

Leverage in a Dim Cave: Cunning μόγλος versus Heavy θυρεός in *Odyssey* 9

During *Odyssey*'s Cyclops episode noun μόγλος appears with unique frequency and in bold catachresis. Fire, moreover, is an important player as the *Odyssey*-poet tells a traditional story in a new way. This paper explains these features, postulating two industrious gods' participation, Athena's especially but also Hephaestus'.

Odysseus blinds Polyphemus *not* with his sword, as he could do the first night during the monster's sleep (9.299-302), but with an instrument ingeniously fashioned from a piece of green *olive* wood, its point brought by *fire* to a fearsome glow.

Olive? Immediately after the seething hero wishes Athena might help him (316f), by dim firelight he notices a log (318ff) from a truncated *olive tree* unique in the history of olive plants, one brown straight, tall, slender like the mast of a ship (321-324). He instantly understands what to do with it (318-330).

Within sixty-five lines of narrating how he defeated the blasphemous man-eater (9.332-396), Odysseus calls the finished object μόγλος seven times, six between 375 and 396 as he blinded his adversary. Such ostinato concentration of an infrequent word is unique. Surprisingly this has not attracted more notice than it receives. That is, almost none.

Likewise noteworthy yet little noted is catachresis here.

Μόγλος appears earlier in the poem. After Odysseus constructs a σχεδίη on Ogygia to sail it homeward, he 'walks' it from the beach down to the water μογλοῖσιν, "with levers" (5.261). For μόγλος denotes lever, in German *Hebel* (cf. verb *heben*, cognate with our word "heave"). One wields this simple *mechanical* tool either to raise a weighty object like

that heavy raft/scow or to pry something open. *The μόγλος in Book 9 does both, albeit indirectly.*

When its maker first names his invention μόγλος (9.332) we wonder a bit. Then we get used to this odd usage. Commentators take it in stride and mostly ignore it; for Anglophone translators it becomes “pole” or “stake.” Nevertheless, more apt were *architectural* element σταῦρος, “post, pale, stake” (Homeric: *Il.* 24.453, *Od.* 14.11). Though similarly trochaic, its two-consonant front would present difficulties. None at all, *nautical* and metrically interchangeable κοντός, “punting pole” (which Odysseus himself names later, at *Od.* 9.487). Plentiful Homeric δόρυ/δοῦρ- “wooden plank, spear shaft,” *martial*, might work, even if requiring prosodic agility. Likewise Attic χάραξ, “vine pole.” Χάραξ, however, first appears only in *Acharnians* (425 BCE). Euripides’ *Cyclops* echoes μόγλος’ Odyssean application at l. 633, for χάραξ evidently did not occur to that poet, viticultural item though it was and thus befitting a satyr play where wine plays a central role.

But why μόγλος? We identify Athena with (1) olive trees, sprigs, wood, oil; (2) wood-working, which our πολύμητις practices on that olive log; but also (3) *raising and moving heavy objects*. This last function, which I argue from internal “Homeric” evidence and from Attic iconography [5-6 slides planned], has too seldom been acknowledged.

Odysseus intends to exit Polyphemos’ cave alive. However, a huge door-stone (θυρεός) blocks egress, so heavy that he and ten thus far uneaten sailors could not budge it. That realization dissuades him from killing the monster with his sword and himself dying in the cold cave. A saving thought—I attribute this to Athena—checks him (299-305). This goddess can just waft problems away, for example, by returning Achilles’ errant spear to him in *Iliad* 22. That, however, is not how she normally collaborates with Odysseus. Even at *Il.* 2.182 he only

hears her *voice*. Preferably she lends him skills and makes materials available, adding hints, yet *he* must figure out how to employ them and to what hardly self-evident end.

The *μόγλος* becomes *indirectly* the lever that lifts the *θυρεός* away and opens the cave. For by blinding Polyphemos it punishes him, prevents him from avenging himself upon invisible enemies, but leaves his strength available to clear their exit. *Μῆτις* at its best!

Olive! That extraordinary log already suggested Athena. As remarked above, Odysseus prays to her right before he spots this preternatural piece of olive wood. It and the accompanying inspiration must be Athena's silent gift. (Compare his saving changes of mind at 5.427 and 437—or at 9.302-305.)

Fire? Athena's *πολύμητις* brother and fellow artisan Hephaestus is active throughout. After the captain's men cut the log to size, he whittles it to a point and, tough though olive wood is, *hardens it in fire* (328f), that fire which has burned brightly enough to illuminate log and Ithacan carpentry.

Later, after Odysseus brings the cooled but fire-hardened *μόγλος ἐλάινος* thrust among fiery embers (378f) almost to blazing, now in *two* ways *πυρήκης* (387) it lights the blinders' way to their target, deoculates him, even applies cautery to his emptied eye-socket, yet leaves his sinews intact.