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**“MUDDY EELS” (ARCHILOCHUS 189W)**

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**RESUMEN**

Un análisis de las ediciones y comentarios acerca de Arquíloco (fr. 189W) desde Liebel (1812) y la sugestión de un posible nuevo contexto (homoerótico), en el caso de que el poema no esté relacionado con la saga de Neobula y sus hermanas.

**ABSRTACT**

A survey of the editions and commentaries on Archilochus (fr. 189W) since Liebel (1812), and the suggestion of a possible new (homoerotic) context, in case the poem was not related to the Lycambid saga.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Lírica Griega, Arquíloco, Poesía erótica  
**KEY WORDS:** Greek Lyric, Archilochus, Erotic Poetry

In a passage dedicated to the diverse aspects of eels, Athenaeus (*Deipn.* 299a) quotes a verse of Archilochus (fr. 189W) with the purpose of providing a parallel for the Homeric form of the noun:

‘ Ομήρου δὲ εἰπόντος τείροντ’ ἐγγέλυες τε καὶ ἰχθύες  
(*Il.* 21.353), ἀκολούθως ἐποίησε καὶ ἄρχιλοχος

πολλὰς δὲ τυφλὰς ἐγγέλους ἐδέξω.

οἱ δὲ Ἄττικοί, ὡς Τρύφων φησὶ (fr. 21 Velsen), τὰς ἐνικὰς χρήσεις ἐπιστάμενοι διὰ τοῦ υ τὰς πληθυντικὰς οὐκέτι ἀκολούθως ἐπιφέρουσιν

*When Homer said, “the eels and fish were in distress” (Il. 21.353), following him, Archilochus also composed:*

*“you accepted many blind eels.”*

*The Attic, as says Triphon (fr. 21 Velsen), know the singular with upsilon, but no longer follow this practice in the plural.<sup>1</sup>*

Archilochus’ verse presents no textual difficulties. Liebel (1812) and all subsequent editors<sup>2</sup> reproduce it as it appears in Athenaeus, with the exception of Wilamowitz, followed by West (1971<sup>1</sup>, 1989<sup>2</sup>), who proposed ἐγγέλυς<sup>3</sup> to avoid the *synizesis*.<sup>4</sup>

The first interpretation of the verse was literal, that is, non-metaphorical and non-erotic. Liebel (1812: 209) placed the fragment among those of uncertain

<sup>1</sup>Athenaeus then lists examples of the Attic plural in Aristophanes (ἐγγέλεις *Eq.* 864; ἐγγέλεων *N.* 559; ἐγγέλειον *V.510*) etc. Cf. Aelius D. (p. 116, § 7 Erbse): ἐγγελυς· τὸ ἐνικόν, ἐγγέλεις δὲ τὸ πληθυντικόν καὶ ἐγγέλεων καὶ ἐγγέλειον.

<sup>2</sup>ἐγγέλυας Gaisford (1823), Bergk (1882<sup>4</sup>), Fick (1888), Hoffmann (1898), Bahntje (1900), Diehl (1926<sup>1</sup>, 1936<sup>2</sup>, 1952<sup>3</sup>), Edmonds (1931), Lasserre (1950), Lasserre-Bonnard (1958), Adrados (1956-76), Treu (1959), Tarditi (1968), Gerber (1999).

<sup>3</sup>Wilamowitz (1924: 271): “Die Auflösung hat zu verschwinden. Archilochos bildete den Akkusativ noch sprachgemäss ἐγγέλυς”.

<sup>4</sup>According to West (1974: 134), we have no means of knowing whether Athenaeus wrote ἐγγέλυς or ἐγγέλυας, both forms being linguistically possible.

metre and tried to explain it with reference to the practice of eel-fishing, quoting Aristotle (*HA* 592a) as a parallel.<sup>5</sup> Athenaeus (*Deipn.* 297b-c) had already mentioned Aristotle (fr. 305 Rose) for the belief that eels like clear water, and that fishermen disturb the depths in order to suffocate them in the mud. For Aristotle thought that eel gills, being very small, were blocked by mud (πνίγεσθαι γὰρ ἐν τῷ θολερῷ).<sup>6</sup> In fact, the mud does not suffocate eels, but as they usually bury themselves in it, one manner of catching them is to revolve it.<sup>7</sup>

Edmonds (1931: 155, n.1),<sup>8</sup> who did not read the “eels” metaphorically in this fragment either, supposed the “you” addressed in the poem was a “corpse” that “entertained” eels by feeding them. Another non-metaphorical interpretation of the “eels” was that of Lasserre (1950: 137ss) who, as Olivier, reconstructed the poem based on Horace (*Ep.* VIII, *O.* IV.13), placing this fragment in what would have been Archilochus’ *Epode* VIII, a poem of “violence and hatred” against an aging woman of “ill repute” (= Neoboule). Lasserre (1950: 141-42) compares Archilochus’ verse (189W) with Horace’s description of the shameless behaviour of a courtesan in banquets (*ludisque et bibis impudens*). Taking the verb δέχομαι in the sense of ἐσθίω, he translates: “et tu as mangé beaucoup de ces introuvables anguilles”, although he recognizes that the aorist ἐδέξω does not correspond well to the present *bibis*.<sup>9</sup> The epithet τυφλός is understood as “introuvables”, because eels are hard to see, living under the mud.

In 1958, Bonnard maintained Lasserre’s edition of Archilochus’ *Epode* VII,

<sup>5</sup> See Gerber’s (1973: 105-6) objections to this reading in view of the use of δέχομαι for fishing (ἀλίσκομαι, λαμβάνω and αἰρέω being the verbs employed in such context) and because Athenaeus and Aristotle speak of eels being suffocated, not blinded by the mud. Gerber (1973: 103) also comments on the similar readings offered by Graziadei (1883) and Merone (1960).

<sup>6</sup> Aristotle (*HA* 592a6), Pliny (31.36).

<sup>7</sup> Other forms of eel-fishing are described by Aelian (*VA* 14.8): seated on a projecting rock (ἐπὶ πέτρας προβλήτος κάθηται ὁ θηρατῆς), the fisherman throws lamb tripe as bait in the water, holding on to the other extremity. When the eel swallows and pulls on one end, the fisherman blows through the other end, inflating the eel’s head until it dies by suffocation (cf. Oppian, *Hal.* 4.450-67). The verbal similarity between this description and Archilochus 41.2W (πέτρης ἐπὶ προβλήτος ...) led Bergk (1882\*) to associate both fragments (Arch. 189 & 41W).

<sup>8</sup> Edmonds (1931: 155): “many blind eel hast thou entertained” (n.1: “thy corpse has fed at the bottom of the water”?).

<sup>9</sup> Another translation is given of the united fragments 205 + 189W (Lasserre, 1950: 142): “<Si tu avais quelque pudeur, > ...tu ne te parfumerais pas, veille comme tu es, de myrrhe,... et tu ne te serais pas régaler d’un mets aussi rare que l’introuvable anguille.”

but provided a novel translation<sup>10</sup> (that still did not solve the problem presented by the verb) and another explanation for the blindness of the eels: in his view, this might have been the name of a species of fish similar to eels (Lasserre-Bonnard, 1958: 68 n.1).<sup>11</sup> Adrados (1956-76: 50, 1955: 55) adopted Lasserre's (1950) reconstruction of Archilochus' *Epode* VIII, but preferred Cantarella's (1950: 508) interpretation, in which the eels would have been gifts offered to Neoboule by the youthful poet. Nonetheless, Adrados (1955: 55) admitted to ignore why the eels in this case should be called "blind".

The last non-erotic interpretation of Archilochus' verse was that of Kamerbeek (1961: 8-9) who considered the reference proverbial: the context of the poem would have been political and that the poet was criticizing someone who "fished in muddy waters".<sup>12</sup> As a parallel, Kamerbeek (1961: 9) quotes Aristophanes' *Nights* (865-67), when the Sausage-seller compares Paphlagonian to eel-fishers:

ὄταν μὲν ἡ λίμνη καταστῆ, λαμβάνουσιν οὐδέν·  
ἐὰν δ' ἄνω τε καὶ κάτω τὸν βόρβορον κυκῶσιν,  
αἰροῦσι· καὶ σὺ λαμβάνεις, ἦν τὴν πόλιν ταραττῆς.

*"When the lake is still, they fish nothing,  
But when they mix the depths topsy-turvy,  
They make their catch. You also fish when you set the city in havoc."*

The eel-simile in Aristophanes bears evident political connotations but throws no light on Archilochus' verse because, as we have already seen, the verb δέχομαι is never used for "fishing".<sup>13</sup> Kamerbeek (1961: 9) still admits another possibility: if the poem were about Neoboule, or any another woman, one could suppose the "eels" to be the lovers caught in her snare.

<sup>10</sup> "<Jadis> tu te gobergeais d'anguilles aveugles."

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Chantraine (1968, sv.) for the names of various fish and serpents that are derived from the same root as τύφομαι.

*Contra*: Cantarella (1950: 508), Kamerbeek (1961: 8-9), Gerber (1973: 105-9) and West (1974).

<sup>12</sup> For the proverb "fishing eels" (ἐγγέλεις θηρώμενος) = "to profit from turmoil", cf. Aristophanes (*Eq.* 860), *Suda*. Athenaeus (*Deipn.* 229d) quotes the passage as evidence that eels are caught in mud.

<sup>13</sup> Kamerbeek (1961: 9) quotes Sophocles (fr. 534.3 Radt) for this usage and suggests that in Archilochus the verb may be translated by "guetter" (if the context is that of hunting or fishing). Gerber (1973: 107) argues that the examples listed do not refer to "fishing". Cf. n. 5 *supra*.

Today, the most widely accepted interpretation of Archilochus fr. 189W is that first proposed by Schneidewin in 1838: “blind eels” are metaphors for the penises Neoboule (or some other woman) “accepted”.<sup>14</sup> He placed fragment 189W right after 188.1-2W as belonging to the same epode and followed, after intervening lost verses, by 191W.<sup>15</sup> Hauvette (1905: 273) remarked that Archilochus’ vocabulary is most inventive in “the expression of obscene and vulgar ideas”,<sup>16</sup> and adopted Schneidewin’s reading of fragment 189W: “such gross injury, hardly hidden under the witty image, would be adequately applied to any kind of courtesan”.

In support of this interpretation of the “eels” in Archilochus fr. 189W as a metaphor for the male sexual organ, Gerber (1973: 108-9, n.10) collected other occurrences of δέχομαι with an obscene sense as “to receive in one’s body” or “in one’s home”.<sup>17</sup> The fact that this is our sole example of the metaphor (eel = penis) offers no difficulty, since there are various cases in which *hapax* metaphors refer unequivocally to sexual organs. As for the eel’s “blindness”, Gerber (1973: 109) noted it could have been an insult against the woman to whom the poem is addressed: she is “so unattractive that any man who comes to her must be ‘blind’”! Thus Gerber appears to have solved the problems created by other interpretations with respect to the meaning of δέχομαι, offering also a plausible explanation for the eel’s “blindness”.

The editors<sup>18</sup> tend to believe that at least 188 and 189W belonged to the

<sup>14</sup> Schneidewin (1838: 193): τυφλὰς ἐγγέλους *intellige membra virilia, quae receperat Neoboule*. Cf. Cantarella (1950: 508), Gerber (1973), West (1974), Merkelbach (1975: 222), Degani (1976: 23), Miralles-Portulàs (1983: 45), Burnett (1983: 78, n.8), Bowie (1987: 17).

<sup>15</sup> Bergk (1882<sup>4</sup>) ordered the fragments he believed to belong to the “*fis anus*” theme in the following sequence: 188.1, 189, 41, 191W. Diehl (1926<sup>1</sup>, 1936<sup>2</sup>, 1952<sup>3</sup>) held fragments 191, 188.1, 188.2, 189, 190W to be tetrameters (asynarteta) from the same poem or, at least, in the same metre. In Lasserre’s (1950) reconstruction 189W was followed by fragments 188.1-2, 66 and 205W. The sequence in West (1989<sup>2</sup>) is almost identical to that of Schneidewin (1838), the only discrepancies being the addition of verses 188.3-4 of the *Second Cologne Epode* (P. Colon. 58.36-40, cf. Merkelbach-West, 1974: 97) and the insertion of 190W. To imagine that fragments 188-91W belonged to a single epode is tempting, but absolutely hypothetical, since another fragment, 192W on *Koiranos and the Dolphin*, was also composed in the same metre and could hardly be imagined in this group. (cf. Treu 1959, Tarditi 1968, West 1971<sup>1</sup>, 1989<sup>2</sup> and Gerber 1999).

<sup>16</sup> On the contrary, Page (1964: 140) believed the fragment’s vocabulary was entirely Homeric, although he admitted to ignore the verse’s context and meaning.

<sup>17</sup> Semonides (7.48-49), Philip of Thessalonica (AP 9.416.5-6), Pseudo-Lucian (*Lucius* 51) and Pseudo-Archilochus (331W).

<sup>18</sup> Bergk (1882<sup>4</sup>), Diehl (1926<sup>1</sup>, 1936<sup>2</sup>, 1952<sup>3</sup>), Lasserre (1950), Adrados (1956-76), Treu (1959), Tarditi (1968), West (1971<sup>1</sup>, 1989<sup>2</sup>) and Gerber (1999). Cf. note 15 *supra*.

same epode, but if we accept Gerber's suggestion of the "blind-love" theme<sup>19</sup> it is even more likely that fragments 189 and 191W went together. Besides similarities in meter and subject matter, the first meaning of τύφομαι is to be deluded, "to be crazy, demented" (LSJ); τῦφος ("fever") being the state of insanity and stupor of the ill (cf. Chantraine, 1968, *sv.*), a blindness, deafness or illusion that results from a spirit consumed in smoke.<sup>20</sup> Thus, the "blindness" of that which is τυφλός is comparable to the state of those possessed by Eros: the basic idea being that of an obscured spirit. Another alternative, long suggested by Schneidewin (1838), is that epithet "blind" might simply serve to distinguish these eels from the *real* ones, with their conspicuous eyes.<sup>21</sup>

Eels were not mythological creatures Greeks told stories about,<sup>22</sup> but although they criticized the Egyptians for considering them sacred,<sup>23</sup> there is notice of the existence of eel-cults in Arethusa, near Chalcis in Euboea: Porphyrius (*de abst.* 3.5) mentions the holy eels of Arethusa that, according to Athenaeus (*Deipn.* 331c), wore gold and silver ear-rings and were hand-fed sacrificial victims' viscera.<sup>24</sup>

As a culinary *delicatessen*, however, most would agree with Arcestratus (*Suppl. Hell.* 139; Athenaeus, *Deipn.* 298f-299a) that "the eel reigns over all other foods, and leads in pleasure".<sup>25</sup> It is however curious that, precisely after such a statement, Arcestratus remarks that although the eel is capable

<sup>19</sup> For the "blind love" theme, Gerber (1973: 109) quotes Plato (*Laws* 731e) and Theocritus (10.19-20) although, as he himself admits, these are cases of *blind love*, not of *blind desire*, as in Archilochus. Cf. also Ongle (1920) and Buchheit (1964).

<sup>20</sup> According to Chantraine (1968, *sv.* τύφομαι), all proposed etymologies are associated to \*dhuð, attested in θύω (= "to produce sacrificial smoke"), cf. fū-mus, θυμός.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. West (1974: 134), who follows Olivier and Lasserre (1950, L-B 1958) in taking Horace as his guide, but differs from them in his conclusions, accepting both Schneidewin's and Gerber's (1973) interpretations of the epithet "blind" as plausible.

<sup>22</sup> Eels appear only circumstantially in the fable narrated by Demades (Aesop 63 Perry), with no indication of any possible character that could have been attributed to them.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Herodotus (2.72), Antiphanes and Anaxandrides, comic poets who according to Athenaeus (*Deipn.* 299e ss), ridiculed the Egyptian for such belief.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Plutarch (*de soll. anim.* 976\*). According to Aelian (*NA* 8.4), the sacred eel of the Arethusa spring was in Ortygia, Syracuse. Diodorus Siculus (5.3.5) and a pindaric scholium (*N.* 1) also refer to the existence of holy fish in Ortygia.

<sup>25</sup> Athenaeus (*Deipn.* 298f-299a): ἔλωσ δ' οἶμαι βασιλεύει/ πάντων τῶν περὶ δαῖτα καὶ ἡδονὴ ἡγεμονεύει/ ἔγγχελυσ. References to eels in this sense, as one of the favourite dishes in Antiquity, abound Cf. *RE* (*sv.*), Keller (1963 II. p.357ss),

of promoting such delight among the fish it is the only one to lack a *scrotum*.<sup>26</sup> The comment evokes the image of the eel as a long penis, without a scrotum, if one bears Archilochus' fragment 198W in mind; the analogy of eels (and snakes)<sup>27</sup> with penises being obviously based on the similarity of their forms.<sup>28</sup> On the other hand, for being considered a delicacy poets also compared eels to brides and "tasty" girls.<sup>29</sup> Therefore, like other sexual metaphors to be found in Greek poetry, such as κύων and οὔκων (cf. Henderson 1975), perhaps one should list "eels" among those that are ambivalent with regards to their gender.

Significant and new implications may be drawn from the examples of the use of δέχομαι quoted by Degani (1976: 23-24). In the epigram of Leonidas of Tarentum (*A Pl.* 261), Priapus adverts the eventual robber not to lament when he shall receive (v.4 δεξάμενος) in his body the "divine φλέψ" (= *membrum virilis*); in Strato (*AP* 11.22), one asks maliciously how could Dracon (an "extremely handsome youth" v.1), who is himself a "serpent" (= δράκων), receive (v.2 δέχεται) another. Both poems, although late, refer to masculine homosexual relations.

If in Archilochus' verse 189W eels represent (as Schneidewin first imagined) male sexual organs, why should we exclude the possibility that who *receives* them might not have been Neoboule nor any other girl, but a boy or man? All erotic interpretations of this verse implied heterosexual intercourse, as the majority of critics also tend to relate Archilochus' erotic iambi to the story of the Licambides. Dover insists on the inexistence of references to male homosexuality in Archilochus. However, it is highly probable that there would have been allusion to male homosexuality in fragments 25, 283 e 294W.

<sup>26</sup> Athenaeus (*Deipn.* 298f-299a): ἔγγελος ἢ φύσει ἐστὶν ἀπύρινος μόνος ἰχθύς. *Contra*: the variant ἀπυρήνος (Gesner and Badham), in Thompson's view (1947: 59), qualified the eel as a fish without a "nucleus" or "bone".

<sup>27</sup> Chantraine (1968, *sn* ἔγγελος) supposes that ἔγγελος results from a term that corresponds *anguilla* and ἔχλις ("serpent"). Cf. also Strato (*AP* 11.22), quoted by Degani (1976: 24), Aristophanes (*Eccl.* 909) and *anguis* in *Carm. Priap.* 83.33).

<sup>28</sup> Cf. also Burnett (1985: 78, n.8): "In 302W both money and lust seem to be compared to a snake: not hard to catch but hard to hold on to. The figure is conceptually related to that of the eel in 189."

<sup>29</sup> Eubulus (fr. 34, 36, 64 K-A), cf. Athenaeus (*Deipn.* 169c). Cf. Alexis (fr.149 K-A) for the desire of a courtesan (γενοίμην ἔγγελος, ἴνα Καλλιμέδων ὁ Κάραβος πρίαιτό με), and the eel as the "banquet's Helen" ( ἡ τῶν δείπτων Ἑλήνη) in Athenaeus (*Deipn.* 340c, 298d).

Therefore, there is no reason why the addressee censured by the poet in this poem may not have been male. If this were indeed fact, the natural habitat of the eel that thrives and procreates in “mud” would also have been suggestive.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Cf. Simonides (*PLG* 11.453: ὡσπερ ἔγγελος κατὰ γλοιοῦ) and Ruck (1975: 38), who relates βόρβορος to an “anal rape”. Gerber (1979: 22) noted that βόρβορος and γλοιός might have been synonymous in certain contexts. Athenaeus (*Deipn.*299d) believed the term “eel” (ἔγγελος) was derived from “mud” (ἰλύς) and, according to Aristotle (*GA* 762b21), they came from the mud or the earth’s intestines (ἐκ τῶν γῆς ἐντέρων). For the procreation of eels in the mud, see also Oppian (*Hal.*1.513-21), Athenaeus (*Deipn.* 135d, 298c) and Pliny (*HN* 9.160).



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