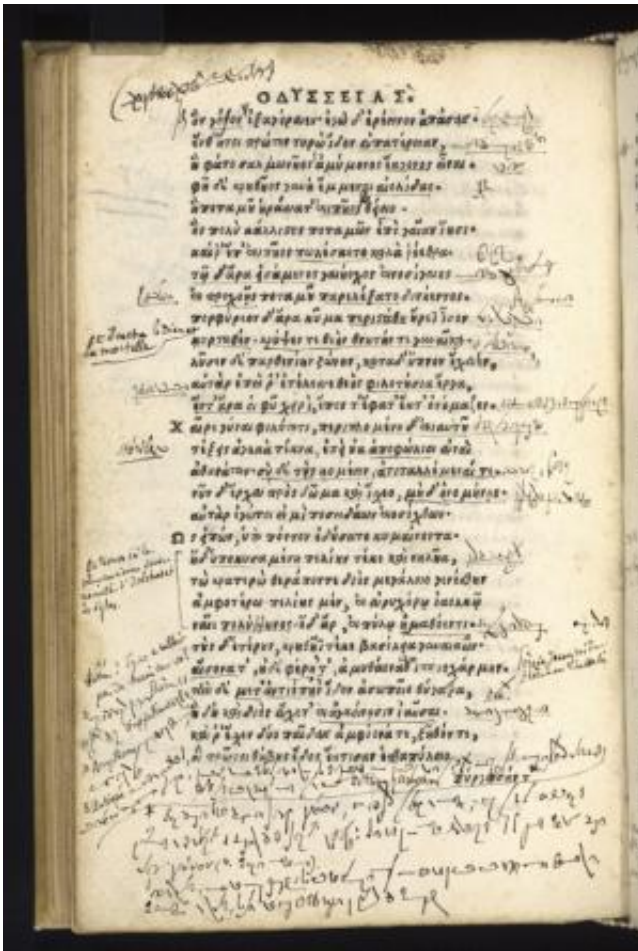


Mysterious 150-year-old writing in rare copy of Homer's 'Odyssey' identified

May 6 2014, by Susie Allen



A rare 16th-century edition of Homer's Odyssey at the University of Chicago Library includes handwritten annotations in an unknown script—thought to date back to the mid-19th century. Credit: Special Collections Research Center

(Phys.org) —An Italian computer engineer has solved a 150-year-old literary mystery found in a rare edition of Homer's *Odyssey* at the University of Chicago Library.

The case of the mystery marginalia began when the University received a donation of Homer's works from collector M.C. Lang in 2007. The collection included a 1504 Venetian edition of the *Odyssey* containing handwritten annotations in an unknown script. The annotations were thought to date back to the mid-19th century, but nothing else was known about them.

In hopes of cracking the code, the Library's Special Collections Research Center called on linguists, classicists and amateur sleuths, publicizing a \$1,000 prize offered by Lang to the first person to identify the script, provide evidence to support the conclusion and execute a translation of selected portions of the marginalia. The contest generated an enormous online response and submissions from around the world.

The winner of the contest, Daniele Metilli, is currently enrolled in a digital humanities course and aiming for a career in libraries and archives. Working with Giulia Accetta, a colleague who is proficient in contemporary Italian stenography and fluent in French, Metilli identified the mystery script correctly as a system of shorthand invented by Jean Coulon de Thévénot in the late 18th century. The annotations themselves are mostly French translations of words and phrases from the Greek text of the *Odyssey*.

Two runners-up reached the same, correct conclusion: Vanya Visnjic, a PhD student in classics at Princeton University with an interest in cryptography was the second contestant to identify the script and provide translations. Gallagher Flinn, a PhD student in linguistics at the University of Chicago, also submitted correct identification and translations.

Based on the mix of French words with the script and a legible date of April 25, 1854, Metilli and Accetta began with the assumption that it was a system of French stenography in use in the mid-19th century.

After rejecting several 19th-century French stenographic systems, they found a chart comparing one of them to the "tachygraphie" (shorthand) system invented by Thévenot and published in *Méthode tachygraphique, ou l'art d'écrire aussi vite que la parole* (1789). They found an 1819 edition revised by a professor of stenography, N. Patey, online. Armed with two contemporary French [translations](#) of the *Odyssey*, one published in 1842, the other in 1854-66, they began the work of translating the annotations.

In Thévenot's system, "every consonant and vowel has a starting shape, and they combine together to form new shapes representing syllables," Metilli wrote. "The vertical alignment is especially important, as the position of a letter above or below the line, or even the length of a letter segment can change the value of the grapheme. This explains why most notes in the *Odyssey* shorthand are underlined—the line being key to the transcription."

Metilli and Accetta are continuing to work on the annotations, and hope to discover the identity of their author and an explanation for why they only exist in one section of the text.

"While it's true that most rare books, archives or manuscripts from the Special Collections Research Center's collections do not generate such global excitement, each one contributes to learning and scholarship," said Alice Schreyer, director of the Special Collections Research Center. "M.C. Lang donated his Homer collection to the University of Chicago because he wanted it to be used by students and researchers. Because of this contest, the collection is now known to a worldwide audience of astute readers and scholars."

A group of graduate students and faculty members produced a [catalogue](#) of Lang's collection that formed the basis for an exhibition, now available [online](#). Their work illustrates the potential of this collection and many others in Special Collections.

According to Metilli, social media and electronic resources made it possible for him to identify the shorthand and translate the first fragments within just a few hours. "If I didn't have access to online sources such as Google Books, the Greek Word Study Tool of the Perseus Digital Library and the French corpora of the CNRTL, I probably wouldn't have won. What great times we live in!"

It was also, for him, another confirmation of his desire to work in libraries or archives. "Where else would I find such wonderful mysteries to solve?" he wrote.

Provided by University of Chicago

Citation: Mysterious 150-year-old writing in rare copy of Homer's 'Odyssey' identified (2014, May 6) retrieved 28 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2014-05-mysterious-year-old-rare-homer-odyssey.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.