Minutes from January 14th — Alessandro Buccheri (LabEx HASTEC, Paris – Centre Jean Pépin): “Φύω, φύσις and the Vocabulary of Vegetal Growth in Homer”

φύω – scholars disagree about its original meaning, as well as on the meaning of PIE root bhu. Equal distribution in IE languages between a) words denoting growth and plants, and b) words denoting being, becoming, appearing *vel sim*.

When we see it in Greek (at least from 5th century BCE onwards), φύω has a wide range of meanings. Paucity of sources - as often noted - makes conclusions/reconstructions of the earlier history of this word difficult, but worth looking at the evidence again (as A. did in his doctoral dissertation). we will deal with φύω (and compounds), φύσις, φυή, εὐ/εὐρυφυής in Homer.

A. ΦΥΩ

handout 1&3: φύω seems to target plants, indicates growth, often with positive connotations (i.e. an impressive growth).

Patzer’s distinction between φύω and e.g. αὐξάνω: φύω unfolding of a plant, as of a fir tree springing up to heavens (handout 4), or bushes developing an intricate network of branches (handout 5). αὐξάνω “aggrandize” vs. φύω “develop/unfold”

handout 6: active form of φύω used as both transitive and intransitive; cf. Burger 1925: some PIE roots develop verbs which can be both (φέρω v. διαφέρω), However, Patzer’s explanation is preferable: “putting forth shoots, leaves etc” (transitive sense of φύω) and “growing” (intransitive sense) are almost the same for a plant.

handout 7&8: only instances of φύω in Homer in which it does not refer to vegetal growth; stags antlers, branch-like (7) and porcine hair, grass-like (8)

When the botanical lexicon is observed in other applications, its features are revealed. Compare and contrast θάλλω vs. φύω. Cf. θάλλει in handout 6 and 20 (here τηλέθω, epic doublet of θάλλω), which refers to the growth of a plant as well, but, in Homer, is used differently from φύω. This appears clearly when θάλλω is not used with reference to vegetation. So Handout 22 θάλλω used for hair (as φύω can be used), but handout 23 used for porcine semiliquid fat (elsewhere, also of young warriors, newlyweds, and tears). Suggests analogy between humors in young plants and liquid abundance in other cases.

Whereas θάλλω focuses on the dynamics of internal humors, φύω depicts the “visible” development of the plant (i.e. the way it unfolds its structure in the adjacent space). That is why θάλλω can be used for semiliquid fat or tears (bodily humors) and φύω for the plant-like growth of hairs, horns, and so on.

In the same vein, consider the 4 occurrences of φύω in Hesiod, denoting the growth of: heads, arms, roots.

B PREFIXED FORMS OF ΦΥΩ

ἐκφύω of the three heads of a serpent (on the baldric of a warrior)

ἐνφύω grasping hand; cf Theophrastus’ use of the verb for rampant plants, ivy clinging to their host etc.

περιφύω (handout 12) and προσφύω (handout 13): similar (not identical though) to the precedent.

C. ΦΥΣΙΣ and ΦΥΗ

φύσις in Homer: Hom. Od. X.303. Hermes giving the *moly* plant to Odysseus (against Circe’s *pharmaka*) and showing him the plant’s φύσις

what does φύσις mean here: Benveniste & Hubbeck: properties; everyone else: appearance as described in the following line (it has a black root, the flower is similar to milk) (A. himself inclined to “form”).

As far as *pharmaka* are concerned, sometimes no distinction seems to be made between color and power of a plant: in Hippocratic texts we read of white drugs, black drugs; prescriptions of white drinks in summer, black drinks in winter, etc. so black and white. This observation made from Hippocratic texts can be projected back to the Odyssey? properties and colors of moly coincide somehow?

φυή: the human body (often marked as beautiful, also when a man/woman is likened to a god 15&16). We could read it φυή as “the way a body has developed” (18&19), cf. the passage in which the adjective εὐφυής appears.

CONCLUSIONS

19 of 21 instances of φύω are of plants. Probably designates the visible development of a plant’s structure, which designates .

DISCUSSION: A.B., J.S.C., C.F., G.H., M.H., O.K., N.L., A.M., L.W., C.Z

J.S.C.: handout 16. Is the likening of Nausicaa to Artemis in φυή ironical? Perhaps a hint that he knows very well that she is human and not divine?

A.B. Confirmed.

J.S.C.: Do gods have φυή? Born and quickly reach their final state. Might be a

distinction.

A.M.: Why no φυή of a tree? Does φυή refer, as it were, to a growth that

one still feels the effects of?

J.S.C.: Maybe it is a liminal state.

G.H. Not so stricly applied to plants: note the use of εὐφυής in handout 19. Maybe it is only chance that it is so distributed in Homer. φύσις in Pindar means only appearance; in Aeschylus, there is only one instance in which it seems to mean appearance. Maybe one should take a broader look: organic growth, with plants as perhaps the most important, special case.

A.B.: Probably the “central”, “prototypical” case. In any case, Pindar, as N.L. has shown, a puzzling case.

N.L.: Homer-->Hesiod: Does φύω become more negative in Hesiod?

A.B.: No shift that I can detect, but a shift in context: it is still an “impressive” growth, but that can be positively negatively evaluated (or not evaluated at all) depending on the context.

L.W.: Is the emphasis on impressive growth a result of genre?

A.B.: Yes, very probably.

L.W.: Please specify what you mean by the visible growth. What of Hesiod’s roots?

A.B.: Development of form (as opposed to other aspects of development: burgeoning, having a lot of sap, and so on)

G.H.: I agree regarding visibility, but visibility can vanish: cf. Hymn to Demeter. φυτεύω, plant *back,* dig into ground so that the planted thing will reemerge. Cites also Od. 5. 340: κακὰ πολλὰ φυτεύει;

A.B.: Yes, but 1) *phuteuo* (to plant) is not *phuo*, one *phuteuei* something, whichthen *phuei*. 2) the use of *phuteuo* in κακὰ πολλὰ φυτεύει fits in a different widespread metaphor: seeds/roots/plantlings stand for “the origin of something”, as when one speaks of the “root” of a problem (=its cause). We could say that in due time, the thing (the problem, the evil) one plants will become apparent: but this is not the main point of this kind of expressions.

M.H. Handout 6 seems to be about how generations are begotten. But this seems less vegetal.

A.B. We could frame it in the terms of prototype semantics. My hypothesis would be: vegetal growth is the “prototype” of φύω, other senses are clustered around it. This is true for Homer. However, this doesn’t mean that every instance of φύω in later texts has vegetal connotations: the historical development of φύω’s semantics could have effaced the link between the botanical and other senses of φύω.

J.S.C. Points out that the growth in Hesiod is not monstrous.

A.M. Interesting to point out that φύω but also other botanical word enter analogies between plants and men. Empedocles and doctors comparing human development with plants.

A.B.: A good candidate is ἄνθος together with its derivatives. Esp. ἀνθέω, and, more precisely, the specialized ἐξανθέω and ἐξάνθημα: they indicate blisters, etc., on skin. Every accumulation of bodily humors on the body’s surface. [Analogy between the sap dynamics in the plant, captured by ἄνθος and the like, and the bodily humors]

R.C. Is the growth you take to be denoted by φύω an ordered growth ?

A.B. Yes

J.S.C. Wonder if there’s a contrast to be drawn between φύω/φυή/φύσις and δέμω/δέμας——