"Is Wilamowitz Mad?"
An unpublished letter by Edgar Lobel

The main point of this short note is to shed some light on Lobel's surprisingly harsh and as-yet unexplained condemnation of Wilamowitz (and Euripides): «Euripides, like Wilamowitz, knew no Greek»[1]. Calder (1988, 160) suggested «the only explanation for Lobel's opinion is that he could not grasp Wilamowitz' contribution, whereas Housman could. Housman, therefore, as Professor Jocelyn and Wilamowitz hold, knew Greek better than Lobel». As the following letter indicates, that is not the only explanation.

First the letter, then the background[2].

3.8.1922

Dear Bell,

Is Humpers mad? Is Wilamowitz mad? Are you mad? Or am I mad? I ask because I have now read the thing[3] you sent me & find in the article you refer to by Humpers (Rev. de Phil. 45 p. 90) ravings about coῦcα cχοινία, and in the Sitzungsbericht remarks[4] by Wilamowitz more ravings about coῦcα cχοινία. Is it in any way possible that the Greeks, as WM thinks, made ropes out of the fibres of the lily (what are they?) and did not rather use the proper word for ropes οὖcα, which was taught me in the cradle? What was in Odyssey XXI 390 was, I imagine, instead of ὑπ' αίθούcηι ὅπλον, ὑπ' αίθούcηc οὖcον. I really will not believe that the Greeks had both οὖcον and coῦcον meaning "a rope". Why not also λοῦcον, μοῦcον and κοῦcον? All beautiful words, which I will commend to WM via Schubart.

Yours ever EL.

"Bell" is Sir Harold Idris Bell, a papyrologist who was working at that time in the department of manuscripts of the British Museum. The subject of the letter was a Berlin *ostracon* (*P. Berol.* 12605), published by Wilamowitz (1918, 739-742), which contains three damaged entries from a glossary of poetic words with citations[5]. At issue is the entry ϙοῦcα· cχοινία, which is accompanied by two illustrative citations: *Od*. XXI 390s. and Antim. fr. 57 W. = 68 M.[6].

---

1 A *bon-mot* recorded without mention of source in Turner (1982, 174 = 2007, 24). Lobel 'despised' Euripides, apparently because he did not meet his standards, as Sappho, Alcaeus, Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Callimachus all did; cf. Turner (1983, 276 and 279). Menander too received his bile. For the debate about "the greatest Hellenist" that forms the background to this paper, see Lehnus (2014) and Naiditch (1988). For an expert appraisal of Housman's Greek, see Diggle (2007). S. West (1967, 260-262) summarizes the history of scholarship on the ostracon in question and provides further analysis; Esposito (2014) reedits the ostracon with commentary, including a defense of coῦcον.

2 The letter is preserved in the British Library as *Brit.* Add. 59515, f. 10 on the recto**.** *Sub* has been written in before Librarian in the printed heading («*From* 'The `Sub'Librarian **[sic? (sic.)]**, Bodleian Library, Oxford'»).

3 «The thing» that Bell sent Lobel was Bell's important bibliography *Bibliography: Graeco-Roman Egypt A. Papyri (1920-1921)* published in «JEA»; Lobel gave more effusive thanks for it in another unpublished letter dated 1.8, a few days before this one.

4 A word of 5-6 letters has been heavily crossed out after «remarks», and a stray stroke cancelled by cross-strokes under the k in «thinks».

5 Data and an image can be found at <https://berlpap.smb.museum/03587/>.

6 It is notable that Lobel was responsible for the initial transcript of the first papyrus published in this batch, *P. Berol.* 11675, ascribed to Tyrtaios, in this collection and his name appears prominently on the first page. Wilamowitz (1918, 728) wrote: «Die erste Abschrift erhielt ich durch Hrn. Lobel, aus Oxford, der im Sommer 1914 auf dem Museum arbeitete». Presumably Wilamowitz received the transcript via Schubart, under whom Lobel studied documentary papyrology in Berlin until July 1914, just before the outbreak of World War I. Wilamowitz acknowledged his work

The *Odyssey* passage, in M.L. West's edition (in which the ostracon is quoted as **w39** in the apparatus), is:

> κεῖτο δ' ὑπ' αἰθούσηι ὄπλον νεὸς ἀμφιελίσσης
> βύβλινον, ὧι ῥ' ἐπέδησε θύρας, ἐς δ' ἤϊεν αὐτός

The author of the lexicon entry on the *ostracon* read coῦcον in the *Odyssey* passage in place of ὄπλον[7]. Unfortunately, coῦcον is only attested with the meaning 'lily' in the ancient scholarly tradition, as a borrowing from Phoenician or Phrygian to explain the name of the Persian city Susa (cf. *e.g*. Ath. XII 8,5, 513F).

Doubly unfortunately, it bears a strong resemblance to a rare word οὖcον, 'rope', attested in Alexander Aetolus' *Apollo*, fr. 3,21 Pow. = fr. 3,21 Magnelli, quoted by Parth. *Erot. Path*. 14,5 Light., in the fragment of Antimachus quoted on the ostracon and perhaps in one other, and in Lyc. *Alex.* 20, as well as in the scholarly tradition (cf. *e.g*. Hesych. o 1871 H.).

The *ostracon*'s reading coῦcον led Wilamowitz to suggest that lily fibres (*Faser*) were used as raw material for rope, hence the use of coῦcον to mean both 'lily' and 'rope'. Further, Wilamowitz overlooked the existence of the word οὖcον – he admits as much in his 1924 *Lesefrüchte* (1924, 273 = 1962, 367), in which, however, he still believed coῦcον existed alongside οὖcον. Wilamowitz (1918, 742) suggested that the fibres of the lily were the raw material for the ropes. He supports this as follows: «Die Pflanze muß dann Fasern für die Bereitung von Stricken geliefert haben; so kommt ja cχοινίον von der Pflanze cχοῖνοc». Wilamowitz thinks that Antimachus also reflects this reading[8].

Humpers (1921, 90–2) accepts Wilamowitz' reasoning about coῦcον and accepts its restoration in *Od*. XIV 346 (ὄπλωι ἐϋστεφέι). Then he calls this proposal a *lectio difficilior*, despite the fact that it is no *lectio* at all. He considers the process of mistaken glossing straightforward: «coῦcον est un mot rare; d'où l'erreur», he writes – but he has already indicated that he does not think that ὄπλον could mean 'rope', making the gloss less than ideally illuminating[9]. The rest of the article cannot have left Lobel with a good impression either.

Now it is clear enough that Lobel immediately saw the solution, parts of which Powell (1919, 90s.) and Leumann (1950, 45) each published: the word coῦcον, 'rope', is a ghost caused by mis-division of ὑπ' αἰθούcης οὖcον and does not exist[10]. Wilamowitz' nearly identical synonyms can be

---

while the war was still raging. While in Berlin, Lobel also studied the papyri of Sappho and Alcaeus (cf. Turner 1983, 276) and evidently other literary papyri as well. Much of his Berlin documentary work was published in *BGU* VI (1922).

[7] The *ostracon* also has two other variants: ὦι τ' for ὧι ῥ' and ἤλυθεν for ἤιεν.

[8] The Antimachus passage runs as follows in Matthews' edition: ἐν δ' ἰστὸν θῆκεν, λαίφεσι δὲ λινέοις / οὖc' ἐτίθει παντοῖα θεά, πόδας ἡδὲ κάλωας / ἐν δ' ὑπέρας στρεπτάς, ὄπλα τε πάντα νεώς. Matthews in his commentary accepts, as Wyss did before him, the arguments that coῦcον, 'rope', is a ghost word and consequently reads οὖc' at the start of l. 2. Fr. 121 W. = 156 M. appears to contain another instance of οὖcον.

[9] His discussion is not very clear. First, he writes. «Sur ce passage l'ingéniosité des critiques s'était exercée: on y lisait ὄπλον, et l'on donnait à ce mot le sens de σχοινίον», but then just below, he writes: «Ici […] le scholiaste donne la glose ὄπλῳ· σχοινίῳ. Il n'y a là rien d'étrange, comme on s'en apercevra en consultant le dictionnaire de Bailly s.v. ὄπλον». Why would scholars have to exercise their ingenuity if a glance in the dictionary solved the problem?

[10] Lobel does not mention Powell's article, though it had been published in «CR» several years before, nor does Bell (1922, 83) include it in his bibliography, perhaps because of his policy not to notice «quite short reviews, unless they make some positive contribution to the subject they deal with»; see *below* for his approval of Humpers' arguments. Powell (1919, 90s) expresses disbelief that lilies could be used for rope-making and suggests that the reading on the *ostracon* is a mistake for οὖcον, which was found in both the passages of Homer and Antimachus quoted. Leumann (1950, 45) suggested that coῦcον arose from mis-division of ὑπ' αἰθούcης οὖcον.

dispensed with, as can his shaky botany[11]. Humpers was less famous, therefore less of a target for Lobel[12].

In this letter, Lobel, it is true, exaggerates the frequency of the word οὖcον: its two appearances in literature and occasional entries in the lexicographical tradition cannot license his claim that the word «was taught me in the cradle». But he clearly thought that a scholar like Wilamowitz should be expected to know these finer points of philological detail and not give himself over to ecstatic statements like «da begrüßen wir freudig das verschollene Wort». This kind of flight of fancy – so far from Lobel's sobriety and care in points of detail – cannot have helped matters.[13]

MICHAEL MCOSKER

mmcosker@umich.edu
University College London, Department of Greek and Latin
Department of Greek and Latin, University College London, Gower Street, London. WC1E 6BT

I would like to thank Nick Gonis for suggesting that I publish the letter and discussing it with me as well as Ben Henry and Amin Benaissa for help and advice.

Bibliographic abbreviations

Bell 2022 = H.I. B, *Bibliography: Graeco-Roman Egypt.* A. *Papyri (1920-1921)*, «JEA» VIII (2022) 83-101.
Calder 1988 = W.M. C. III, *Letter to the Editor*, «LCM» XIII (1988) 160.
Diggle 2007 = J. D., *Housman's Greek*, in P.J. Finglass, C. Collard, and N.J. Richardson (edd.), *Hesperos: Studies in Ancient Greek Poetry Presented to M. L. West on his Seventieth Birthday* (Oxford 2007), 145-169.
Esposito 2014 = E. E., *O. Berol. inv. 12605 riconsiderato: testo, traduzione e commento*, «Eikasmós» XXV (2014), 159-175.
Humpers 1921 = A. H., *Glosses homériques sur ostrakon*, «RPh» XLV (1921): 90-92.
Indelli and Longo Auricchio 2018 = G. I. and F. L.A., *Corrispondenza fra Achille Vogliano, Edgar Lobel e Eric G. Turner conservata nel Fondo Vogliano di Napoli*, in P. Davoli and N. Pellé (edd.), *Πολυμάθεια*: Studi Classici offerti a Mario Capasso, Lecce-Rovato 2018, 837-853.
Leumann 1950 = M. L., *Homerische Wörter,* Basel 1950.
Lehnus 2014 = L. L., *Wilamowitz e 'il miglior grecista'*, «A&R» VIII (2014) 1-6 (reprinted in Id., *Maasiana et Callimachea*, Milano 2016, 375-379).
Naiditch 1988 = P.G. N., *Housman's knowledge of Greek*, «LCM» XIII (1988), 142-14 (reprinted in Id., *Problems in the Life and Writings of A.E. Housman*, Beverly Hills 1995, 64-67).
Powell 1919 = J.U. P., *On the new fragments of Greek poetry recently published at Berlin*, «CR» XXIII (1919) 90s.
Turner 1982 = E.G. T., *The Graeco-Roman Branch of the Egypt Exploration Society*, in T.G.H. James (ed.), *Excavating in Egypt: The Egypt Exploration Society, 1882-1982*, London 1982, 161-178, reprinted in A.K. Bowman-R.A. Coles-N. Gonis-D. Obbink-P.J. Parsons (edd.), *Oxyrhynchus: A City and its Texts*, London 2007, 17-27.
Turner 1983 = E.G. T., *Edgar Lobel †*, «Gnomon» LV (1983) 275-280.

[11] I cannot imagine that Wilamowitz' analogy, that as cχοινίον is a product made from cχοῖνος, so coῦcον is a product made from coῦcον, impressed Lobel much either. The second product would have to be coυcίον.
[12] Bell (1922, 84) had praised his article, saying that he «makes some brilliant conjectures for readings, which seem likely to be right».
[13] Lobel's comment in a letter to Achille Vogliano, dated 1 Nov. 1926 and published by Indelli and Longo Auricchio (2018, 840), is worth mentioning in this connection: "I am not surprised that Wilamowitz has made some objections about my views on Sappho. I hardly ever find myself agreeing with him on any subject, at any rate any subject connected with language. He will find a great deal more he does not like in Alcaeus, which is now at the press and I believe has begun to be printed."

West 1967 = S. W., *The Ptolemaic Papyri of Homer*, Köln-Opladen 1967.
Wilamowitz 1918 = U. v. W.-Moellendorff, *Dichterfragmente aus den Kgl. Museen*, «SBBerlinAkW» II (1918) 728-751.
Wilamowitz 1924 = U. v. W.-Moellendorff, *Lesefrüchte*, «Hermes» LIX (1924): 249-273 (= *Kleine Schriften*, Berlin 1962, IV 341-367).

Abstract
In this article, I publish a letter dated 3 August 1922 from Edgar Lobel to H.I. Bell in which Lobel mocks Wilamowitz for imagining the word coũcov "rope." The letter has bearing on Lobel's famous antipathy for Wilamowitz and the debate about the greatest Hellenist of the early 20th century.