

THE OLD MAN OF ONCHESTOS

The *Homeric Hymn to Hermes* shows many peculiarities, none more peculiar than what is said about the old man of Onchestos (87-93, 187-211). This old man is encountered first by Hermes as he drives his stolen cattle to the Alpheus, and is warned by Hermes not to disclose what he has seen; and secondly by Apollo, who enquires if he has seen anything relevant and is given some rather evasive information.

What is the old man doing? The narrator introduces him as δέμων ἀνθοῦσαν ἀλώην (87), which must refer to some kind of construction work, i.e. enclosure of the vineyard, no doubt by a stone wall, as at *Odyssey* 24.224 we read αἵμασιὰς λέξοντες ἀλώης ἔμμεναι ἔρκος (I take this reference from the dissertation on this Hymn of Dr A. Vergados, University of Virginia 2007). However, Hermes addresses him as ὅς τε φυτὰ σκάπτεις (90). Later the narrator, according to the manuscripts, tells us that Apollo γέροντα / κνώδαλον εὔρε νέμοντα παρὲς ὁδοῦ ἔρκος ἀλώης (187-8), and the old man informs Apollo that he thinks he saw a boy with cattle while πρόπαν ἡμαρ... ἔσκαπτον περὶ γουνὸν ἀλώης (206-7).

The text of 188 has been suspected, with good reason, by many. As it stands, it must mean the the old man was pasturing some animal (an ass, say). But κνώδαλον means a beast in general; it can apply to asses etc., but when a specific genus of animal is meant, the context always identifies this. Who would say, tout court, “pasturing a beast”? And what point would that have in the context here? Second problem: what is the syntax of ἔρκος? It is an act of utter desperation to make it somehow depend from παρὲς; though that word is capable of governing an accusative, it here clearly governs ὁδοῦ. For these reasons I do not see how Barnes’ emendation δέμοντα can fail to be right; it admirably restores the symmetry between the two divine encounters with the old man.

That leaves the problem of κνώδαλον, which must be corrupt, since it is absurd to try to refer it somehow to the old man. The corruption represented by this word is a consequence of the corruption to νέμοντα, for which an object indicating some animal had to be provided. One must admit that κνώδαλον is not the first word which one would expect to jump to a scribe's mind; I would infer that it replaced a word of fairly similar appearance. That word might have been:

a) an adjective referring to the old man; but the adjectives which have been proposed (the least bad is Hermann’s νόχαλον) are implausible palaeographically or pointless or both, and in some cases actually non-existent, and no adjective is wanted, since to the narrator he is just “the old man”;

b) an adjective applying to ἔρκος; but no suitable adjective has been conjectured or presents itself;

c) an instrument with which the old man is building his wall. That possibility brings us back to the question of what exactly the old man is doing, building a wall or digging round his vines (φυτά). The latter is an exercise necessary to loosen the soil (Verg. *G.* 2.254-7, Columella 4.27-8 [and 4.5 with reference to newly-planted vineyards], Pliny *NH* 17.188-9); one may infer that while doing this the old man digs up the stones which he uses to construct the wall, as (to take this as an example) most of the stone walls in the West of Ireland have been built up by stones dug up on the spot. That leads me to suggest that the word we want is κηδάλω, “with a spade” or similar implement; the fact that the two operations involved are two sides of the same coin justifies the portmanteau phrase “building a wall with a spade”. The word suggested is not found in any text, but is recorded in Hesychius, who glosses it with σκάλαθρον. The writer of the hymn also uses the words χαρμόφρων (127), φωρήν (385), ἐμβολάδην (411) known only from Hesychius, not to mention θεμούς (531), known only from Hesychius and Etymologica (this list derived from the work of Dr Vergados).

Charlottesville, Virginia (USA)

E. COURTNEY