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RESEARCH ARTICLE

From rags to riches? An illusory semantic change in ancient Greek

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Abstract

The rare word λάκος occurs in an oracular enquiry from Dodona. Although it is likely to mean 'a (bundle) of rags', some scholars believe that the consultation concerns the theft of a garment in good condition. However, the evidence for a semantic change 'tatters' > 'garment' or vice versa in ancient Greek is weak. In this paper, we assess the evidence of some nouns (Aeolic βράκος and poetic λαῖφος, λαίφη, σπεῖρον) that allegedly combine the meanings '(bundle of) tatters, rags' and 'piece of clothing, garment'. Drawing from the evidence provided by papyri and inscriptions, we propose two alternative hypotheses for λάκος in the Dodonaean enquiry: it may refer either to a ragged garment kept as an offering in a temple or to some tattered cloth used for wrapping various valuable items.

Keywords: clothing; rags; lexicology; linguistics; epigraphy

> 'The question is,' said Alice, 'whether you can make words mean so many different things'.
>
> Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There*

I. Introduction

The psychological and mental mechanisms that trigger and govern natural semantic change (metonymy, metaphor, etc.) are fairly straightforward. Usually, words change their meaning gradually through adjacent cognitive domains: for instance, γυνή 'woman' > 'wife'. But, occasionally, languages also attest to unexpected semantic developments in which words take on new meanings that have little or nothing to do with the original. Cross-linguistically, 'literary' learned and/or obsolete terms, which are rarely used (if at all) in everyday speech, frequently succumb to the latter kind of change due to the fact that their meaning often remains unclear (if not utterly opaque) to speakers. These words are often more connotative than denotative, serving as high-style markers.[1]

This phenomenon is far from unknown in ancient Greek. In many cases, over-interpretation (as well as its corollary, irrational polysemy) can be traced back to the ancient poets. More often than not, however, the responsibility for such misunderstandings rests with the ancient lexicographers and scholiasts (indeed, in many cases, with contemporary scholars). In dealing with the semantics of rare words found in archaic poets (which had become obsolete in common parlance), ancient grammarians and

[1] Silk (1983).

lexicographers resorted to intuitive guesswork, or simply allowed their imagination to run wild. Modern researchers have demonstrated that the contentions of ancient lexicographers should only be accepted if they are corroborated by further evidence (whether linguistic, archaeological or historical).[2]

In this paper, we are concerned with the ancient Greek nouns λάκος, ῥάκος (with its Aeolic variant βράκος), σπεῖρον and λαῖφος. These words allegedly attest to an unexpected semantic overlap between 'rags' and 'garments'. However, closer scrutiny of the passages in which they occur tells an entirely different story.

II. Λάκος in an oracular enquiry from Dodona

The quasi-*hapax* λάκος occurs in a consultation on a lead lamella (now seemingly lost) found at Dodona in 1955 and dated to the late fourth or early third century BC.[3] We reproduce below Éric Lhôte's text, followed by his French translation, as well as several English translations by other scholars:

ἔκλεψε Δορκίλος τὸ λάκος;

Est-ce que c'est Dorkilos qui a volé mon vêtement? (tr. Lhôte 2006)
Did Dorkilos steal the cloth? (tr. Parke 1967; Eidinow 2007)
Did Dorkilos steal the garment? (tr. Chaniotis 2017)

The Greek text is straightforward. The translations, however, are problematic in two respects.[4] First, the enquirer is not necessarily also the possessor of the stolen λάκος, as implied by Lhôte's possessive *mon*. Second, and more relevant to the present study, the meaning 'garment', which Lhôte and Angelos Chaniotis attribute to this word, is questionable.

Following in the footsteps of Olivier Masson, Lhôte rightly connected our lamella's λάκος to Hesychius' gloss λάκη· ῥάκη. Κρῆτες (λ 192 Latte and Cunningham; MS ρακκη).[5] The word must be a cognate of the rare λακίζω 'to tear', λακίς (mostly pl. λακίδες) 'shred, tear' and λάκισμα 'rags'.[6] Both the Hesychian gloss and the other words of the family unequivocally point to a meaning 'rags, tatters' but, probably owing to the fact that 'a bundle of tatters' is (in principle) an unlikely target for a thief, Dimitrios Evangelidis, Masson and Lhôte assume that Dorkilos was suspected of stealing a garment in good condition.[7] However, neither the semantic promotion 'tatters' > 'garment' nor a hypothetical demotion 'garment' > 'tatter' is an obvious semantic change. In the case of ancient Greek at least, the evidence of the would-be parallels is much less compelling than it may seem at first glance, as will be demonstrated in the following sections.

[2] Leumann (1950); Le Feuvre (2015), (2016); Méndez Dosuna (2012), (2015), (forthcoming); Alonso Déniz (2019).

[3] Evangelidis (1956) 56; (1960) 171 δ (cf. *SEG* 19.429); Parke (1967) 273 no. 29; Eidinow (2007) 117 no. 6; Lhôte (2006) no. 120; Chaniotis (2017) 60. Ioulia Katsadima kindly confirmed to us (*per litteras electronicas*) that the lamella cannot be located in the museum.

[4] See Evangelidis (1960) (but not 1956); Parke (1967); Eidinow (2007). All of them mistakenly accentuate λᾶκος.

[5] *Cf.* Masson (1964); Lhôte (2006) 248. Note that the contracted form, λάκη, seems to be at odds with the reflexes of **-e(h)a* attested in Cretan Doric. In Central Cretan, the expected outcome would be *λάκια; East Cretan preserves the hiatus. Instances of contraction in the dialect are late and must be attributed to the influence of Koine.

[6] *Cf.* Beekes (2010) *s.v.* λακίς.

[7] *Cf.* 'λᾶκος [*sic*] = ῥάκος, ἔνδυμα' (Evangelidis (1956), (1960)); 'vieux vêtements' (Masson 1964). Parke's and Eidinow's 'the cloth' is more ambiguous.

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III. From 'rags' to 'garments'?

As befits their circumstances, beggars, castaways and the wretched wear tatters in epics and drama. Disguised as a beggar, Odysseus is clad in rags when he finally reaches Ithaca (*Od.* 13.434–35; 14.342, 349, 512; 17.198; 18.67, 74; 19.507). Other ill-fated heroes in tatters are Xerxes (Aesch. *Pers.* 125, 834–35), the Danaids (Aesch. *Supp.* 131, 904), Electra (Eur. *El.* 185), Menelaos (Eur. *Hel.* 415–17, 1079) and Telephos (Eur. *fr.* 697 Kannicht). Ragged kings on stage were a Euripidean staple, which Aristophanes mocked time and again in his comedies (*Ach.* 415–38; *Thesm.* 935; *Ran.* 842, 1063–64).[8]

In the literary passages cited above, ῥάκος and its synonyms, λακίδες and τρῦχος (*cf.* τρύχω 'wear out'), as well as the adjective ῥωγαλέος (*cf.* ῥωγάς 'ragged', from ῥήγνυμι 'break'), did not denote items of clothing in a good condition. To all appearances, the ancient Greeks viewed rags and usable clothing in entirely antithetical terms. For instance, in Aristophanes' *Wealth*, Chremylos enumerates the many hardships endured by the poor (535–47), one of which is 'to have rags instead of a cloak' (ἀνθ' ἱματίου μὲν ἔχειν ῥάκος, 540). In a fragment of Antiphanes' *Soldier or Tychon* (*fr.* 202 *PCG* transmitted by Ath. 103F), a character complains about the reversals of fortune, mentioning a *chorēgos* who, having decked out the entire chorus in golden robes, was himself reduced to rags. To assume that the consultant of Lhôte's lamella no. 120 was a beggar enquiring about the fate of his tattered clothes would be preposterous.[9]

i. Ῥάκος and Lesbian βράκος

Purportedly, a change 'rag' > 'garment' is on record for Lesbian βράκος, which, according to ancient lexica and modern dictionaries, denotes a '(costly) garment' in Sappho (*fr.* 57.3 Voigt, transmitted by Ath. 21B) and in Theocritus (*Id.* 28.11; *cf.* also βράκος· κάλαμος. ἱμάτιον πολυτελές (Hsch. β 1047 Latte and Cunningham)).[10] Given their seemingly contradictory meanings, modern scholars are reluctant to accept an etymological connection between βράκος 'garment' and ῥάκος 'rag(s)'.[11] However, as we will soon see, such extreme circumspection is unwarranted, for both words can be safely traced back to the common etymon *ϜράκοϚ.[12]

With regard to the hypothetical semantic change from 'rags' to 'garment', a closer look at the passages under consideration makes clear that the meaning '(costly) garment' is illusive:[13]

> τίς δ' ἀγροΐωτις θέλγει νόον … | ἀγροΐωτιν ἐπεμμένα σπόλαν … | οὐκ ἐπισταμένα τὰ βράκε' ἔλκην ἐπὶ τῶν σφύρων; (Sappho *fr.* 57 Voigt)

[8] Milanezi (2005); Jendza (2020) 83–102.

[9] The alleged use of ῥάκος for 'old cloak' in papyri is another phantom; see Mascellari (2015).

[10] See LSJ ('long robe') and Chantraine (2009) *s.v.* βράκος ('manteau luxurieux'). According to Gianotti (1981) and Andrisano (1997–2000) 20–23, the Hesychian gloss unequivocally depends on Theoc. *Id.* 28.11, but Neri and Cinti (2017) 326 (see also Neri (2021) 662), Palmieri (2019) 79 n.132 and Batisti (2019) 53 do not exclude a connection with Sappho's fragment. The transmitted κάλαμος must be a corruption, for which different corrections have been conjectured: καὶ λάκος (Schmidt (1858) *ad loc.*); μάλακον (Gianotti (1981); *cf.* μαλάκοις … πόκοις 'soft fleeces' in *Id.* 28.12).

[11] *Cf.* Chantraine (2009) and Beekes (2010) *s.vv.* βράκος and ῥάκος. See also Aloni (1997) 104–05. Andrisano (1997–2000) 11–13 claims that ῥάκος/βράκος originally meant 'cloth, piece of fabric' (Italian *telo*) and eventually developed a depreciative signification. Although we agree for the most part with Andrisano's sensible conclusions, we are not persuaded by her arguments on this particular issue.

[12] For other instances of the spelling βρ (representing [vr]?) for Ϝρ, see Hamm (1957) 19.

[13] See Gianotti (1981) and Cannatà (1999) for a similar conclusion.

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> What country girl beguiles your mind … dressed in country garb … not knowing how to pull her *brakea* above her ankles?[14]

> σὺν τᾷ πόλλα μὲν ἔργ' ἐκτελέσῃς ἀνδρεῖοις πέπλοις, | πόλλα δ' οἷα γύναικες φορέοισ' ὐδάτινα βράκη. (Theoc. *Id.* 28.10–11)

> [A distaff] with which you will create many pieces of work for men's robes, and many *brakē* as if made of water, such as women wear.

In *fr.* 57, Sappho addresses a certain Andromeda, a rival for a girl's affection, whom she taunts for her 'tattered clothes' (βράκεα), which betray her rusticity.[15] Although Theocritus' ὐδάτινα βράκη 'rags made of water (i.e. fluid)'[16] may describe, half-jokingly, the women's clothes that Theugenis will be able to produce with the help of the distaff,[17] we are inclined to think that, by Theocritus' time, Lesbian βράκος was only a learned γλῶσσα with a distinctly Aeolic flavour, which had already been misinterpreted as 'garments' in Sappho's poem.[18] This secondary over-interpretation of βράκος does not thereby disprove our contention that a semantic change 'rags' > 'garments' is unnatural.

The antiphrastic use of βράκος in Sappho and possibly in Theocritus is comparable to similar expressions mostly ironically said of (fancy, expensive) garments in the colloquial registers of modern languages: for example, English *rags*, French *mettre ses loques* (literally 'to put one's tatters on' > 'to get dressed'), Italian *stracci* (diminutive *straccetti*) 'rags', Spanish *trapos* (diminutive *trapitos*) 'cloths'. This is also attested in a Hellenistic letter on papyrus:

> γυμνός εἰμι καὶ | ὕπαιθροι γεινόμεθα. | καλῶς οὖν ποιήσεις | συντάξας δοῦναί μοι | ⊢ δ′, ἵνα ⳨ρίωμαι κ[α]ὶ ῥάκο[ς]. (*P.Mich.* 1 90, *ca.* 250 BC)

[14] Unless otherwise indicated, translations of the Greek texts quoted are our own, although they draw liberally on previous translations. For ease of presentation, the word whose meaning is under discussion is transliterated and left untranslated.

[15] Andrisano (1997–2000) 10–11, with previous references. Although Montanari (2015) still interpreted 'robe (for women)' *s.v.* βράκος, the online version has now 'rag, tatter, scrap' (https://dictionaries.brillonline.com/montanari).

[16] Gow (1952) 501 and Palmieri (2019) 78 note that the contraction of acc. pl. -εα in neuter nouns is alien to Sappho's Aeolic. In our view, Theocritus may have artificially replaced Attic -η for dialectal -εα on the analogy of other instances in which -η was transmitted in the text of the early Aeolic poets instead of epic -εα: *cf.* ἦρος 'of the spring' (Sappho *fr.* 121 and Alc. *fr.* 98.1 Voigt), ἀ<π>οίχηι 'you are gone away' (Sappho *fr.* 114.1 Voigt) *vs* Hom. ἔαρος, ἀποίχεαι. A hypothetical correction βράκεα must be ruled out, since synizesis of -εα- never occurs either in Sappho (Lobel (1925), lxii–lxiii) or in Theocritus' Aeolic poems. Other non-Aeolic epic features in *Id.* 28 are athem. inf. ἀπαλάλκεμεν (line 20) for expected ἀπαλαλκέμεναι, and ἴερον 'sacred' (line 7) *vs* Aeol. ἶρον 'shrine' (line 5). Theocritus certainly read ἰέρας in Sappho's song about the wedding of Hector and Andromache (*fr.* 44.6 Voigt), a composition resonating with unmistakable Homeric echoes.

[17] For Acosta-Hughes (2010) 108–09, *Idyll* 28 constitutes 'a Theocritean evolution of Sappho' with a distinct overtone of Sappho's verses and vocabulary. Hopkinson (2020) 210 considers the composition 'an experimentally archaic piece in imitation of Sappho'. For Theocritus' Aeolic linguistic features, see Batisti (2019) and Tribulato (2021) 100–02.

[18] See Cannatà (1999) 19–25. According to Mascellari (2015) 155–56, followed by Palmieri (2019) 78–79, Theocritus intentionally created an unexpected new connotation for Sappho's βράκος, resorting to a practice characteristic of Hellenistic poets. Andrisano (1997–2000) 16–19 believes that Theocritus used the Sapphic βράκος with the purported original meaning '(piece of) cloth' (Palmieri has 'stoffe fluide come l'acqua'), but this seems unlikely (see n.11). For obvious reasons, we also disagree with Neri and Cinti (2017) 326 (see also Neri (2021) 662), followed by Batisti (2019) 53, who suggest that Sappho may have been playing on a purported dialectal ambiguity ('ambivalenza dialettale') between the different meanings of Homeric ῥάκεα 'rags' ('stracci') and Lesbian βράκεα 'costly garment' ('veste costosa') as documented by Theocritus and Hesychius. This notwithstanding, Neri and Cinti (2017) 326 and Neri (2021) 433 opt in their tentative translations for the meaning 'rags': 'i propri stracci'. *Cf.* also Hopkinson's (2020) 212 'fine clothing'.

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I am naked and we are in the open air. Please, give the order that I receive four drachmas, so that I can buy even a rag.[19]

ii. Λαῖφος and λαίφη

In two passages of the *Odyssey*, the neuter λαῖφος (a noun of unknown origin) refers to the shabby clothes of the pseudo-beggar Odysseus:

ἀμφὶ δὲ λαῖφος | ἕσσω ὅ κε στυγέῃσιν ἰδὼν ἄνθρωπος ἔχοντα. (*Od.* 13.399–400)

I [Athena] will put a *laiphos* around you, and whoever sees you wearing it shall hate you.

δεδάκρυνται δέ μοι ὄσσε | μνησαμένῳ Ὀδυσῆος, ἐπεὶ καὶ κεῖνον ὀΐω | τοιάδε λαίφε' ἔχοντα κατ' ἀνθρώπους ἀλάλησθαι. (*Od.* 20.205–06)

And my eyes are filled with tears when I [Philoitios] remember Odysseus, because I imagine him too wandering among men wearing such *laiphea*.

According to ancient and modern scholars, λαῖφος denotes a 'tattered garment' in both passages.[20] Modern translations usually reflect this viewpoint by rendering the word as 'rags'.[21]

However, even if Odysseus was clothed in rags, it does not follow that λαῖφος inherently denoted a ragged garment, as evidenced by later uses of the word.[22] In archaic poetry (Alc.; *Hymn. Hom. Ap.*) and in Attic tragedy, λαῖφος means 'sail'. In antiquity, as in more recent times, a sail can hardly have been made of tatters.[23] Likewise, in the *Homeric Hymn to Pan*, the god wears a λαῖφος δαφοινὸν λυγκός over his back (23–24). Although the meaning of the adjective δαφοινός is uncertain in this passage, a lynx coat characterizes Pan as a god of the wild, not as a beggar.[24] In the *Hymn to Hermes*, the newborn god plays (ἀθύρων) in his cradle with a λαῖφος (152), which seems to be bedding of some kind.[25]

The meaning 'rags' probably resulted from over-interpretation of the two passages of the *Odyssey* quoted above. In *Od.* 13.399–400, the condition of Odysseus' λαῖφος is suggested by the context: Athena will render the hero unrecognizable by making him ugly and filthy (13.392–403). In fact, the transformation of Odysseus (13.434–37) includes a more detailed description of the hero's shabby clothes.[26] By *Od.* 20.205–06, Odysseus' λαίφεα have been repeatedly mentioned in different passages of the poem, in which they are described as ῥάκεα 'tatters' (*Od.* 14.512, 18.67), λυγρὰ εἵματα 'pitiful clothing' (*Od.* 16.457; 17.203, 338, 573) and κακὰ εἵματα 'wretched clothing' (*Od.* 14.506, 17.24, 19.72).

[19] The editor, Campbell C. Edgar, translates ῥάκος as 'old cloak', following Preisigke (1925–1931) *s.v.* ῥάκος.

[20] *Cf.* λαίφεα. ῥάκη, ἢ λεπτὰ ἱμάτια '*laiphea*: rags, or fine garment' (schol. *Od.* 20.204–06 Dindorf); *cf.* also (Laconian, Cretan, Boeotian?) λαίφια· ῥάκη '*laiphia*: rags' (Hsch. λ 171 Latte and Cunningham; MS ρακκη). See LSJ ('shabby, tattered garment'); Montanari (2015) ('ragged or threadbare garment'); Bailly (1963) ('mauvais vêtement, haillon'); Chantraine (2009) ('lambeau d'étoffe'); Snell et al. (1955–2010) ('Lumpen') *s.v.* λαῖφος. See also Marinatos (1967) 15: 'Das Tuch, um das Odysseus Nausikaa bittet, … nennt er ῥάκος … und seiner Bedeutung nach mit λαῖφος … zu verbinden ist'.

[21] English *ragged garment*, *rags* (Murray (1995)); French *haillons* (Bérard (1924)); Italian *straccio*, *stracci* (Privitera *apud* Heubeck and West (1981)); Spanish *harapos* (Pabón (1982)); modern Greek κουρέλια (Maronitis (2006)).

[22] Andrisano (1997–2000) 11 n.16.

[23] In *Od.* 5.258, Calypso brings to Odysseus φάρεα (here likely denoting mantles), which the hero sews together to make a sail cloth for his raft. See Morrison and Williams (1968) 55; Mark (2005) 131.

[24] Thomas (2011) 157–58; Le Feuvre (2016) 144 n.5, 152. The coat of the Balkan lynx (*Lynx lynx balcanicus*) can be reddish with brown spots.

[25] Vergados (2013) 357–58.

[26] On this passage, see Bowie (2013) 162. Odysseus uses similar words when he tells Eumaeus that his former raiment was replaced by the humble rags he is now wearing (*Od.* 14.341–43).

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A feminine form, λαίφη, probably coined by the poet himself on the neuter λαῖφος, occurs in a passage of Callimachus' *Hecale*, in which Theseus takes refuge from a storm in the humble hut of the eponymous character, an impoverished old widow, and shakes off his sopping wet clothing (διερὴν δ᾽ ἀπεσείσατο λαίφην, *fr.* 239 Pf.).[27] The *Suda* glosses λαίφη as χλανίς 'mantle' (λ 207 Adler) and, according to Pfeiffer (see the apparatus *ad loc.*), Callimachus' verse echoes certain Homeric passages.[28] There is no reason to believe that Theseus was portrayed as a beggar in his encounter with his hostess. Interestingly, this episode of the myth might have been depicted in a fifth-century BC Attic red-figure hydria, on which a bowed old lady (Hecale?) proffers a flat object (a phiale?) to a young man (Theseus?).[29] This is wrapped up in a neatly arranged cloak, for which the context betrays no signs of fraying.

We may conclude that the λαῖφος must originally have denoted a piece of fabric whose size varied depending upon the purpose for which it was intended. The word could easily be applied to different objects, such as a garment, a blanket or a sail. Indeed, cloaks in ancient Greece served a dual purpose, being used as outer garments by day and coverings by night. Similarly, although depending upon the context, φᾶρος (Myc. *pa-we-a* /p^h*arweha*/) can equally refer to a cloak (for instance, *Od.* 5.230), a shroud (*Il.* 24.580 and 588), swaddling clothes (*Hymn. Hom. Ap.* 121) and a bedspread (Soph. *Trach.* 916). Therefore, the λαῖφος and λαίφη worn by Odysseus and Theseus were simply 'woollen textiles' likely used as cloaks.

iii. Σπεῖρον

As with λαῖφος, the evidence regarding σπεῖρον in the texts seems to be incompatible with the basic meaning 'tattered piece of clothing'.[30] In her famous address to the suitors, Penelope implores them to wait until she has finished the burial shroud she is weaving for Odysseus' elderly father before she makes a final decision:

> μή τίς μοι κατὰ δῆμον Ἀχαιϊάδων νεμεσήσῃ, | αἴ κεν ἄτερ σπείρου κεῖται. (*Od.* 2.101–02 = 19.146–47, 24.106–07)
>
> For fear that any of the Achaean women across the land should blame me, were [Laertes] to lie without a *speiron*.

Here, σπεῖρον picks up the aforementioned shroud (φᾶρος … ταφήϊον, *Od.* 2.97–99). Being the father of the king of Ithaca, and having been a king himself, Laertes was certainly not expected to be buried in a tattered shroud. Furthermore, σπεῖρον occurs in the description of Odysseus' shipwreck after his departure from Ogygia:

> τηλοῦ δὲ σπεῖρον καὶ ἐπίκριον ἔμπεσε πόντῳ. (*Od.* 5.318)
> Far into the sea *speiron* and sailyard fell.

Since the context clarifies that σπεῖρον is a component of the hero's raft, ancient and modern scholars agree that it means 'sail'.[31]

[27] Hollis (2009) 167–68.

[28] Cf. *Od.* 14.500; *Il.* 2.183.

[29] Private collection in Hamburg (http://ark.dasch.swiss/ark:/72163/080e-753e365a8b572-2). See Simon (1988); Servadei (2005) 70–71 (fig. 24).

[30] According to the accepted etymology, σπεῖρον is related to an otherwise unattested verbal root **sper-* 'turn', 'wind'.

[31] *Cf.* νῦν τὸ ἄρμενον 'Now the sail' (schol. *Od.* 5.318b1 Pontani: *cf.* Apollonius Sophista 144.4–5 Bekker). According to Morrison and Williams (1968) 56, 'the *speiron* must … be one, possibly any one, of the ropes associated with the sailyard and sail'. See Kurt (1979) 154–55 for various counter-arguments.

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By contrast, all occurrences of σπεῖρον in later authors point to a garment of some form or another. If the transmitted text is correct, then the diminutive σπειρίον in Xenophon denotes some piece of men's light clothing.[32] In Euphorion, νυμφίδιον σπεῖρον can only be understood as a 'bridal gown' (*fr.* 107 Powell), whereas in Nicander it denotes a 'cloth' used to apply an ointment (*Alex.* 460–61).[33] The σπειροφόρος mentioned in an Ephesian inscription is likely to be a young person who carried a sacred robe during a procession, alongside bearers of other sacred objects (σελεινοφόρος [*sic*] 'celery bearer', ἁλοφόρος 'salt bearer', κοσμοφόρος 'bearer of the ornaments').[34] The meaning 'garment' is confirmed by Pollux, who mentions a market in Athens called ἱματιόπωλις or σπειρόπωλις (*sc.* ἀγορά).[35]

In late lexica, however, σπεῖρον is not merely a 'beautiful dress' (καλὸν ἱμάτιον): it is also glossed as a 'ragged garment' (ῥακῶδες [ἱμάτιον]).[36] Once again, the meaning 'rags', which has found its way into some modern dictionaries,[37] was improperly inferred from the context in two Homeric passages. In the first, Helen describes Odysseus' clothing when he managed to sneak into Troy in disguise:

> σπεῖρα κάκ' ἀμφ' ὤμοισι βαλών, οἰκῆι ἐοικώς,
> ἀνδρῶν δυσμενέων κατέδυ πόλιν {εὐρυάγυιαν.
> ἄλλῳ δ' αὐτὸν φωτὶ κατακρύπτων ἤϊσκε,
> Δέκτῃ, ὃς οὐδὲν τοῖος ἔην ἐπὶ νηυσὶν Ἀχαιῶν·
> τῷ ἴκελος κατέδυ Τρώων πόλιν}, οἱ δ' ἀβάκησαν
> πάντες· ἐγὼ δέ μιν οἴη ἀνέγνων τοῖον ἐόντα. (*Od.* 4.245–50)[38]
>
> He put some vile *speira* on his shoulders and, looking like a servant, got into the wide-wayed city of hostile men. He camouflaged himself and took on the appearance of another man, Dektes, he who in no way was of such kind on the ships of the Achaeans. In the guise of that man, he entered the city of the Trojans. They all remained speechless,[39] and I alone recognized him, even though he had such an appearance.

The Byzantine scholar Eustathius and, after him, some modern translators analyse σπεῖρα in this passage as denoting a filthy 'bundle of rags'.[40] This line of interpretation probably harks back to Aristarchus' views on the meaning of ΔΕΚΤΗΙ (l. 248). For the Alexandrian scholar, the general sense of lines 247–48 was that Odysseus assumed the disguise of a mendicant (δέκτης) when he entered Troy.[41] Aristarchus' interpretation of δέκτης as 'receiver (of alms)' (an agent noun of δέκομαι/δέχομαι) and, secondarily, 'beggar' has been endorsed by many in both ancient and modern times.[42] The noun is only documented in a

[32] *Cf.* Xen. *Hell.* 4.5.4. Ludwig Dindorf (*apud* Estienne et al. (1831–1865) *s.v.* σπειρίον) unnecessarily conjectured σείρια (*sc.* ἱμάτια) 'summer (cloaks)'. The noun σείριον is only documented by late lexicographers (Harp. σ 2 Keaney; Hsch. σ 351 Hansen).

[33] Nicander coined the neuter σπεῖρος for the 'peel' of an onion (*Ther.* 882).

[34] *IEphesos* 14.22 (late first century BC). See also Jessen (1905) 2760 and Schwabl (1993) 137–38.

[35] Poll. *Onom.* 7.78.

[36] *Cf.* σπεῖρον· τὸ καλὸν ἱμάτιον, καὶ τὸ ῥακῶδες (Hsch. σ 1450 Hansen; *cf.* Apollonius Sophista 144.4 Bekker; *Suda* σ 934 Adler; *Etym. Magn.* 723.34–35).

[37] *Cf.* 'haillons' (Bailly (1963); Chantraine (2009)); 'rag' (Montanari 2015).

[38] The text is from West's (2017) edition. The curly brackets mark an apparent interpolation that will be discussed further below.

[39] The etymology and meaning of the *hapax* ἀβακέω (along with Lesb. ἀβάκης) constitute a notorious crux in Homeric scholarship. See Snell et al. (1955–2010) *s.v.* ἀβακέω.

[40] *Cf.* Eust. *Od.* 1494.47–50. Modern translators often choose equivalents of ῥάκος: French *vieilles loques* (Bérard (1924)), Spanish *malos harapos* (Pabón (1982)), modern Greek ἁθλια κουρέλια (Maronitis (2006)).

[41] Ἀρίσταρχος δὲ 'δέκτῃ' μὲν ἐπαίτῃ 'Aristarchus (takes) *dektēi* for *epaitēi* ('beggar')' (schol. *Od.* 4.248a Pontani; *cf.* also schol. *Od.* 4.248b1, b2 and d; Hsch. δ 579 Latte and Cunningham).

[42] *Cf.* Apollonius Sophista 57.16 Bekker; Fraenkel (1910–1912) 1.20 n.2 and 76–77; Snell et al. (1955–2010) *s.v.* δέκτης.

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late Christian funerary epigram.[43] Still, this only proves that, by the end of antiquity, Aristarchus' reading had gained widespread acceptance. At any rate, δέκτης is at odds with οἰκεύς: a servant is by no means a beggar.

For all his indubitable talent and skill, the great Aristarchus missed the point here. In the *Little Iliad*, which also narrates Odysseus' surreptitious exploration of Troy in the company of Diomedes, the hero is disguised as an inconspicuous man named Δέκτης (*fr.* 6, Bernabé *PEG*). According to Aristarchus, the author of the *Little Iliad* copied this passage, mistaking δέκτῃ for a personal name.[44] Conversely, some modern scholars are of the opinion that *Od.* 4.246–49 (εὐρυάγυιαν … Τρώων πόλιν) is a later interpolation by some rhapsode who combined the two versions of the episode as narrated in the *Odyssey* and the *Little Iliad*.[45] In some versions of the story, Odysseus manages to slip into Troy by pretending to be an unremarkable commoner named Δέκτης and by wearing humble, undistinctive clothing, not some beggar's rags. The adjective κακά in the above-quoted passage (*Od.* 4.245) has social overtones ('of low quality, vile') and, contrary to the assumption of some scholars (both ancient and modern), it may imply that σπεῖρα did not specifically refer to a ragged piece of clothing.[46]

In the second passage of the *Odyssey* in which σπεῖρα occurs, the naked Odysseus shipwrecked in the island of Scheria begs Princess Nausicaa for 'a scrap of cloth':

> δὸς δὲ ῥάκος ἀμφιβαλέσθαι, | εἴ τί που εἴλυμα σπείρων ἔχες ἐνθάδ' ἰοῦσα. (*Od.* 6.178–79)
>
> Give me a scrap of cloth to throw around myself, if you had a wrapping of the *speira* when you came here.

Odysseus, who is aware that Nausicaa and the other girls have been washing laundry, does not ask for ordinary clothes, but just for some tatters to cover his shame. The neuter εἴλυμα, a derivate of ἑλύω/εἰλύω 'to enfold, enwrap', denotes a 'wrap', and σπείρων could be a genitive of material, 'a wrapping consisting in pieces of cloths', that is 'a wrapping-cloth', which would not necessarily have been tattered.[47] However, according to the scholia, σπεῖρα is here synonymous with ἱμάτια or ἐνδύματα,[48] a sense that finds independent confirmation in the post-Homeric use of the word mentioned above. Consequently, εἴλυμα σπείρων could be one of the wrappings (εἴλυμα) in which the girls carried the bundles of garments (σπείρων).[49] If this interpretation is correct, then σπεῖρα cannot mean 'tattered clothes': the previous passages of book six clearly indicate that Nausicaa and her servants had gone to the river to wash the magnificent clothing of the Phaeacian royal family.[50] Eventually, Nausicaa's servants provide Odysseus with a cloak and a tunic (φᾶρός τε χιτῶνά τε εἵματ(α), *Od.* 6.214). On a mid-fifth-century BC Attic

[43] *SEG* 39.449.36 (Tanagra, early fifth century AD).

[44] Aristarchus is followed by Blass (1904) 71–72 and Severyns (1928) 347–49.

[45] Burgess (2001) 152–53; West (2013) 196–97; Lucarini (2019) 372–73, with earlier references. Later in the same book, some elements taken from the Epic Cycle were also incorporated into Menelaos' account of Odysseus' self-restraint within the wooden horse (lines 275, 285–89). See West (2013) 206–07.

[46] *Cf.* ἱμάτια. προσέθηκε δὲ κακά ἵνα δηλώσῃ ῥάκη 'Clothes. [The poet] added "poor" (κακά), in order to specify rags' (schol. *Od.* 4.245a1 and a2 Pontani). Stanford (1958–1959) 1.275 interprets σπεῖρα as 'covering', while Murray (1995) and Privitera *apud* Heubeck and West (1981) translate σπεῖρα κακ(ά) respectively as 'wretched garment' and 'vile mantello'. Some modern lexica also accept this interpretation: (*sorry*) *wraps* (LSJ), *Gewand* (Snell et al. (1955–2010)).

[47] Marinatos (1967) 15; Garvie (1994) 126.

[48] *Cf.* schol. *Od.* 2.102b, 2.102d and 4.245b Pontani.

[49] *Cf.* schol. *Od.* 6.179a1–3 Pontani. This interpretation is accepted by Ameis et al. (1920) 190 and by Stanford (1958–1959) 1.315.

[50] *Cf.* εἵματα … σιγαλόεντα (6.26), ῥήγεα σιγαλόεντα (6.38), κλυτὰ εἵματα (6.58), ἐσθῆτα φαεινήν (6.74), εἵματα καλά (6.111).

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red-figure amphora which portrays the encounter of Odysseus and Nausicaa, the pieces of cloth hanging from a tree, held by four of the princess' attendants and wrung by another, are not depicted as tatters.[51]

When we consider all the available evidence, we cannot but conclude that σπεῖρον must originally have designated a kind of 'cloth' (like φᾶρος and λαῖφος); that it was a term that could be used in different contexts for different referents in the field of textiles and clothing, like a sail, a shroud, a dress, a cloak, etc., but not specifically for rags.

IV. Dodonaean λάκος revisited

It follows from the foregoing that the evidence in Greek for a semantic change 'rags' > 'clothes' or 'clothes' > 'rags', based on the testimony of ancient lexicographers, is extremely shaky and does not warrant the meaning 'garment' that epigraphists have attributed to λάκος in the Dodona enquiry. We must search elsewhere for an alternative hypothesis.

Relevant to the elucidation of λάκος is perhaps the evidence of the inventories of garments offered in the sanctuary of Artemis Brauronia on the Athenian Acropolis,[52] in which the noun ῥάκος is occasionally added as a descriptive appositive to all kinds of garments (ἱμάτιον, χιτών, χλανίς, etc.) in poor condition. For illustrative purposes, a few examples will suffice:

> Μέλιττα ἱμάτι|ον λευκὸν καὶ χιτωνίσκον ῥάκος. (*IG* II^2 1514.19–20 = 1515.11–12; *ca.* 350 BC)
>
> Melitta [consecrated] a white himation and a short chiton (tatters).
>
> κάνδυν Διοφάντη Ἱερωνύμου γυνὴ Ἀχαρνέ(ως) πασμάτια ἔχοντα χρυσᾶ ῥάκ(ος). (*IG* II^2 1524.180–81 = 1523.8–9; *ca.* 350 BC)
>
> Diophante, wife of Hieronymos, Acharnian, [consecrated] a *kandus* with golden spangles (tatters).

In other inventories, the adjectives ῥακώδης (Athens, Delos) and ῥάκινος (Tanagra, Samos) 'tattered' serve a similar purpose:[53]

> Ἀρχίππη χι[τώνιον σ]τύππινον ῥακῶ(δες). (*IG* II^2 1518.66; Athens, *ca.* 350 BC)
>
> Archippe [consecrated] a short chiton made of flax, tattered.
>
> ἄλλον (*sc.* χιτῶνα) ἐμ πλαισίωι περιπορφυροῦν ῥακώδη κατερρυηκότα. (*IDélos* 1417, face A, col. I.30–31; Delos, 155/4 BC)
>
> Another (chiton) in a frame[54] purple-edged, tattered, completely ruined.
>
> ἄλλα (*sc.* προσκεφάλαια) [ῥ]ακώδη IIII. (*IG* XI.2, 147 B.13; Delos, *ca.* 300 BC)
>
> Four other cushions, tattered.
>
> Φιλοκκώ ταραντῖνον ῥάκινον. (*SEG* 43.212B.37; Tanagra, *ca.* 260–250 BC)
>
> Philokko [consecrated] a *tarantinon*, ragged.

[51] Munich, Antikensammlungen, 2322 (*CVA* Deutschland 20, taf. 213.1–2). For an overview of ancient representations of women washing clothes, see Lewis (2002) 75–77.

[52] Linders (1972) 58–59; Cleland (2005) 46, 126; Milanezi (2005) 78–80; Brøns (2017) 120–21.

[53] Brøns (2017) 85–87.

[54] For the meaning of πλαίσιον, see Hellmann (1992) 340–41 and Andrianou (2006) 569.

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περίζωμα ἀλοργοῦν ῥάκινον ποικίλον. (*IG* XII.6, 261.22; Heraion of Samos, *ca.* 346/5 BC)

A purple loincloth, tattered, patterned.

We may tentatively suppose that the λάκος mentioned in Lhôte's lamella no. 120 might be a sacred object: a ragged piece of clothing dedicated to a goddess at Dodona or another sanctuary. This would justify the otherwise puzzling consultation. The consultant, possibly someone from the sanctuary, does not enquire about the theft of some filthy tatters, but suspects Dorkilos of having committed sacrilege by stealing a sacred object from a shrine.

Alternatively, judging from the meaning of ῥάκος and its diminutive ῥακάδιον in some late Greek papyri, λάκος might denote a tattered piece of cloth tied up for transporting objects (a *bundle* or *parcel*):[55]

παρὰ τοῦ ἐπιστολαφόρου ἐκομι|σάμεθα γράμματα ὑμῶν καὶ ῥάκος ἐν ᾧ ἐσ|τιν πέταλα χρυσᾶ, ἃ δεδώκαμεν Τροφίμῳ. (*P.Oxy.* 3993.9–11, second or third century AD)

From the dispatch carrier we received your letter and a ragged piece of cloth containing some gold leaves, which we have handed to Trophimos.

σπέρματα σικυδίων | σπουδαῖα ἔπεμψα ὑμεῖν (= ὑμῖν) διὰ | Διογένους τοῦ φίλου Χαιρέου τοῦ πο|λειτικοῦ (= πολιτικοῦ), ῥάκη δύο κατασεσημημ|{μ}ένα [τ]ῇ σφραγεῖδι (= σφραγῖδι) μου, ἐξ ὧν δώσεις | τοῖς παιδίοις σου ἓν ἐξ αὐτῶν. (*P.Oxy.* 117.9–16, second or third century AD)

I sent you some quality melon seeds through Diogenes, the friend of Chaireas the citizen, [and] two ragged pieces of cloth (that is, bundles) sealed with my seal, one of which you shall give to your children.[56]

As in many other languages, in ancient Greek, bags and wallets frequently took their name from the material of which they were made: for example, ἀσκός 'animal skin, hide' > 'bag', 'wineskin'; δέρμα 'skin' > 'wineskin'; διφθέρα 'leather' > 'haversack'; σάκκος 'rough cloth made of animal-hair' > 'sack'; σκύτος 'tanned hide, leather' > 'bag', etc.

One could counter-argue that the chronological and geographical gaps between the Egyptian letters and the Dodonaean enquiry is too great. Nevertheless, a diminutive ῥάκιον already occurs in a Delian inventory of the temple of Apollo, where different types of coins were wrapped with a ragged cloth in a bundle, stored in a jar (στάμνιον) with other objects:

[πλινθοφόρους καὶ ἡμιρόδι]α τρία καὶ διώβολα τέτταρα καὶ χαλκὸν ἀδόκιμον ἐν ῥακίωι καὶ λεπίδια χρυσᾶ τὰ ἐκ τοῦ θησαυροῦ ΔΓΙ· ταῦτα ἔνεστιν ἐν στ[αμνίωι]. (*IDélos* 1450.103; 140/39 BC).[57]

plinthophoroi, and three Rhodian hemidrachmas, four diobols and some bronze money (not current) in a small, ragged cloth, and some small pieces of gold plate from the treasure: (weight) 15 drachmas and 1 obol. These are contained in a *stamnos*.

This use of cloth is far from unparalleled in Greek sanctuaries. In the temples of Artemis Brauronia and Apollo at Delos, a piece of linen (ὀθόνιον, which was not necessarily ragged) was used to wrap different objects and materials, such as soft wool (ἔρια μαλακά), anklets (περισκελίδες), coins (νόμισμα), etc.[58]

[55] Kayser (1993) 139; Mascellari (2015) 152–53.

[56] *Cf.* also *O.Wadi.Hamm.* 29.5 (first century AD); *O.Claud.* 1.174.6–8; *O.Krok.* 184.2–4 (early second century AD).

[57] *Cf.* also *IDélos* 1443.A I.151, 1449.Aab.II.25–27. See Robert (1951) 168.

[58] Cf. *IG* II^2 1514.57–58 and 1516.34 (*ca.* 350 BC); *IDélos* 399.B.I.140 (192 BC), 1432.Ba.I.5–6 (153/2 BC), etc. See Prêtre (2018) 554–55.

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Consequently, it is not inconceivable that old, ragged cloths were used in Classical times for bundles. Dorkilos may have been suspected by his master(s) of stealing a piece of ragged cloth (λάκος) in which valuable objects were wrapped.

V. Conclusions

If our analysis is correct, a natural semantic change from 'garments' to 'rags' is nowhere to be found in classical Greek. The obsolete nouns λαῖφος and σπεῖρον were misinterpreted as synonyms of 'rags' by late lexicographers only because both words occurred in some Homeric passages which deal with beggars and outcasts clad in tatters. However, a careful analysis of the texts unequivocally proves that λαῖφος and σπεῖρον denoted pieces of clothing of various types. Needless to say, all those garments could be in perfect condition or in tatters.

Evidence for a hypothetical semantic evolution 'rags' > 'garment' is hardly provided by some passages in which ῥάκος and its Aeolic correlate βράκος ironically allude to garments. As far as we can see, this antiphrastic use did not bring about an actual change in the meaning of these words.

Finally, the linguistic analysis of this paper contributes to a more reasonable interpretation of the enigmatic theft of a λάκος, a rare synonym of ῥάκος, in a Dodonaean enquiry. Instead of a garment, we consider two possibilities: the λάκος was either a consecrated piece of cloth worn by the passage of time, or a tattered cloth used to bundle and carry various unnamed goods. Of course, we cannot boast of having solved the case: only omniscient Zeus knew whether Dorkilos actually stole the λάκος!

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