The Oscans in Greek and Roman Tradition: Some Notes

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1. The term Ὄπικός and its Latin equivalent Opicus have a double meaning in the ancient tradition: on the one hand it refers to a specific ethnic group, on the other hand it becomes a way of indicating a person or, more generally, a people incapable of speaking Greek correctly, with a meaning similar to that of βαρβάρος¹. What makes the issue still more complex is the fact that in Latin the relationship between Opicus and the related term Oscus is not only lexical, but also semantic since the ethnonym Oscus early takes on a negative meaning different from Opicus.

The primary use of the Greek ethnonym Ὄπικός had an exclusively ethno-geographical sense: the first level of the tradition is represented by Antiochos of Syracuse since he is the best known example in the Greek evolution of knowledge about theItalic populations².

Besides the peoples already known from the preceding tradition (Enotres, Ausones, etc.), Antiochos introduces in the ethnic system of ancient Italy the notion of Opikoi, which was unknown up to that level of the tradition³. After Antiochos, the term Opikoi appears in Thucydides (5.2.4) with the comprehensive meaning of the Lucans and without distinction from the former Ausones⁴. As a rule, the ethnonym Opikoi has a wide and unsteady geographic extension since the Opikoi superimpose on the Ausones of the previous or coeval tradition⁵. Yet, superimposition does not mean “confusion”: ethnography of the 5th

³ According to Musti, the innovation by Antiochos compared to the position of Hecataois of Miletus corresponds to the course of events in the second half of the 5th century in the Oscan area. Remember the “oscanization” of Capua (between 438 BC and 423 BC) and of Cuma (about 421 BC). Antiochos knew about similar movements for the southern area of the peninsula as well, but it seems that he had only a vague idea of the latter, consequently giving a vague description in terms of ethnic successions. According to Musti, Opici is almost certainly the same as Osci(< *Ops-ci), and the Campani defined themselves as Osci probably the Greeks, in contact with these barbarians in Campania, invented (or accepted) a new ethnonym to indicate populations of similar origin and language which occupied the inland areas. See Musti (1988), in particular p. 279. For the concept of Oscus as a residual ethonym, see D. Musti, Per una valutazione delle fonti classiche sulla storia della Campania tra IV e III secolo a. C., in La Campania tra IV e III secolo a. C., Atti del XIV Convegno di Studi Etruschi e Italici, Benevento 1981, Galatina 1992, pp. 31-46. For an analysis of the synchronic use of Oscus and Campanus, see B. D’Agostino, Greci, Campani e Sanniti: città e campagna nella regione campana, in La Campania tra IV e III secolo a. C., Atti del XIV Convegno di Studi Etruschi e Italici, Benevento 1981, Galatina 1992, pp. 73-83.
⁵ For this aspect, see Prontera, Imagines Italicae.

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century BC was replacing or at least superimposing the “new” Opici on the ancient Ausones, distinguishing them from both the Iapyges and the Enotres, as well as from the Siculi, as evidence of Antiochos in Thucydid (6.2.4) and in Strabo (6.1.6) testifies. From a diachronic point of view, the analysis of the sources undoubtedly shows that there is a precise historical succession in the use of these ethnonyms which corresponds to a lexical evolution, in both the Greek and the Latin forms. The most ancient level, in which the term Ausones was used, was followed by several stages in which ancient sources began to adopt new ethnonyms until the Latin terms Opici and Osci were established. The most meaningful feature of the use of the term Opikoi in Latin is the semantic and lexical equivalence of Opici (Latin loan from the Greek Opikoi), Osci and Samnites, though with important differences of meaning: in the Latin perspective, the term Oscus, apart from the negative acceptation we will point out later, takes on a more “cultural” rather than an ethnic or geographical meaning, since sources very rarely mention Osci as a separate people, and nearly always in reference to the past.

As sources show, in the passage to Latin the Greek term Opikos nearly completely lost any ethnic or geographical meaning since it was replaced by the terms Oscus (more rarely and with an acceptation valid mainly on the cultural level) and Samnis, as far as the ethnic or geographical indication is concerned.

Festus’ evidence offers further important information concerning the semantic evolution of oscus and opicus in the early Latin tradition and their mutual relationship: Oscos quos dicimus ait Verrius Opscos antea dictos, teste Ennio, cum dicat “de muris rem gerit Opcus” (p. 218 L); Opicum quoque invenimus pro Osco (Paul. p. 205 L); in omnibus fere antiquis commentariis scribitur Opicum pro Oscus, ut in Tit[n]i fabula Quinto: “Qui Obsce et Volsce fabulantur, nam Latine nesciunt” (p. 204 L). First of all, it is necessary to point out the sequence provided by Festus (Opicus – Obscus / Opicus – Oscus), which assures that the form Opicus had also been used as an ethnonym (or correlated adjective) on a very ancient level of the tradition.

The adjective Oscus, on the other hand, indicates what is Samnite, in particular the language, and only in some rare examples does it take on the function of an ethnonym. According to Antiochos (f 2), Enotrian people originally lived in a small region called Italy. The Opikoi, called also Ausones, were placed in Campania (f 7; Arist., Pol. 1329b, 18). For Antiochos’ image of Italy, see N. Luraghi, Antioco di Siracusa, in R. Vattuone, ed., Gli storici greci d’occidente, Bologna 2002, pp. 52-91. For the ideological evolution of the concept of Italy, mostly in Roman perspective, see specifically F. Russo, Il concetto di Italia nelle relazioni di Roma con Cartagine e Pirro, «Historia» 59, 2010, pp. 74-105 and F. Russo L’Italia nella prospettiva romana (III-II secolo a.C.), Pisa 2012.

In the Roman perspective, the ethnonym Samnis is used to refer to a rather vast ethnic reality, covering before most of central and southern Italy and then a specific area. Prinoteca, Imagines Italicæ.

Titinius, v. 104 Ribbeck.

Strabo, too, assures a similar succession: Opici – Osci – Samnites, which apart from reflecting a probable historical situation, indicates also the parallel succession of ethnonyms, progressively more precise and specific.

This is the most attested use. See for instance Varro, De lingua latina 7.284 (oscam linguam); Livy 10.20.8 (oscae linguæ). The term Oscus recurs with this acceptation also in the famous passage from Ennius, quoted by Aulus Gellius (Noctes Atticae 17.7): Quintus Ennius tria corda habere sese dicebat, quod loqui Graece et Osce
instance, Pliny (Naturalis Historia 3.56.1), talking about Latium, says tenuere Osci, Graeci, Umbri, Tusci, Campani. This is an example of a rather rare and surely ancient use, not only because more recent Latin sources nearly always speak in terms of Samnites or other Italic peoples (Campani), but also because some sources explicitly put the use of Oscus as an ethnonym on a particularly archaic level of the tradition. As in the case of Oscus, the term Opicus (transparent loan from the Greek Opikoi) used both as a noun and as an adjective, almost never has an ethnic-geographical sense as it always takes on a secondary meaning indicating a person who does not know the Greek language well. The most ancient evidence of the use of Opicus in this specific sense, i.e. without any hint of the ethnic meaning of the Greek correspondent, is from the grammarian Tiro (quoted by Aulus Gellius, Noctes Atticae 13.9.4), according to whom an opicus is a Roman who does not know the Greek language: vteres Romani litteras Graecas nesciverunt et rudes Graecae linguae fuerunt...sed vades oik apó tón únv id est non a subus ita ut nostri opici putaverunt, sed ab eo quod est únev.

In another passage, Aulus Gellius defines as opicus anyone who is unable to understand Greek and Latin (Noctes Atticae 11.16.7): qui et litterarum et vocum graecarum expers fuit, cuisnam liber et qua de re sumptus esset. Fronto writes to Marcus Aurelius, asking him to correct any mistakes in the letter (which he calls “barbarisms”) since he does not want to appear to Domitia Lucilla as an opicus. nolo enim me mater tua ut opicum contemnat. Also Marcus Aurelius, in another letter (Ad Front., p. 31 Naber), describes himself as paene opicus (nearly opicus) because of his problems in understanding Greek. It is, therefore, interesting to note that Opicus is never used with an ethnic-geographical meaning, whereas it is well documented in the sense of a person who does not know Greek and how to pronounce it. It is precisely this fact which leads one to think that this particular Latin use is actually not originally Latin, but rather Greek, as is also shown by Iohannes Lydus (De mensibus 1.13), ἐξ Ἦϛ καὶ ὀππικίζειν, καὶ ὡϛ τὸ πλῆθος, ὀ̓φφικίζειν τὸ βαρβαρίζειν Ἴταλοι λέγουσιν. Since the concept of barbarization in the sense of cultural decay is typically Greek, it is probable that these Ἴταλοι are not the Italians (Romans) but rather the Greeks of Magna Graecia.

As Dubuisson has pointed out, the term βάρβαροϛ originally referred to people unable to speak and pronounce Greek correctly. The semantic equivalent barbarus - opicus is


11 Virgil (Aen. 7. 730) speaks of a Oscurum manus. Livy, 7.2.12 states that the Atellane were learnt by the Osci. Also in Strabo (5.3.6; 5.4.8) the term Osci is close to the Greek and generic use of Opici, but placed on a very distant chronological level.


13 The same meaning, i.e. with a linguistic character, occurs in Terentius Scaurus (De ortographia 7.23.1 Keil.), Juvenalis (Sat. 3. 203-211; 6. 455), Ausonius (Epigr., 79) and Sidonius Apollinaris (Ep. 7.3.1).

14 As Dubuisson, Barbare, pp. 4 ff., stresses, from the original linguistic meaning, barbaros assumed early a wider cultural and ethnic connotation.
confirmed by Iuvenalis’ evidence: (6.55), nec curanda viris opicae castigat amicae / verba, specifying imperitae, male pronuntiantis. A scholium on Iuvenalis (3.207) clarifies the linguistic reference as well: iamque vetus Graecos servabat cista libellos / et divina opici rodebant carmina mures ... Graeci dicunt de his, qui imperite locuntur, alii opicos dicunt eos, qui foedam vocem habent.

Consistent with this use, another scholium on Iuvenalis (3.207) clarifies that Graeci dicunt de his, qui imperite locuntur, alii opicos dicunt eos, qui foedam vocem habent.

Thus, the semantic equivalents Opicus – barbarus shows that Opicus, indicating someone who does not speak Greek, is not a codification of the Roman but of the Greek tradition, which had stigmatized the inability to speak Greek of this specific Italian population. Moreover, it is extremely interesting to observe that the linguistic meaning is expressed only by the term Opicus, and not by Oscus: clearly, the former Greek tradition determined the semantic specialization of this ethnonym in Latin usage as well.

A fragment of Titinius (v. 104 Ribbeck) provides us with further data on the use of Opicus with the meaning of “unable to speak correctly”: those who speak Oscan do not know Latin and just as the Opici do not know Greek, the Osci speak only Oscan; in the first case the negative feature is stressed (inability to speak Greek), in the second case the positive one (Oscan is the language spoken by those who belong to the race of the Osci). It is not accidental that both cases assume the linguistic point of view, probably because the Greek use of Ὅπικος, widely accepted in Latin, influenced the primary use of oscus, which was used above all to indicate a fact of language.

Two passages by Ausonius associate the meaning of “obscure, illegible” with opicus, which obviously is an expansion of the main definition “uncultured”. In the following two cases, opicae papyri and opicae chartae are mentioned to indicate precisely documents which, for different reasons, are illegible: in the first case (Ep. 4, nil quaero, nisi quod libris tenetur / et quod non opicae tegunt papyri), since tego means “to hide”, we can presume that the expression opicae papyri refers to something hidden, and hence illegible; in the second case (Comm. Prof. Burdig., 23, v. 1-4, Victorii studiose, memor, celer, ignoratis /
adsidue in libris nec nisi operta legens / exesas tineis opicasque evolvere chartas / maior
quam promptis cura tibi in studiis), once again the author refers to something illegible\textsuperscript{20}.

The same can be assumed in the case of opicus in the sense of illegible: Festus (p. 189 Lindsay) says that obscum means “holy”, and Cloatius, quoted in the comment, mentions in this connection the leges obscatae, i.e. “holy”, “sacred”. If it is true that obscus has the same value as opicus, as is claimed by Festus, the sense we can give to the first term can be reconstructed on the basis of opicus if opicus means illegible in the sense that something cannot “be read physically” for various reasons, the same meaning would occur also for obscus, which would mean that the leges obscatae are called that because they are not legible to everyone\textsuperscript{21}.

The connection between this use and the meaning of opicus as person unable to speak Greek correctly is clear and indubitable, because of the common linguistic reference. In both cases, Opicus indicates a linguistic (or widely cultural) problem: something could be illegible either because it was forbidden or it was because incomprehensible.

2. Ausonius (\textit{Ep.} 79.1-3) also attributes to opicus a moral sense, which the ancient sources more often connect to oscus: Eunus Syriscus, inguinium ligurritor, / opicus magister (sic eum docet Phyllis), / muliebre membra quadrangulum cernit. In v. 12 of the same epigram, a magister who earlier was opicus, is now defined obsc(a)enus, with the specific correspondence of the terms we also find in Festus (p. 204 L) \textit{s.v.} oscus: \textit{A quo (= Obsco) etiam verba impudentia elata appellantur obscena, quia frequentissimus fui usus Oscis libidinium spurcarum}, which suggests a link (etymological as well as semantic) between oscus and obsc(a)enus. This paraetymology is not entirely unwarranted, not only because the adjective obsc(a)enus can actually be traced back to oscus, but also because the connection between oscus and the idea of “dirty”, in both the physical and the moral sense, often occurs in Latin sources, as Porphyrius’ comment to Horace (\textit{serm.} I, 5, 62) confirms\textsuperscript{22}: \textit{Campani, qui Osci dicebantur, ore immundi habiti sunt. Unde etiam obscenos dictos putant quasi oscenos}. Porphyrius confirms that the term Osci was used as an ethnonym only in very ancient times (this is also demonstrated by the tense of the verb, dicebantur); besides that, we notice the

\textsuperscript{20} Consistently with this use, Sidonius Apollinarius (\textit{Ep.} 3.1) defines a translation opica if turbida, once again “unclear”.

\textsuperscript{21} F. M. D’Ippolito, \textit{Leges obscatae}, in \textit{“PP”} 335, 2004, pp. 81-91. It is because of the connection between opicus and obscus (indicated by Festus) that I do not agree with Nettleship’s hypothesis; according to Nettleship, obscus should be connected to opacus. However, there is no lexical relationship between these two words. Nor is it possible to accept the second hypothesis of Nettleship, according to which obscus was connected to obscure. Aside from the lexical problem of these hypotheses, in this case we must also remember that Festus explicitly links obscus to opicus, and it is in opicus that the semantic explanation of obscus must be found. H. Nettleship, \textit{Contributions to Latin Lexicography}, Cambridge 1889 (repr. 2010), p. 540. See also A. Thieffelder, \textit{Obscaenus}, in \textit{Navicula Chiloniensis. Studia philologa Felici Jacoby professori Chiloniensi emerito octogenario oblata}, Leiden 1956, pp. 98-106

\textsuperscript{22} See also Tacitus, \textit{Annales}, 4.14: Oscum…ludicrum, levissimae apud vulgum oblectionis, eo flagitiorum et virium venisse ut auctoritate patrum coercedendum sit.
conceptual closeness and lexical similarity between osci / obsceni / osceni, as indicated by Festus and emphasized also by the use of the adjective immundi, which once again recalls the idea of “dirty”.

The same negative acceptation occurs in Titinius, as Festus (p. 390 L) indicates: ...e sucerda / ...homo opicer. Clearly, the Oschi were said to be that immoral so as to enter the collective imagination as a symbol of immorality and to coin an adjective on the basis of their ethnicity, as other sources stress.

The connection to obsc(a)enus would hence be a minor fact (remember that the etymology of obsc(a)enus from oscus is only one of many usages in the ancient tradition) motivated by the assonance between oscus and obsc(a)enus and by the contiguity of meaning of the two terms.

Pliny’s evidence provides us with further data concerning the evolution of the term Opicus in Latin and its semantic relationship with Oscus. In an attack on Greek medicine, Pliny quotes Cato (Naturalis Historia 29.7.14): Nos quoque dictitant barbaros, et spurcius nos quam alios’ Ὀπικῶν appellatione foedant. Why did the Greeks call the Romans Opici, and why did the Romans take offence at being confused with them?

After what has been said above, I am inclined to exclude the possibility that the Greeks wanted to call the Romans immoral (like the Romans did with the Oschi) mostly because this acceptation is completely Roman, unlike the linguistic one. It is, however, possible that the Romans interpreted the Greek use of the term in this sense, as indicated also by the use of spurcius, which once again refers to the semantic aspect of the secondary use of oscus. Moreover, although it is true that for the Greeks the Opici were a people widely diffused along the Tyrrhenian coast, I do not believe that at the time of Cato the ethnonym was used in such a generic way. It is, therefore, more probable that the Greeks voluntarily confounded the Romans with the Opici in order to associate the former with the latter, who were “the barbarians par excellence” of Italy. We have seen that, except for some late examples, Opici has a linguistic–cultural meaning, while the interpretation of Oschi - obviously apart from indicating everything that was Oscan – was moral.

Cato’s passage, which uses the term Ὀπικῶν, can be explained as evidence of the Greek use (appellation Ὀπικῶν). The fragment of Titinius (Festus, p. 390 L) associates a term derived from the root Opic- (i.e. the form modelled on Greek) with the meaning connected to the

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23 For this problem, see specifically Dubuisson, Les opici, pp. 532-34. According to Dubuisson, the Greeks confused Romans and Oscans. Yet, as we have seen above, Greek sources were able to distinguish several Italian peoples already in the 5th century BC. Therefore, Dubuisson’s hypothesis is not acceptable.

24 Still in the 2nd century AD a passage from Aristides Quintilianus (De musica) confirms the barbarian nature of the Oscan people, comparing them to beasts: ἀναίσθετοι τε ἐίοι καὶ βοσκηματώδεις, ὃς οὖ τε περὶ τὴν Ὀπικίαν καὶ Λευκανίαν. For the barbarization of Magna Graecia in the Greek perspective, see recently F. Russo, Ancora sulla barbarizzazione di Poseidonia, «Aevum» 82, 2008 pp. 25-39.
root *Osc-* (see Festus paraetymology). Clearly, in the period in which Titinius lived a specialization of the terms with their respective meanings had not yet taken place.

As regards the origin of the secondary meaning of *oscus*, I believe that a possible source may be found in the characteristics of the *fabula atellana* (Strabo 5.3.6).

The *fabula atellana* was a farce of Oscan origin (from Atella) which dealt with vulgar matters in coarse language and, most important of all, staged situations that might well have been considered immoral. It is therefore plausible that the derogatory connotation in a moralistic sense which is called to mind by the adjective *obsc(a)enus* derives exactly from the genre of the Atellana, whose characteristics match perfectly with the secondary meaning of *oscus* as obscene and trivial.

For the lexical as well as the semantic point of view, the analysis we have carried out shows a certain degree of semantic and lexical continuity and contiguity between *opicus* and *oscus*. Starting from the material already examined by Dubuisson, which was duly confronted with other evidence and hypotheses, it is possible to deduce that, despite the divarication of their use, the two ethnonyms seem to maintain a basic referential homogeneity. On this basis an evolution concerning the level of secondary meanings needs to be added. The semantic evidence concentrates at times on one of the lexemes, at times on the other, even if the figurative sense is directly documentable only for *opicus*.

*Oscus*, which has a particular specialized use (with reference to the Oscan language), recovers semantic affinity with *opicus* indirectly (with reference to the Oscans’ immoral behaviour) when the ancient tradition reconnects it paraetymologically to the adjective *obsc(a)enus*.

Under a wider cultural point of view, this study provides us with some important elements useful for understanding the Romans’ concept of “barbarian” and its dependence on the previous Greek experience, where the capacity to understand a specific language represented the most important feature differing Greeks from barbarians.

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25 M. Martina, *Sulla cronologia di Titinio*, in «Quaderni di Filologia Classica dell’Università di Trieste» 1, 1978, pp. 5-25. The alternative hypothesis collocates Titinius immediately before the period in which Cato lived.

26 ίδιον δὲ τι τοῖς Ὀσκοῖς καὶ τῷ τῶν Αὐσόνων ἐθνεὶ συμβέβηκε· τῶν μὲν γὰρ Ὄσκων ἐκλελοιπότων, ἡ διάλεκτος μένει παρὰ τοῖς Ῥωμαίοις, ὥστε καὶ ποιήματα σκηνοβατεῖσθαι κατὰ τινα ἀγώνα πάτριον καὶ μιμολογεῖσθαι. Strabo’s evidence is important for two reasons: first of all, it confirms that the term *Oscus* as an ethnonym was used in connection with the past and not with the present; secondly, the use of Oscus as the name of a dialect confirms its linguistic reference.

It is thus of great interest to observe how this distinction based mostly and originally on a linguistic skill endured throughout the Middle Ages, when a vulgar person who was even unable to speak correctly was called *Opizzinus*, clearly a derivative of *Opikos / Opicus*\(^28\).

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\(^{28}\) Feo, *Il nome Oppizinus*, pp. 256 ff.