



EARLY TRACES OF THE GREEK QUESTION MARK

ABSTRACT

According to the standard view on the issue, the habit of marking questions with a particular typographical sign in Greek and Latin script does not arise prior to the eighth or ninth century. This period is generally credited with the ‘invention’ of the question mark (excepting Syriac evidence, which points to the fifth and sixth centuries). The purpose of the present article is to correct this view. It argues that the first indication for the use of a typographical sign that marks questions can actually be detected no later than during the reign of Emperor Hadrian (A.D. 117–38), that is, more than half a millennium before the traditional date of the invention. The chief witness is Nicanor of Alexandria, who does not seem to have used question marks himself, but criticizes the misappropriation of another punctuation mark to that purpose. He thus indirectly testifies to the existence of question marks. Comparable traces can also be found later in the exegetical works of some Christian commentators.

Keywords: punctuation; question mark; Nicanor of Alexandria; delivery; intonation

The Greek grammarian Nicanor of Alexandria, active during the reign of the Roman emperor Hadrian (A.D. 117–38), is known, among other things, as the author of a complex and somewhat idiosyncratic system of punctuation that consists of no fewer than eight different punctuation marks.¹ Owing probably to its complexity, Nicanor’s system largely remained an isolated phenomenon.² For the scope of the present article, one punctuation mark is of particular importance. Its name is ἐνυπόκριτος ὑποστιγμή

¹ For concise summaries on Nicanor and his works (all fragmentary) in general, see C. Wendel, ‘Nikanor (27)’, *RE* 17 (1936), 274–7; S. Matthaios, ‘Nikanor aus Alexandria (12)’, *DNP* 8 (2000), 903–4. The name and function of the eight punctuation marks, specifically, are explained and illustrated with examples in R. Nünlist, ‘Nicanor’s system of punctuation’, *GRBS* 60 (2020), 124–38. That account is based on the two chief witnesses known at the time, a commentary on the grammar of Dionysius Thrax (pp. 26.4–28.8 Hilgard), which includes Homeric examples, and Nicanor’s actual practice that can be derived from the fragments of his commentary on the *Iliad*. (The newly discovered summary of Nicanor’s theory does not affect the present argument; for the new summary, see M.G. Sandri, ‘Nuovi frammenti sulle interpunzioni dall’opera di Nicanore di Alessandria’, *Glotta* 98 [2022], 279–301; R. Nünlist, ‘New evidence on Nicanor’s theory of punctuation’, *Philologus* 167 [2023], 8–21.) Nicanor’s fragments have been edited, with extensive introduction, by L. Friedländer, *Nicanoris Περὶ Ἰλιακῆς στιγμῆς reliquiae emendatiores* (Berlin, 1857², repr. Amsterdam, 1967), but the text of the fragments is now best consulted in H. Erbse’s edition of the scholia to the *Iliad*: *Scholia Graeca in Homeri Iliadem (Scholia vetera)*, 7 vols. (Berlin, 1969–88). The attribution of Odyssean scholia to Nicanor is encumbered by uncertainty.

² This is the standard view on the fate of Nicanor’s system (e.g. Wendel [n. 1], 277; Matthaios [n. 1], 904). But there are exceptions. The commentaries on the speeches of Gregory Nazianzen from the pen of Basilii Minimus (tenth century), for instance, are indebted to Nicanor’s system. See T.A. Schmidt, *Basilii Minimi in Gregorii Nazianzeni orationem XXXVIII commentarii* (Leuven, 2001), XXI–XXIII, who, however, underestimates the degree to which Basilii’s practice actually differs from Nicanor’s. Basilii probably meant to follow Nicanor, but did not fully understand his system. The terminology used in sch. Dion. Thrax pp. 54.27–55.5 Hilgard is reminiscent of Nicanor’s (D. Blank, ‘Remarks on Nicanor, the Stoics and the ancient theory of punctuation’, *Glotta* 61 [1983], 48–67, at 57 n. 40).

(literally ‘point below with special intonation’) and its function is to mark the pivot between a preceding subordinate clause and the subsequent main clause.³ A good example is Paris’ indignant response to Antenor’s suggestion that Helen be returned to the Greeks (*Il.* 7.359–60):

εἰ δ’ ἔτεδον δὴ τοῦτον ἀπὸ σπουδῆς ἀγορεύεις,
ἐξ ἄρα δὴ τοι ἔπειτα θεοὶ φρένας ὄλεσαν αὐτοῖ.

But if in all seriousness this is your true argument, then it is the very gods who ruined the brain within you.⁴

The ἐνυπόκριτος ὑποστιγμὴ after ἀγορεύεις indicates that the subordinate clause is coming to an end. This way of punctuating applies only to those subordinate clauses that precede the main clause, which, for Nicanor, is the standard sequence (called ὀρθὴ περίοδος, ‘straight/regular period’). In the case of an inverted period (ἀντεστραμμένη περίοδος), on the other hand, the preceding main clause is separated from the subsequent subordinate clause by means of a διαστολή (‘comma’).⁵ As a matter of fact, the function that Nicanor assigns to the ἐνυπόκριτος ὑποστιγμὴ is not so different from the function that the ὑποστιγμὴ has in other ancient punctuation systems, most of which essentially operate with two marks, hard and soft. The grammar of Dionysius Thrax, for instance, sees the (soft) ὑποστιγμὴ as a ‘marker that the sense of the sentence is not yet complete but still defective’.⁶ Nicanor’s practice in putting the ἐνυπόκριτος ὑποστιγμὴ shows that he essentially agrees with this definition; for instance, the Homeric example cited above nicely illustrates the definition because the main clause is needed in order to complete the sentence.⁷ The main difference between Dionysius Thrax and Nicanor is that the latter expressly wants his ὑποστιγμὴ to be accompanied by an appropriate intonation: it ought to be ἐνυπόκριτος (from ὑπόκρισις ‘delivery’).⁸ This specification matters to Nicanor because his system has in fact two ὑποστιγμαί, one with special intonation (ἐνυπόκριτος), the other without (ἀνυπόκριτος). The function of the latter ὑποστιγμὴ is to mark the end of an insertion (called διὰ μέσου, literally ‘in-between’, that is, parenthesis broadly

³ On the function of the ἐνυπόκριτος ὑποστιγμὴ, see Nünlist (n. 1 [2020]), 128–9 (§3.1). It is one of the three softer punctuation marks. Nicanor’s eight marks fall into two groups (Blank [n. 2], 51).

⁴ Translations of the *Iliad* follow R. Lattimore, *The Iliad of Homer. Translated with an Introduction* (Chicago, 1951), occasionally with modifications in order to render the passage as the ancient critic understands it. Translations of the scholia are my own.

⁵ On the function of the διαστολή, see Nünlist (n. 1 [2020]), 130–3 (especially §4.1 for the specific function of separating the preceding main clause from the subsequent subordinate clause).

⁶ ὑποστιγμὴ δὲ διανοίᾳ μηδέπω ἀπρητισμένης ἀλλ’ ἔτι ἐνδεούσης σημείων (Dion. Thrax §4, p. 7.6–7 Uhlig, p. 44.4–5 Lallot). See Blank (n. 2), who also demonstrates that the differentiation between complete and incomplete phrases is common among ancient grammarians and originates in Stoic linguistics.

⁷ Therefore Nicanor’s differentiation between the punctuation of ‘regular’ and ‘inverted periods’ is less arbitrary than might seem at first sight. A preceding main clause might well be complete; the subsequent subordinate clause is not strictly necessary. Conversely, a preceding subordinate clause needs to be followed by a main clause in order to result in a complete period. Nicanor’s notion of completeness (αὐτοτέλεια) is further explored in R. Nünlist, ‘Nicanor of Alexandria on grammatical completeness’, forthcoming in *Glotta*.

⁸ The name ἐνυπόκριτος ὑποστιγμὴ is transmitted by sch. Dion. Thrax p. 27.12–13 Hilgard (cf. n. 1 above). Instead of the adjective ἐνυπόκριτος, the relevant Homeric scholia use the alternative expression ἐν ὑποκρίσει (sch. A *Il.* 1.512b, 2.123–7, 2.139b, 2.148b, etc., all attributed to Nicanor).

understood).⁹ Nicanor has an obvious interest in making the two ὑποκριταὶ distinguishable.¹⁰

The relevant sources do not explain which form this special intonation of the ἐνυπόκριτος ὑποστιγμή is to take. But it is a fair guess to assume, with Friedländer, that the reader raises the pitch of the voice towards the end of the subordinate clause, from where he or she then lets it descend into the main clause.¹¹ The raised pitch of the voice indicates the incompleteness of the subordinate clause. A main clause is needed to round off the entire sentence. Raising the pitch of the voice towards the end is, of course, also a standard way of marking a question in oral discourse.¹² Therefore it is not too difficult to see why someone might feel inclined to (mis)appropriate the ἐνυπόκριτος ὑποστιγμή as a question mark. For this is what in fact happened, as shall be demonstrated shortly. The argument of the present article does not hinge, however, on Friedländer's hypothesis of the raised pitch of the voice. As the texts quoted below shall show, Nicanor himself recognizes that the two fundamental phenomena that he urges to keep separate, preceding subordinate clauses and questions, do have similarities in delivery (ὑπόκρισις), whatever this delivery might have been like.

Nicanor criticizes the misappropriation of the ἐνυπόκριτος ὑποστιγμή on at least five occasions. The number is large enough to prove the point of the present article and, at the same time, small enough to allow reviewing all the instances.¹³ Owing to the nature

⁹ On the function of the ἀνυπόκριτος ὑποστιγμή, see Nünlist (n. 1 [2020]), 129–30 (§3.2). That other ὑποστιγμή and its function are likely to be Nicanor's invention (130). On Nicanor's treatment of insertions (διὰ μέσου), see R. Nünlist, 'Two cornerstones of Nicanor's syntactic explanations', *RFIC* 147 (2019), 395–416.

¹⁰ In practice, the relevant Homeric scholia repeatedly fail to specify which of the two ὑποστιγμαὶ is actually meant (the same observation applies to the five different στιγμαὶ: Nünlist [n. 1 (2020)], 127 [§2.6]). This state of affairs may be the result of the multi-stage abbreviation process that the scholia underwent. Truly ambiguous cases are nevertheless rare, though the two fundamental errors in the description of sch. Dion. Thrax pp. 26.4–28.8 Hilgard (cf. n. 1 above) both concern the function of Nicanor's ὑποστιγμαὶ (Nünlist [n. 1 (2020)], 129 n. 18).

¹¹ Friedländer (n. 1), 59, tacitly accepted by Blank (n. 2), 50.

¹² This intonation applies, in particular, to yes-no-questions, whereas wh-questions have an intonation peak on the interrogative word. As far as the intonation of questions specifically in ancient Greek is concerned, there is, admittedly, little hard evidence to rely on. The fact that interrogative words such as τίς/τί always retain their acute accent is generally taken as an indication of the intonation peak in wh-questions: see P. Chantraine, *Grammaire homérique*, vol. 2 (Paris, 1963), 10; A.M. Devine and L.D. Stephens, *The Prosody of Greek Speech* (New York, 1994), 454–5. The assumption that yes-no-questions were indicated by raising the pitch of the voice towards the end of the sentence (presupposed without proof by various grammars: e.g. R. Kühner and B. Gerth, *Ausführliche Grammatik der griechischen Sprache. Zweiter Teil: Satzlehre*, 2 vols. [Hannover, 1898], 2.523, Chantraine [this note]) can be supported by a typological argument: 95% of the world's languages use this marker in order to differentiate between yes-no-questions and statements; see P. Siemund, 'Interrogative constructions', in M. Haspelmath et al. (edd.), *Language Typology and Language Universals. An International Handbook*, vol. 2 (Berlin, 2001), 1012–13 (I owe this reference to Alessandro Vatri). As a 'null-subject language', ancient Greek cannot mark yes-no-questions by means of an inversion (e.g. 'are you ready?'). Homeric Greek, in particular, has no equivalent to the Attic interrogative word ἄρα (Kühner and Gerth [this note], 2.527). The particle ἦ ('surely, truly, really'), in turn, can be used to introduce both statements and yes-no-questions. As a result, the illocutionary force of several Homeric sentences remains disputed to this day (see e.g. the examples mentioned in nn. 16, 26).

¹³ The five notes are mentioned by Friedländer (n. 1), 70–1 as examples for wrongly placed ἐνυπόκριτος ὑποστιγμαὶ, without, however, touching upon the history of the question mark. K.E.A. Schmidt, *Beiträge zur Geschichte der Grammatik des Griechischen und Lateinischen* (Halle, 1859), 536 with n. 34 underestimates their relevance because his focus is on finding the unique question mark.

of the extant sources described in n. 1 above, the relevant notes all deal with passages from the *Iliad*.

In *Iliad* 3, Aphrodite rescues Paris from certain death at the hands of Menelaus and brings him back to the palace, where Helen addresses him a harsh speech. Its first line reads as follows (*Il.* 3.428, with Nicanor's punctuation):

ἦλυθες ἐκ πολέμου. ὡς ὄφελες αὐτόθ' ὀλέσθαι.

So you came back from fighting. Oh, how I wish you had died there.

Nicanor's note on the passage testifies to a scholarly disagreement over the illocutionary force and punctuation of the first half of the line:

πλανάμενοι τινες ὑποστιζουσιν ἐν τῷ “πολέμου” διὰ τὴν ὑπόκρισιν. Νικάνωρ [p. 174 Friedländer] δὲ τελείαν δίδωσι καὶ τὸ ἐξῆς ἀπόλυτόν φησιν (sch. AbT *Il.* 3.428a ex./Nic.).

Some erroneously put a *hupostigmē* after *poleμου*, owing to the delivery. Nicanor, however, puts a *teleia* [sc. *stigmē*] and says that what follows is an asyndeton.

The τελεία στιγμή (literally ‘complete point’) is Nicanor's hardest punctuation mark. It rounds off complete sentences that are followed by an asyndeton in the next sentence.¹⁴ To punctuate *Il.* 3.428a with an ἐνυπόκριτος ὑποστιγμή is out of the question for him because the first three words of Helen's speech can in no way be analysed as a subordinate clause.¹⁵ The misguided τινές might actually agree on this point. For their motive appears to be another one: they put an ἐνυπόκριτος ὑποστιγμή ‘owing to the delivery’ (διὰ τὴν ὑπόκρισιν). This seemingly vague expression must refer to the delivery as a question. The justification for this explanation is provided by none other than Nicanor himself when he expressly refers back to this comment in a note on a scene from Book 4 of the *Iliad*.¹⁶

Instigated by Zeus, Athena arrives on the battlefield, illustrated by the ominous simile of a meteor, in order to renew the fighting. A τις-speech summarizes the anxiety felt among both armies alike (*Il.* 4.82–4, with Nicanor's accentuation and punctuation):

ἦ ῥ' αὖτις πόλεμός τε κακὸς καὶ φύλοπις αἰνὴ
ἔσσειται· ἢ φιλόητα μετ' ἀμφοτέροισι τίθησιν
Ζεὺς, ὅς τ' ἀνθρώπων ταμίης πολέμοιο τέτυκται.

Will there again be evil war and terrible fighting? Or else is now friendship set between both sides by Zeus, who is appointed lord of the wars of mortals?

The first part of the speech (82–3a) is commented on in the following way (sch. A *Il.* 4.82–3a¹ Nic.):

ὁ λόγος σίζει ἐπὶ τὸ “ἔσσειται” [*Il.* 4.83]· εἴρηται γὰρ καὶ ἐν τῇ πρὸ ταύτης ῥαμφιδία [sc. ad 3.428] ὅτι οὐ πάντως ἐπὶ τῶν πευστικῶς λεγομένων ὑποστικτέον. οὕτως Νικάνωρ [p. 176 Friedländer], εἰ καὶ ἀπα(ν)τῶ [suppl. Bekker], φησίν, ἢ ὑπόκρισις.

¹⁴ Nünlist (n. 1 [2020]), 125–6 (§2.1).

¹⁵ The note does not specify the ὑποστιγμή, but there can be no doubt that the ἐνυπόκριτος is meant; cf. n. 10 above.

¹⁶ The relevant notes, at least in their extant form, do not make it clear whether Nicanor accepts the analysis of *Il.* 3.428a as a question. In modern scholarship this is done by, among others, K.F. Ameis, C. Hentze and P. Cauer, *Homers Ilias*, vol. 1 (Leipzig, 1913⁷, repr. Amsterdam 1965), ad loc. or the Basel commentary, J. Latacz (ed.), *Homers Ilias: Gesamtkommentar. 3. Gesang* (Berlin, 2009), ad loc.

The sense requires putting a *stigmê* after *essetai* [*sc.* and not a softer punctuation mark].¹⁷ For it has already been said in the preceding book that under no circumstances must one put a *hupostigmê* after questions [literally ‘words spoken interrogatively’]. Thus Nicanor, even though, he says, the delivery occurs.

The back reference to the previous discussion is unmistakable. As is the generalizing character of the note: questions must not be punctuated with an ἐνυπόκριτος ὑποστιγμή under any circumstances.¹⁸ This general rule applies, even though, Nicanor admits, there is a noticeable comparability as far as the delivery (ὑπόκρισις) is concerned. In other words, with a view to delivery preceding subordinate clauses and independent questions do display similarities.¹⁹ But the dissimilar syntactic status of a subordinate clause and a question—one is dependent, the other not—precludes that one and the same punctuation mark can apply to both because it would undermine the fundamental criterion of completeness.²⁰ In all likelihood, Nicanor agrees with the τινές that lines 82–3a are in fact a question.²¹

The τις-speech that has just been quoted is very similar to a section from Zeus’s speech in the preceding divine assembly that results in the dispatch of Athena (*Il.* 4.14–16, with Nicanor’s accentuation and punctuation):

ἡμεῖς δὲ φραζόμεθ', ὅπως ἔσται τάδε ἔργα,
ἢ ῥ' ἀντις πόλεμόν τε κακὸν καὶ φύλοπιν αἰνὴν
ὄρσομεν, ἢ φιλότητα μετ' ἀμφοτέροισι βάλωμεν.

Let us consider then how these things shall be accomplished, whether again to stir up grim warfare and the terrible fighting, or to cast down love and make them friends with each other.

Not unexpectedly, Nicanor argues along the same lines as in the preceding cases but adds a small point (*sch.* *A Il.* 4.14–16 *Nic.*):

βραχὺ διασταλτέον ἐπὶ τὸ “τάδε ἔργα” [*Il.* 4.14] καὶ “ὄρσομεν” [16], βαρυνομένου τοῦ προτέρου συνδέσμου [*sc.* ἤ], περισπωμένου τοῦ δευτέρου [*sc.* ἤ]. οἱ δὲ ὑποστίζοντες ἐπὶ τὸ “ὄρσομεν” [16] πάλιν ὑπὸ τῆς πειστικῆς ὑποκρίσεως πλανῶνται, ἐπεὶ καὶ τοῖς δισταγοῖς αὕτη συμβέβηκε πολλάκις. μηδὲ στίζωμεν ἐπὶ τὸ “ὄρσομεν” [16]: ὁ γὰρ λόγος, φραζόμεθ', ὡς ἔσται ταῦτα, κότερον πάλιν πόλεμον ποιήσομεν ἢ φιλίαν ἐμβαλοῦμεν.

A short *diastolê* must be put after *tade erga* and *orsomen*, with the former conjunction taking an acute accent, the latter a circumflex. Those who put a *hupostigmê* after *orsomen* are again misled by the interrogative delivery, because it often occurs in dubitative questions as well.

¹⁷ The στιγμή in question is the πρώτη ἄνω (Friedländer [n. 1], 56), on which see Nünlist (n. 1 [2020]), 126–7 (§2.3).

¹⁸ For this translation of οὐ πάντως here, see Friedländer (n. 1), 71 with n. 9. From a terminological point of view, the note seems to indicate that Nicanor does not observe the distinction made in ancient grammar and rhetoric between πεῦσις (wh-question) and ἐρώτησις (yes-no-question), on which see A. Rijksbaron, ‘A question of questions: *peusis*, *erôtêsis* and [Longinus] Περὶ ὕψους 18.1’, *Mnemosyne* 56 (2003), 733–7. His notes discussed in this article, at any rate, deal with yes-no-questions. See also n. 27 below.

¹⁹ For the notion that questions are spoken ἐν ὑποκρίσει, see also Ps.-Herodian, *Fig.* 37 Hajdú (illustrating the phenomenon with a literary yes-no-question of uncertain paternity, see apparatus criticus); cf. *sch. vet. Ar. Plut.* 651b.

²⁰ Nicanor’s notes on ἐνυπόκριτοι ὑποστιγμαὶ regularly identify the conjunction on which the subordinate clause depends, e.g. (all attributed to him) *sch.* *A Il.* 1.512b (ὡς), 2.80a (εἰ), 2.198a (relative ὅς), 3.221–2 (ὅτε), 12.13a (ἐπεὶ), 18.88–90 (ἵνα).

²¹ The illocutionary force of lines 83b–84 is not discussed in the extant notes. Nicanor may have read the entire speech as an alternative question (see n. 22 below).

Nor should we put a *stigmê* after *orsomen*. For the sense is: let us consider how these things shall be, whether again to stir up war or to incite friendship.

Nicanor again criticizes unnamed critics for putting an ἐνυπόκριτος ὑποστιγμὴ because they are misled by the delivery as a question. He adds the observation that this delivery is common ‘also to dubitative questions’ (καὶ τοῖς δισταγμοῖς). What he means to say is that the relevant delivery does not only apply to simple yes-no-questions but also to dubitative questions (δισταγμοί).²² In this particular case, Nicanor rejects not only the use of the ἐνυπόκριτος ὑποστιγμὴ to mark a question but also the analysis specifically of lines 15–16 as independent questions (hence no πρώτη ἄνω στιγμή after ὄρσομεν either). Instead, he reads them as indirect questions dependent on φραζόμεθα (‘let us consider’), as his alliterating paraphrase shows.²³

Another note, sch. T *Il.* 3.405 Nic., simply states the fact that the delivery as a question (here with an ironic undertone, ἠθικῶς) does not result in punctuating the line with an ἐνυπόκριτος ὑποστιγμὴ.²⁴

The fifth and final case is again worth quoting, because it indirectly brings out a potential shortcoming of ancient systems of punctuation in general. Hera, fully dressed up and adorned with Aphrodite’s girdle, arrives on Mt Ida in order to seduce her husband. He welcomes her with the following speech (*Il.* 14.298–9, with modern punctuation):

Ἥρη, πῆ μεμανῖα κατ’ Οὐλύμπου τόδ’ ἰκάνεις;
ἵπποι δ’ οὐ παρέασι καὶ ἄρματα, τῶν κ’ ἐπιβαίης;

Hera, what is your desire that you come down here from Olympus? Are there no horses here or a chariot, which you would ride in?

In his note on the speech’s second line, Nicanor deliberates on how to take it (sch. A *Il.* 14.299a Nic.):

δύναται καὶ πειστικῶς ὁ στίχος ἀναγινώσκεισθαι, οὐ μὴν ὑποστικτέον διὰ πειστικὴν ὑπόκρισιν.

It is equally possible to read out the line as a question; it must, however, not be punctuated with a *hupostigmê* owing to an interrogative delivery.

By now, the fundamental argument will sound familiar, irrespective of the open question whether someone actually put an ἐνυπόκριτος ὑποστιγμὴ at the end of line 299.²⁵ More importantly, Nicanor expressly accepts the possibility of reading the line

²² This extension is hardly surprising because alternative questions such as *Il.* 4.15–16 (taken as independent questions) can easily be analysed as a subtype of yes-no-questions (‘Shall we do A? Or B?’); see A. Rijksbaron, *The Syntax and Semantics of the Verb in Classical Greek* (Chicago, 2006³), 56. The preceding example *Il.* 4.82–4 might in fact be read as an alternative question.

²³ In sch. A *Il.* 9.673–4 Nic., sch. *Od.* 4.487a Nic. and sch. *Od.* 4.712a Nic. both options, dependent and independent, are considered feasible with no indication of a preference. In sch. A *Il.* 21.226 Nic. the two alternatives are an independent statement (ἀποφατικός) or a dependent question.

²⁴ The wording of the note contains a small oddity: ‘She [*sc.* Helen] asks ironically. Therefore, one must not put a *hupostigmê* on *parestês*’ (ἠθικῶς πυνθάνεται· διὸ οὐ δεῖ ὑποστικτεῖν εἰς τὸ ‘παρέστης’). One might have expected Nicanor to write something like ‘nevertheless’ instead of ‘therefore’ (διὸ).

²⁵ According to Erbse (n. 1), *ad loc.*, the note refers to the punctuation mark at the end of line 298, but this cannot be right.

as a question.²⁶ But his system of punctuation, in all its complexity, does not allow him to mark the text accordingly. The fact that line 299 can be delivered as a question must be spelled out in the commentary.²⁷

This is where one might glimpse the rationale of the unnamed critics. They apparently felt the need to mark questions in the text itself and decided to fill what they considered a gap in the extant systems of punctuation. It seems unlikely that they themselves invented the ἐνυπόκριτος ὑποστιγμή to that purpose. More likely is the scenario that they appropriated an extant punctuation mark, the purpose of which was to signal a special intonation. This manoeuvre seemed to offer itself because the relevant intonation was in fact so similar. The corollary of the appropriation was, of course, that one and the same punctuation mark was to have multiple functions. This effect need not have bothered them too much. For a very similar appropriation happened more than a millennium later, albeit the other way around. In early modern Germany it became customary to mark some preceding subordinate clauses with a question mark.²⁸ Likewise, the widespread habit of putting question marks after direct and indirect interrogative sentences alike was not reigned in until the middle of the eighteenth century in Germany and England. Moreover, the τυνές might have felt that there was no risk that readers or listeners might truly mistake an independent question for a preceding subordinate clause. Or they simply focussed more on producing, as it were, a ‘score’ for the delivery of the text in question and less on the syntactical status of the individual sentence.

Be that as it may, Nicanor, for his part, did not like at all what they were doing. He forcefully argued against what he considered a fundamental misapplication of a particular punctuation mark because it blurred the crucial boundary between complete and incomplete sentences. Most interestingly, he does accept that the unnamed critics have a point when they align the delivery of questions with the delivery of preceding subordinate clauses. But he does not seem to have acknowledged that they equally have a point when they deplore the lack of a question mark and fill the gap. Like most ancient punctuators, he apparently saw no need for a question mark.²⁹

²⁶ In modern scholarship, line 299 is read as a question by, among others, R. Janko, *The Iliad: A Commentary. Volume IV: Books 13–16* (Cambridge, 1992), ad loc. and the Basel commentary, J. Latacz (ed.), *Homers Ilias: Gesamtkommentar. 14. Gesang* (Berlin, 2015), ad loc.

²⁷ For parallels where Nicanor’s note spells this out, see (all attributed to him) sch. A *Il.* 1.290–1, sch. AbT *Il.* 3.46–52, sch. A *Il.* 9.673–4, sch. A *Il.* 10.61a, sch. A *Il.* 10.545–6a (with a remarkable transition from indirect to direct question), sch. A *Il.* 13.727–8, sch. A *Il.* 24.381. Unsurprisingly, all these notes deal with yes-no-questions, which are more difficult to detect for the reader, whereas wh-questions are marked by interrogative words; cf. n. 12 above. The question mark found in early Syriac manuscripts indicates yes-no-questions (J.F. Coakley, ‘An early Syriac question mark’, *Aramaic Studies* 10 [2012], 193–213, at 201); cf. n. 38 below. The Latin question marks found in Carolingian manuscripts, on the other hand, signal yes-no-questions and wh-questions alike: see B. Bischoff, *Paläographie des römischen Altertums und des abendländischen Mittelalters* (Berlin, 2009⁴ [1979¹]), 225.

²⁸ K. Rinas, *Theorie der Punkte und Striche. Die Geschichte der deutschen Interpunktionslehre* (Heidelberg, 2017), 196–7. This punctuation applies to preceding conditional clauses that lack a conjunction. Instead of such a conjunction the word order is inverted, which has the clause resemble a yes-no-question (cf. n. 12 above). An example is (Logau [1605–55], quoted from Rinas, with contemporary spelling): ‘Kan die Deutsche Sprache schnauben, schnarchen, poltern, donnern, krachen? Kann sie doch auch spielen, schertzen, liebeln, güteln, kürmeln, lachen.’ (‘[If] the German language can snort, snore, bluster, thunder, crash [question mark] it can also play, jest, flirt, cuddle, babble, laugh.’)

²⁹ In his apparatus criticus on sch. A *Il.* 1.290–1 Nic., Erbse (n. 1) suggests understanding ἐπι δὲ τὸ “μυθῆσασθαι” (*Il.* 1.291) στικτέων <πευστικῶς> (‘a [question] mark must be put after

Most—not all. Nicanor does not seem to have succeeded in completely eradicating the ‘bad habit’ of marking questions with a ὑποστιγμή. Four Church Fathers, at least, had no qualms about doing exactly that: Eusebius of Caesarea (c.260/4–339/40), Athanasius of Alexandria (c.300–73), Cyril of Alexandria (c.376–444) and Theodoretus of Cyrrhus (c.393–458/66).³⁰ Their exegetical works on Biblical texts such as, for instance, the Psalms contain notes where the word ὑποστιγμή clearly betrays its use as a question mark.

Eusebius’ point of reference is a section from the beginning of Psalm 21, which reads as follows (verse 3, punctuated with modern marks as Eusebius understands the passage):

ὁ θεός μου κεκράξομαι ἡμέρας, καὶ οὐκ εἰσακούσῃ;

My God, I shall cry by day, and you will not give ear?

Eusebius opposes the view that the final part should be read as a statement. Quoting a passage from the Gospel of John in support (11.42–3: ‘I [*sc.* Jesus] knew that you always hear me’), he puts forward a different interpretation (Euseb. *Demonstr. evang.* 10.8.44):

εἰ τοίνυν πάντοτε αὐτοῦ ἀκούει, οὐκ ἀμφιβάλλον ἀλλ’ ἀκριβῶς ἐπιστάμενος ὅτι καὶ νῦν αὐτοῦ εἰσακούσεται ... ἐρωτηματικῶς φησιν· “ὁ θεός μου κεκράξομαι ἡμέρας, καὶ οὐκ εἰσακούσῃ;” ὑποστιζόντων ἡμῶν ἐν τῷ “οὐκ εἰσακούσῃ” καὶ τὸ ἐναντίον ὑπονοούντων τῷ πύσματι.

If, therefore, he [*sc.* God] always listens to him, not in doubt but knowing exactly that in the present case too he will give ear to him ... he says interrogatively: ‘My God, I shall cry by day, and you will not give ear?’, with us putting a *hupostigmē* after *ouk eisakousēi* and understanding the opposite of the question.

Eusebius reads the passage as a question and therefore marks it with a ὑποστιγμή. Unsurprisingly, in his commentary on the Psalms he repeats essentially the same interpretation, but the point is less obvious because he gives a mere paraphrase of the positive implication that the leading question (introduced by οὐ) has (Euseb. *PG* 23.204.50–1):

οὕτω δέ μου βοῶντος οἶδα ὅτι εἰσακούσῃ· μεθ’ ὑποστιγμῆς γὰρ ἀναγνωστέον.

‘With me crying thus, I know that you will give ear’; for one must read out [the passage] with a *hupostigmē*.

For the purpose of the present article, the wording of this note is all the more revealing because Eusebius apparently expects his readers to understand without further explanation that he suggests putting what is in effect a question mark. This conciseness presupposes a certain familiarity with the concept, at least among the intended readers of his commentary.³¹

muthēsasthai). Nicanor does understand the relevant line as a yes-no-question (cf. n. 27 above), but there is no evidence that he ever used a question mark. On the contrary, questions are rounded off with a στιγμή (usually a τελεία), whether they are wh-questions as in *Il.* 4.351, 10.61, or 18.80–2 (sch. *A Il.* 4.351–3 Nic., sch. *A Il.* 10.61a Nic., sch. *A Il.* 18.82a Nic.) or yes-no-questions as in *Il.* 4.93–4 or 10.204–6/13 (sch. *T Il.* 4.93c Nic., sch. *AbT Il.* 10.204–13a Nic.). Erbse’s suggestion is unlikely to be correct. The claim that Nicanor puts a τελεία στιγμή ‘before and after interrogatives’ (Blank [n. 2], 56) must be a slip of the pen.

³⁰ The list makes no pretence to completeness.

³¹ On the other hand, the two notes quoted in the main text are, to my knowledge, the only attestations of ὑποστιγμή (and cognates) in the sense of ‘question mark’ in Eusebius’ extant works.

Turning to Athanasius, his explanatory paraphrases leave no room for doubt either that he makes use of a question mark. In his case, a point of reference is the following passage from Psalm 9 (verse 25, punctuated with modern marks as Athanasius understands the passage):

παρώξυνεν τὸν κύριον ὁ ἁμαρτωλός,
κατὰ τὸ πλήθος τῆς ὀργῆς αὐτοῦ. οὐκ ἐκζητήσει;

The sinner irritated the lord, in accordance with the quantity of his anger. Will he [*sc.* the lord] not seek [him] out?

Athanasius' commentary reads as follows (starting with a paraphrase of the passage; *PG* 27.88.41–50):

‘παρώξυνε τὸν Κύριον’, φησίν, ‘ὁ ἁμαρτωλός, πλήθος ὀργῆς ἑαυτῷ θησαυρίζων’. τὸ γὰρ “αὐτοῦ” ἐπὶ τοῦ παροξύναντος ληπτέον. εἶτα τὸ ἐπιφερόμενον τοῦτο “οὐκ ἐκζητήσει” καθ’ ὑποστιγμὴν ἀναγνωστέον, ἵνα ἢ τὸ νοούμενον οὕτως· ‘ἄρ’ οὖν ὁ μὲν παροξύνει τὸν Θεόν, καίτοι πλήθος αὐτῷ ἐκκαίων ὀργῆς, ὁ δὲ οὐκ ἐκζητήσει;’ καθ’ ὑποστιγμὴν ἢ ἀνάγνωσις, ἵνα ἢ· ‘οὐκ ἐκζητήσει’, φησίν, ‘ὁ Θεὸς καὶ ἀποδώσει αὐτῷ κατὰ τὴν ὀργὴν, ἣν ἑαυτῷ ἐθησαύρισεν ἐν ἡμέρᾳ ὀργῆς αὐτοῦ;’

‘The sinner irritated the Lord’, he [*sc.* the psalmist] says, ‘thereby storing up for himself a lot of anger’. For the [pronoun] *autou* must be taken with [that is, refer to] the agitator [that is, the sinner]. Next, the subsequent phrase *ouk ekzētesei* must be read out *kath’ hupostigmēn*, so that the sense is the following: ‘so the one irritates God, though inciting in him plenty of anger, and the other will not seek [him] out?’ The reading is *kath’ hupostigmēn*, with the following result: ‘Will God not seek him out’, he says, ‘and return to him the anger that he stored up for himself on the day of the anger with him?’

Irrespective of whether this comment actually gives an accurate explanation of the difficult passage from Psalm 9, it demonstrates that Athanasius is prepared to use the ὑποστιγμὴ as a question mark. The phrase καθ’ ὑποστιγμὴν ἀναγνωστέον, which is even repeated in this note, and the subsequent paraphrases make it perfectly clear how he takes the passage and that he marks it accordingly.³² This comment and those mentioned in n. 32 below deal with questions that are introduced by οὐ and thus suggest an affirmative answer.

The commentary on the same passage from Psalm 9 from the pen of Cyril of Alexandria (*PG* 69.780.44–59) is so similar, with plenty of verbatim repetition, that there is little point in quoting it too. The hypothesis that Cyril depends here on Athanasius (or on a common source) is confirmed by his use of the shorter phrase καθ’ ὑποστιγμὴν in order to indicate a question mark. This is contrary to Cyril’s regular practice, because elsewhere he tends to make things clearer by explicitly adding a form of the word ἐρώτησις—for instance, when he gives instructions on how to punctuate and deliver a passage from Exodus (Cyril. *Comm. Ioann.* 2.143.27–144.2 Pusey):

εἶτα τὸ τούτων κείμενον ἐφεξῆς ὡς ἐν ἐρωτήσει μεθ’ ὑποστιγμῆς ἀναγνωσόμεθα “καὶ καθαρισμῷ οὐ καθαριεῖ τὸν ἔνοχον;” [Exod. 34.7] ἵνα τι τοιοῦτον ἐννοήσης ‘ὁ μακρόθυμός’ φησι ‘καὶ πολυέλεος Θεός, ὁ ἀφαιρῶν ἀνομίας καὶ ἁμαρτίας, οὐκ ἂν καθαρῖσαι καθαρισμῷ τὸν ἔνοχον;’

³² As with the anonymous targets of Nicanor’s criticism, the same punctuation mark can have several functions for Athanasius. The use of the ὑποστιγμὴ as a question mark recurs e.g. in *PG* 27.132.138–9 (on Psalm 21.3, essentially replicating Eusebius’ interpretation, quoted above), 27.97.32 (on 52.5), 27.124.29–33 (on 18.4).

Then, we shall read out the passage that follows next as a question with *hupostigmê*: ‘And will he [sc. God] not clear the guilty?’, in order for you to understand something like ‘God, magnanimous and merciful’, he says, ‘he who removes lawlessness and fault, will he not clear the guilty?’

This combination of the terms ἐρώτησις and ὑποστιγμή is Cyril’s standard way of dealing with passages that ought to be delivered and punctuated as questions. The fairly numerous examples discuss various yes-no-questions.³³

Theodoretus of Cyrhus, finally, provides examples in his commentary on the letters of Paul, more specifically, the letter to the Romans. For instance (*Rom.* 11.7, with modern punctuation):

τί οὖν; ὃ ἐπιζητεῖ Ἰσραήλ, τοῦτο οὐκ ἐπέτυχεν κτλ.

What then? Israel failed to obtain what it was seeking, etc.

Theodoretus tellingly comments (*PG* 82.173.12–14):

“τί οὖν;” ἐνταῦθα ὑποστικτέον· κατ’ ἐρώτησιν γὰρ κεῖται ἀντι τοῦ ‘τί τοίνυν ἔστιν εἰπεῖν;’ εἶτα κατὰ ἀπόκρισιν τὰ λοιπὰ κτλ.

‘What then?’ A *hupostigmê* must be put here. For the passage represents a question in the sense of ‘What then should one say?’ The remainder then follows as an answer, etc.

Theodoretus stands out because he does not deal with a yes-no-question but with a wh-question, which, however, is rhetorically emphatic and thus suggestive.³⁴

Similar attestations of the word ὑποστιγμή (and cognates) can be found, for instance, in the various scholiastic corpora on Greek authors.³⁵ The problem with these attestations is that it is virtually impossible to provide even an approximate date for them. One is nevertheless worth looking at because it has been linked to Nicanor.

The relevant Homeric scene is the questioning of the Trojan spy Dolon by Odysseus, who enquires about the exact position of the Trojan allies (*Il.* 10.424–5, with modern punctuation):

πῶς γὰρ νῦν, Τρώεσσι μεμιγμένοι ἱπποδάμοισιν
εὐδούσ’, ἧ ἀπάνευθε;

How, then, are these sleeping, mixed with the Trojans, breakers of horses, or apart?

A scholium from MS A (Venetus A, tenth century) reads as follows (sch. A *Il.* 10.425a Nic.?):

τὸ “εὐδούσ’” ἐν διαστολῇ καὶ ὑποστιγμῇ, ἵνα ἐρωτη<μα>τικὸν [corr. Erbse] γένηται.

The [word] *heudous*’ [is to be punctuated] with a *diastolê* and a *hupostigmê*, so that it is interrogative.

³³ See *PG* 69.785.23 (on Psalm 9.34), *PG* 69.809.15–19 (on 15.4), etc. One of Cyril’s examples (Paul’s letter to the Corinthians 1.6.3, with the commentary printed in P.E. Pusey, *Sancti patris nostri Cyrilli archiepiscopi Alexandrini in D. Joannis evangelium*, vol. 3 [Oxford, 1872], 262) also occurs among the instances that Coakley (n. 27) was able to identify in Syriac manuscripts of the fifth and sixth centuries (cf. n. 38 below).

³⁴ Theodoretus, too, uses the ὑποστιγμή for multiple purposes. For another question mark, see *PG* 82.161.34–5 (on *Rom.* 9.30, on a very similar wh-question with subsequent answer).

³⁵ E.g. sch. Eur. *Hec.* 1015, sch. Eur. *Hipp.* 1076a (ed. Cavarzeran), sch. Thuc. 1.35.3d (ed. Kleinlogel–Alpers); see also sch. rec. Ar. *Plut.* 139.

Erbse tentatively attributes the scholium to Nicanor, but this attribution is unlikely to be correct. As Friedländer (n. 1), 71 n. 10 aptly remarks, the note contradicts Nicanor's doctrine both in letter and in spirit. In the present context, the salient point is that this critic suggests identifying a question by means of a punctuation mark that has, as seen, a different function for Nicanor, who does not mark questions in the first place.³⁶ Unfortunately, both the identity and the date of this critic remain unknown, except that he must predate the writing down of the manuscript (tenth century), which is not particularly helpful. On the positive side, the striking instruction to mark the same word with two signs, a stroke (διαστολή) and a point (ὑποστιγμή), might help eventually to solve a question that remains elusive: how did the semicolon (;) become the standard question mark in Greek? A possible answer is, perhaps, to be sought in the following direction. The main argument of this paper presupposes that a single punctuation mark, the ὑποστιγμή, could be used for rather different purposes. Readers may have felt that the ambiguity of the ὑποστιγμή is unsatisfactory. As a remedy, scribes who intended to mark a question combined the ὑποστιγμή with another mark in order to make it unique and thus unambiguous. Such a combination of a point and a stroke would be particularly close to a semicolon if the prefix ὑπο- in ὑποστιγμή referred not to its position but to its weaker force.³⁷ Needless to say, this hypothesis on the origin of the question mark in the form of a semicolon can be no more than a first attempt and needs further elaboration.

To sum up: the present article collects notes that testify to the use of the ὑποστιγμή as a question mark. These notes all predate the eighth or ninth century by several hundred years (except for the last, which cannot be dated with any certainty). In other words, they substantially predate the period which relevant scholarship almost universally credits with the 'invention' of the question mark both in the East and in the West.³⁸ This *communis opinio* needs to be modified in the light of the present findings. On the one hand, the argument may well remain valid that physical evidence in the form of actual manuscripts which document the use of a question mark of sorts does not substantially predate the eighth and ninth centuries.³⁹ On the other, the evidence collected in this paper clearly testifies to early attempts at identifying questions by

³⁶ Besides, Nicanor's understanding of the passage is made clear in sch. A II. 10.424–5a Nic., including the telling establishment of the natural word order (and the modification of the accent on ἦ/ῆ): πῶς γὰρ νῦν εὔδουσι, Τρώεσσι μεμιγμένοι ἢ ἀπάνευθε; ('How then are they sleeping, mixed with the Trojans or apart?').

³⁷ The argument that ὑποστιγμή originally meant 'weaker point' is Schmidt's (n. 13), 515, accepted by Blank (n. 2), 52 n. 24.

³⁸ For Latin script, see e.g. Bischoff (n. 27), 152, 225; M. Parkes, *Effect and Pause. An Introduction to the History of Punctuation in the West* (Cambridge, 1992), 35–6; I. Fees, 'Interpunktion', in M. Kluge (ed.), *Handschriften des Mittelalters* (Ostfildern, 2015²), 48–55, at 53; all three assume that the mark is meant to have a bearing on the intonation as well. For Greek, see e.g. C.B. Randolph, 'The sign of interrogation in Greek minuscule manuscripts', *CPh* 5 (1910), 309–19. According to these and many other witnesses, the eighth/ninth century is to be credited with the 'invention' of the question mark *tout court*. In this comprehensive form, this opinion can no longer be upheld owing to Coakley (n. 27), who demonstrates that in Syriac manuscripts of the fifth and sixth centuries yes-no-questions are marked with a particular sign (a colon placed above a word within the relevant sentence, later called *zawgā 'elāyā*, 'upper pair'). But Coakley, too, follows the traditional date for the introduction of question marks by Greek and Latin scribes (Coakley [n. 27], 211) and does not address the issue whether they might have been influenced by the Syriac practice. Such an influence seems unlikely in the light of the present article.

³⁹ This palaeographical argument lies beyond the scope of the present article. It is bedevilled by at least two factors: the scarcity of relevant material that predates the eighth/ninth century and the use of the same punctuation mark for multiple purposes.

means of a punctuation mark, the ὑποστιγμή. The most plausible conclusion is that contemporaries either largely ignored these early efforts or, as in Nicanor's case, expressly rejected them. The corollary is that these attempts remained more or less isolated and seem to have had no noticeable impact on general principles of punctuation. Apparently, the time was not yet ripe for a punctuation mark whose origins can now be traced back to the second century A.D.

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