A very recent article by Charles de Lamberterie discusses the etymology and the meaning of ἄσμενος, generally translated as ‘well-pleased, glad’ and considered since antiquity to be the participle/adjective of an unattested verbal stem, related to the verb ἑδομαί, ‘enjoy oneself, take one’s pleasure, be pleased’. Already in 1897, however, the noted Hellenist, comparatist, and Sanskrit scholar, Jacob Wackernagel, raised formal objections to this hypothesis and proposed a connection with the family of the verb νέομαι ‘return’ (from the Indo-European root *nes-), assuming an original meaning related to the idea of being ‘saved, rescued’ (’gerettet, geborgen’, CdL, pp. 190-191).

The history of words was fundamental for the great Wackernagel, who advocated a systematic synergy between historical linguistics and philology. CdL draws our attention to this important point, offering a beautiful lesson on methodology: an adequate linguistic and etymological analysis needs to rely on good philology, which in turn needs the history of words to fully capture their meaning.

Specifically, CdL (195) cites Douglas Frame’s analysis (in the 1978 book The Myth of Return in Early Greek Epic) as an excellent example of this synergy between historical linguistics and philology: to Douglas Frame goes the credit of having shown the link between asmenos and neomai/nostos in

1 In M. Fumaroli, M. Trédé, M. Zink (eds.), Hommage à Jacqueline de Romilly. L’empreinte de son œuvre, Paris 2014, pp. 185-205.
Homeric vocabulary. CdL summarizes DF’s argument and supplements it with additional texts from subsequent periods (Theognis, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Herodotus, Aristophanes, Plato), all of which support the hypothesis of a link between neomai/nostos and asmenos. Thus, CdL offers a fundamental lesson on how linguistics and philology can provide a fuller understanding of the history of words and their use in different phases of Greek language and literature.

This is the difference between Frisk’s purely formal etymological analysis, which misses the point, and Chantraine’s interest in ‘l’histoire des mots’, which allows him to see a more full picture. Chantraine recognized the initial meaning ‘la joie du salut’ in the word asmenos (which did not disappear completely in subsequent uses, see a striking example in Aeschylus, Persians, 736), but didn’t commit to Wackernagel’s hypothesis, even if he found it attractive. As CdL shows, though, every occurrence of the word asmenos in Homeric epic supports Frame’s conclusion: when the passages including this word were composed, « the form asmenos was necessarily still a part of the paradigm of neomai » (Douglas Frame, quoted by CdL p. 196). Thus, the initial meaning of the expression ἄσμενοι ἐκ θανάτου was ‘coming back from death’, ‘having escaped death’, conveying the idea of ‘joy linked to salvation’. The idea of joy came to prevail later.

CdL stresses that what works on the synchronic level (in this case a connection with hēdomai) may not be valid diachronically: full comprehension of a word has to rely on a historical approach to language. This is the same basic principle that Wackernagel advocated: one should not base understanding of Homeric Greek on classical Greek, because serious anachronisms can occur.

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