is Aristarchus of Samothrace, whose activity falls into the first half of the second century BCE.⁶ Baege in his exhaustive discussion rejects the claim of Stephanus, assuming that it derived from the frequent pairing of Aristarchus and

¹ My paper delivered at the conference, 'Some "Rational" Greeks from Ancient Palestine', will be part of a larger work. I offer this piece in memory of a great scholar and a most kind and generous friend. My thanks are due to Israel Shatzman and Nigel Wilson for advice and criticism; the remaining faults are mine.

² See M. Baege, *De Ptolemaeo Ascalonita*, diss. Halle 1882. This excellent dissertation has not been yet superseded.

³ Among those undecided (though perhaps slightly preferring the identification) one should note M. Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism*, Jerusalem 1974-1984 (henceforth *GLAJJ*) I, no. 146; E. Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ (175 B.C.-A.D. 135)*. A New English version rev. and ed. by G. Vermes and F. Millar (Edinburgh 1973), I, 27-28, and more positively W. Otto, *Herodes. Beiträge zur Geschichte des letzten jüdischen Königshauses* (Stuttgart 1913), coll. 5-6, followed by A. Schalit, *König Herodes* (Berlin 1969), 677-8.

⁴ See, e.g., Schalit (n. 3) on the early Christian traditions, according to which Herod's family hailed from Ascalon. Even though these may be dismissed, there is no telling whether such rumours were not current already at the time of the king, and especially in Ascalon. The efforts of N. Kokkinos, *The Herodian Dynasty: Origins, Role in Society and Eclipse* (Sheffield 1998), 100-139, to maintain the story, are rejected, with further references, by I. Shatzman, 'Herod, Marissa, and Khirbet Madras' (forthcoming, Hebrew). For Herod's generous building activity in the city see D.W. Roller, *The Building Program of Herod the Great* (Berkeley - Los Angeles - Oxford 1998), 216-9.

⁵ Baege (n. 2), 2-6.

⁶ See now the edition by M. Billerbeck, vol. I (Berlin - New York 2006), 276-7; at 177 n. 642 she draws attention to the fact that A. Dihle, *RE Suppl.* IX col. 1306 no. 79a discusses a Ptolemy of Alexandria who was an Aristarchean — no doubt the source of the confusion in Stephanus.

Ptolemy by Herodian⁷ in the Homeric scholia, and shows that Ptolemy is to be dated to the late first century BCE or the very beginning of the first century CE. First, his reasons for Ptolemy's *terminus post quem*. Herodian in the scholia on the *Iliad* often pairs him with Alexio and seems to see them as contemporaries. Since Alexio excerpted Didymus, who lived in the first century BCE this would provide a *terminus a quo* for Ptolemy as well. The earliest to refer to Ptolemy are Apollonius Dyscolus and Nicanor of Alexandria,⁸ and he is not referred to by the scholia emanating from Didymus. This carries extra weight since Ptolemy wrote on Aristarchus' recension of the *Odyssey*,⁹ a subject treated by Didymus as well. It also emerges from Herodian (schol. *Υ* 234) that Ptolemy did not live before Apollonius the son of Theon.¹⁰ As for Ptolemy's *terminus ante quem* the following considerations apply. Eustathius quotes (e.g. on *E* 887, *X* 351) him at second hand from Apion (first century CE) and Heliodorus,¹¹ and from "Ammonius" (see below) it emerges that Ptolemy was referred to by Heraclides of Miletus, who was active around 100 CE.¹² Thus all the circumstantial evidence points to an Augustan or Tiberian date for Ptolemy.

Needless to say, all these are factors in favour of the probability of the equation, rather than proof. On the other side, beside the commonness of the name, it has been argued that Ptolemy of Ascalon is known only as a grammatical writer, and not as an historian.¹³ This last argument carries little weight, considering that all the writers (with

⁷ The vast majority of the close to two hundred fragments of Ptolemy are quoted in the Homeric scholia and come from his work Προσωδία Ὀμηρικὴ; as is well known Herodian was the member of the so-called *Viermännerkommentar* responsible for this aspect of the scholia, see, e.g., E. Dickey, *Ancient Greek Scholarship. A Guide to Finding, and Understanding Scholia, Commentaries, Lexica, and Grammatical Treatises, from Their Beginnings to the Byzantine Period* (Oxford 2007), 19.

⁸ On Apollonius Dyscolus, the author of the most important and influential surviving grammatical treatises (mid-second century CE) see Dickey (n. 7), 73-75; on Nicanor, also of the second century CE, see O. Carnuth, *Nicanoris περὶ Ὀδυσσεϊακῆς στιγμῆς reliquiae emendatiores*, Berlin 1875.

⁹ Suda s.v. (Π 3038).

¹⁰ Theon is to be dated in the Augustan age, see *RE* V A no. 9, coll. 2054-9 (C. Wendel).

¹¹ Baege (n. 2), 5, corrects the name from Herodorus. Heliodorus cannot be easily identified: Dickey (n. 7), 25 n. 9; 29 n. 13; 80 no. 8, lists the persons with whom Heliodorus can *not* be identified; *RE* does not come to our succour and does not accord this person an entry (unless one wishes to identify him with *RE* VIII no. 16, coll. 28-40). The personality, works and times of Herodorus are far from clear, see *RE* VIII no. 5, col. 988 (Gudeman).

¹² See *RE* VIII s.v. Herakleides no. 52, coll. 491-2 (H. Schultz).

¹³ Among the skeptics are to be listed, very decidedly, Jacoby at *FGrH* 199, IID pp. 625-6, and following him *RE* XXIII no. 75 col. 1861, and no. 79, col. 1863 (both A. Dihle); see also *DNP* no. 63. Rather surprisingly the entire issue is ignored by Baege, almost the only criticism that can be levelled against his dissertation. (I take this to mean that he dismissed the identification out of hand — one would not wish to impute the alternative of ignorance to this excellent scholar.) It goes without saying that because of the tendency of the fragment, no doubt referring to the question of Herod's Idumaeian descent, it cannot be ascribed to his friend Ptolemy, the brother of Nicolaus of Damascus; see e.g. Schürer, Vermes and Millar (n. 3) and *FGrH* 199, IID pp. 625-6. J. Radicke in the continuation of

the exception of the Suda) who refer to Ptolemy of Ascalon were grammatical authors and quote only what matters to them; and it does not seem advisable to argue *e silentio* relying on the Suda, who may well have derived his data from a grammatical writer. In parentheses it may be noted that Ptolemy's Palestinian contemporary, Theodorus of Gadara, the rhetorician and grammarian and tutor of Tiberius, also wrote, among others, *On Coele Syria* and *On History*¹⁴ — a concern with local history was not necessarily devoid of interest for grammarians. As for Ptolemy's work, we cannot guess its extent except for the fact that it was in more than one book; our notice, no doubt pertaining to Herod's family and his Idumaeen descent, naturally belongs to the beginning of the work. As for its genre, it may be readily conjectured that it was biographical — one may recall Nicolaus of Damascus' *On the Young Caesar*¹⁵ — and thus perhaps in some way a response to the king's *Autobiography*,¹⁶ or at least stimulated by it.

So far the present state of the issue. Since, however, the only existing piece of evidence is neither straightforward nor easy to appreciate, it will be best to examine it closely before trying to interpret it. In *De adfinium vocabulorum differentia*, ascribed to one Ammonius, we find the following entry:¹⁷

Ἰουδαῖοι καὶ Ἰδουμαῖοι διαφέρουσιν, ὡς φησι Πτολεμαῖος ἐν πρώτῳ Περὶ Ἡρώδου τοῦ βασιλέως. Ἰουδαῖοι μὲν εἰσιν οἱ ἐξ ἀρχῆς φυσικοί. Ἰδουμαῖοι δὲ τὸ μὲν ἀρχῆθεν οὐκ Ἰουδαῖοι, ἀλλὰ Φοίνικες καὶ Σύροι κρατηθέντες δὲ ὑπ' αὐτῶν καὶ ἀναγκασθέντες περιτέμνεσθαι καὶ συντελεῖν εἰς τὸ ἔθνος καὶ τὰ νόμιμα ἠγείσθαι ἐκλήθησαν Ἰουδαῖοι.

Judaeans and Idumaeans differ, as Ptolemy says in his first book of *On King Herod*. On the one hand Judaeans are those who are so by origin and nature, on the other, Idumaeans were not Judaeans by origin, but Phoenicians and Syrians. They were called Judaeans after

FGrH IV A 7 no. 1053, queries Ascalon, but cautiously anticipates, in general terms, the conclusions of this paper.

¹⁴ See on him R. Granatelli, *Apollodori Pergameni ac Theodori Gadarei testimonia et fragmenta*, Rome 1991, and *FGrH* 850; the information is contained in his Suda article (Θ 151).

¹⁵ Mark Toher's new commentary on the text is eagerly awaited. In the meantime, for a concise overview see Schürer, Vermes and Millar (n. 3), I, 28-32; B.Z. Wacholder, *Nicolaus of Damascus*, University of California Publications in History 75, Berkeley - Los Angeles 1962.

¹⁶ See Joseph. *AJ* 15.165-174 and J. Geiger, 'The Augustan Age', G. Marasco (ed.), *Political Autobiographies and Memoirs in Antiquity. A Brill Companion* (Leiden - Boston 2011), 260-261. The *Autobiography* was far from widely known; we are informed about it by a single quotation in Josephus, perhaps, again, slightly increasing the likelihood that an Ascalonite would be acquainted with it.

¹⁷ Ammonii ... *De adfinium vocabulorum differentia*, ed. K. Nickau (Leipzig 1966), no. 243 (pp. 63-64). Nickau was a pupil of B. Snell and of H. Erbse, the editor of the Homeric scholia, the carrier of the vast majority of Ptolemy's fragments. The additional MSS considered by W. Bühler 'Zur Überlieferung des Lexikons des Ammonios', *Hermes* 100 (1972), 531-550, are of no relevance to the present enquiry.

being overcome by them and compelled to undergo circumcision and join the nation and have the same customs.

Before discussing the text it should be noted that the similarity of the words Ἰουδαῖοι and Ἰδουμαῖοι — the reason for the entry in the first place — brought about their confusion and substitution for each other in the manuscripts.¹⁸ This, however, is a minor issue compared with the problem of the identity of Ptolemy, a problem that is in itself connected with that of the authorship of the synonym lexicon, where the fragment is found. It is only by an examination of the text carrying it that its authorship can be decided.

Now the authorship of “Ammonius” is an intricate subject involving an entire cohort of Greek synonym lexica with complex relationships. These lexica copied each other with differing effort and success, and survive in a variety of MSS under a number of authors’ names. All this is best discussed in Nickau’s introduction to his edition, and again, succinctly, in his reconsideration some thirty-four years later.¹⁹ According to the end result of his investigations, the ultimate authority for the preserved texts was Herennius Philo’s περὶ διαφόρων σημαυνομένων, a work often quoted by Eusthatus, mostly by name of author, three times also with the title of the work, though it is not asserted that he was the only author of such a work in Antiquity.²⁰ The tradition, as we have it, is divided into two branches: the first (labelled ε by Nickau) carries various forms of Herennius Philo’s name and is alphabetically ordered by the first letter of each entry, while the other (Nickau’s α) contains a greater number of glosses, has Ammonius or Ptolemy as authors and is, or had been, alphabetically ordered by the first two letters of each entry. Accordingly it is his conclusion that the more elaborate α derives from ε.

Before proceeding to Herennius Philo it will be best to put Ptolemy out of our way. The Suda (Π 3038) credits Ptolemy of Ascalon among other works with one Περὶ διαφορᾶς λέξεων. As we have seen, one version of the synonym lexicon we possess is indeed attributed to Ptolemy,²¹ and of course an entry discussing Iudaeans and

¹⁸ This is not the only instance where this confusion occurs, see e.g. Verg. *G.* 3.12, and cf. *GLAJJ* I, p. 316; Jos. *cAp.* 2.112 (Lat.) and cf. B. Bar-Kochva, *The Image of the Jews in Greek Literature. The Hellenistic Period* (Berkeley 2010), 208; see also Ael. *NA* 6.17.

¹⁹ See Nickau’s introduction to his edition (n. 17), and his reconsideration ‘Schiffbruch in der Wüste des Sinai: Zu Herennios Philon, Neilos von Ankyra und dem Ammonioslexikon’, *Hermes* 128 (2000), 218-226. In that paper he revives the hitherto dismissed possibility, that the Ammonius in the title is the late fourth-century pagan grammarian from Alexandria.

²⁰ See *RE* VIII, Herennius no. 2, coll. 650-661 (A. Gudeman), at 652. The text has been edited by V. Palmieri, *Herennius Philo, De diversis verborum significationibus*, Testo crit., introd., comm., indici, Naples 1988; his reservations as to Herennius Philo being the fountainhead of all synonym lexica (51-55) are laid to rest by Nickau in his reconsideration of the evidence, op. cit. (n. 19). For a list of Palmieri’s other contributions to the subject see K. Nickau, ‘Zur Geschichte der griechischen Synonymica: Ptolemaios und die Epitoma Laurentiana’, *Hermes* 118 (1990), 253 n. 4.

²¹ The text has been edited by G. Heylbut, ‘Ptolemaeus Περὶ διαφορᾶς λέξεων’, *Hermes* 22 (1887), 388-410; another lexicon ascribed to Ptolemy in an Ambrosian MS has been edited

Idumaeans would eminently fit such a work. Though Baege's arguments,²² unaware as he was of the entire tradition of synonym lexica, denying the authenticity of the extant work attributed to Ptolemy, do not hold water,²³ one may go along with his judgment that the author was not the careful grammarian of Ascalon, but rather *magistellus quisdam*. As we have seen, it is Nickau's careful survey of all existing synonym lexica that assigns "Ptolemy" his proper place.

It is now time to return to "Ammonius". He quotes, in addition to the item with which we are concerned, Ptolemy of Ascalon twice, expressly with his *ethnicon*: under the entry τριέτες²⁴ and again under σταφυλή²⁵, where the quotation is explicitly attributed to this author's Προσῳδία Ὀμηρικὴ.²⁶ This work provides close to two hundred quotations from Ptolemy of Ascalon, industriously collected by Baege. We may compare the references in "Ammonius" with the quotations from Ptolemy of Ascalon in the Homeric scholia: he is there referred to sometimes by his name alone, sometimes only by his *ethnicon*, and sometimes by both. If "Ammonius" had a Ptolemy other than the Ascalonite in mind, we may have expected him to indicate this. Moreover, "Ammonius" quotes a very large number of well-known authors, and evidently expects his readers to be familiar with them. An author on Herod, not known from any other source, quoted by name only, and on top of it, a homonym of an author quoted by him elsewhere, would hardly fit into this company. Thus we may assume with some confidence that it is Ptolemy of Ascalon whom "Ammonius" had in mind also in the fragment concerning Herod.

Herennius Philo is the last stage of our journey. Although we are here discussing a grammatical work of his, he is best known as an historian, who beside an history of Hadrian, under whose rule he lived, also wrote a rather problematical history of the Phoenicians.²⁷ There is no good reason to doubt that the σύγγραμμα περὶ Ἰουδαίων²⁸ ascribed to him, was indeed a separate work and not part of the Phoenician history, though, of course, even as a section of the longer work it would still carry the weight of

by V. Palmieri, *Ann. Fac. Lett. Napoli* 24 (1981-2), 155-233; this last text does not contain our item.

²² Baege (n. 2), 16-21.

²³ His main point was that Ptolemy would not duplicate the same entry in his synonym lexicon and in his *Homeric Prosody* — a far too confident contention concerning an author known to us almost exclusively by one class of fragments.

²⁴ Ammonii ... ed. Nickau (n. 17), no. 477 (p. 124).

²⁵ *Ibid.*, no. 436 (p. 112).

²⁶ In fact, to his *Prosody of the Odyssey*, but we know from a number of references that the *Homeric Prosody* was divided according to the two epics. This is also confirmed by the item on σταφυλή recurring under Ptolemy's name and the title of *Prosody of the Odyssey* in schol. B 765.

²⁷ H.W. Attridge, and R. A. Jr. Oden, *Philo of Byblos. The Phoenician History*. Introd., Crit. Text, Transl., Notes, Cath. Bibl. Monogr. Series 9, Washington DC 1981. The question of Philo's alleged source Sanchuniaton is of no concern here.

²⁸ See *GLAJJ* II, pp. 139-145, no. 325 (Origen, *cCels* 1.15 [*FGrH* 790 F 9]); no. 326 (Eus. *PE* 1.10.42 [*FGrH* 790 F 10 + 3b]).

the learning of its author.²⁹ As it happens, both these and his other references to Palestine, viz. to Ioppe and Iamnia, testify to his acquaintance with Jewish history and Palestinian geography, not very surprising in a Phoenician interested in the ancient history of his own country, not to mention the special Phoenician ties of Ascalon.³⁰ Moreover, Herennius Philo was also the author of a work in thirty books Περὶ πόλεων καὶ οὐς ἐκάστη αὐτῶν ἐνδόξους ἤνεγκε.³¹ It is not difficult to see how a scholar of such accomplishments and such interests would be familiar with and quote from an otherwise unknown work on King Herod by an Ascalonite, perhaps discussing whether he was a famous son of the city.³² To sum up: Herennius Philo, the source of “Ammonius”, in all probability believed that the Ptolemy whom he quoted about King Herod was Ptolemy of Ascalon. Since he was an historian of the Jews and generally a very learned man with a special interest in the provenance of famous people, one should forward some serious arguments to deny his attribution.

The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

²⁹ Its fragments are printed as a separate work in an Appendix by Attridge and Oden (n. 27), 98-101; see also Palmieri (n. 20), 27-28.

³⁰ There is no need to survey here these ties in their entirety; suffice it to say that already at the very beginning of the Hellenistic age a Sidonian erected in Athens a bilingual, in Phoenician and Greek, stele to an Ascalonite — see the recent and exhaustive discussion of J.M.S. Stager, “Let No One Wonder At This Image”. A Phoenician Funerary Stele in Athens’, *Hesperia* 74 (2005), 427-449 — and that around the end of the second century BCE the important poet Antipater of Sidon, as well as Antisthenes of Paphos composed epigrams for an Ascalonite banker on Delos, see G. Mancinetti Santamaria, ‘Filostrato di Ascalone, banchiere in Delo’, F. Coarelli, D. Musti, H. Solin (eds.), *Opuscula Instituti Finlandiae* (Rome 1982), 78-89; M. Leiwo, ‘Philostratus of Ascalon, his Bank, his Connections and Naples in c. 130-90 B.C.’, *Athenaeum* 77 (1989), 575-584; in 218 CE an Ascalonite refers to Heracles-Belos, that is Tyrian Melkart, as his ancestral god, see *IGRR* I 1092.

³¹ See *RE* VIII coll. 654-9 (Gudeman); this is not the place to discuss Stephanus of Byzantium’s use of this work.

³² N.b. that even Palmieri, (n. 20), 62, while contesting the ascription of all the material in “Ammonius” to Herennius Philo, accepts the attribution of this item.