THE HOMERIC ‘Ασάμινθος: STIRRING THE WATERS OF THE MYCENAEAN BATH

In the storm of controversy raised by the word ἀσάμινθος there are two reliable anchors: (1) that for Homer ἀσάμινθος meant not simply a wash basin or tripod from which to draw warm water but a real ‘bathtub’, one into which the bather entered and from which he emerged (ἐξ ὀ’ ἀσάμινθου/ἐκ ὀ’ ἀσαμίνθου), one of the very type that has survived almost intact from the Mycenaean period in the palace of Nestor at Pylos in Western Messenia; (2) that ἀσάμινθος, with its intervocalic -σ- and suffix -νθ-, is not native Greek but a foreign loan word of a type thought to have had its origins directly in the indigenous ‘Aegean’ culture and perhaps ultimately in Anatolia or the Near East (cf. Κόρινθος, λαβύρινθος, ύλάκινθος).

In Homer the word is seven times embedded in the formulaic phrase ἐξ ὀ’ ἀσαμίνθου (-ους)/ἐκ ὀ’ ἀσαμίνθου (-ον):

- ἐξ ὀ’ ἀσαμίνθους βάντης ἐυξείστασα λούσαντο (Il. 10.576; Od. 4.48)
- ἐξ ὀ’ ἀσαμίνθου βανθ’ ὁ δ’ ἄρ’ ἀσαπισίως ἑς θυμῷ (Od. 8.450)
- ἐξ ὀ’ ἀσαμίνθου ἐσασα λό’ ἐκ τρίποδος μεγάλου (Od. 10.361)
- ἐκ ὀ’ ἀσαμίνθου βη δέμας ἀθανάτοις ὠμοῖος (Od. 3.468)
- ἐκ ὀ’ ἀσαμίνθου βας ἀνδρας μέτα οἴνοποτήρας (Od. 8.456)
- ἐκ ὀ’ ἀσαμίνθου βάντης ἐπὶ κλισμοί καθίζον (Od. 17.90)

Three times the particle δέ occurs instead of άρα (although in each case ὀ’ survives as a lexical variant):

- ἐξ δ’ ἀσαμίνθους βάντης ἐυξείστασα λούσαντο (Od. 17.87)
- ἐκ δ’ ἀσαμίνθου βη δέμας ἀθανάτοις ὠμοῖος (Od. 23.163)
- ἐκ δ’ ἀσαμίνθου βη· θαύματε δέ μιν φίλος νυός (Od. 24.370)

Only once does ἀσάμινθος occur outside the formulaic expression, there with no particle at all:

- ὃς Μενελάῳ δῶκε δό’ ἀργυρέας ἀσαμίνθους (Od. 4.128)

The almost complete fossilization of this ancient loan word within a formulaic phrase, which along with a form of βαίνω fills the metrical space between verse-beginning and 3rd-foot caesura (—~ω/—~[ω]), suggests that ἀσάμινθος was not the common term for ‘bath’ in the vernacular of Homer’s contemporaries; it had become a linguistic relic well before the time of Homer.

The word is almost moribund after Homer, other terms for bath being common (πύελος, βαλανεῖον, σκαφή, μάκρα, δροίτη, etc.): the rare poetic usages of ἀσαμίνθος are clearly derived from epic (e.g., Sophocles fr. 204,
Cratinus fr. 252), and the prose usages are almost all commenting on these very Homeric passages, or, if not, are nevertheless derived indirectly from epic. The ancient lexicographers knew the meaning of ἀσάμινθος but had not a clue of its etymology; the most frequently offered solution is also the most amusing: ἥσις + μινθὸς 'slime reducer' (scholia to Homer, Hesychius, Photius, Suda, Etymologicum Magnum, Eustathius, etc.)

While modern comparative philologists have almost unanimously regarded ἀσάμινθος as a loan word, there has been no unanimity about its original root or provenance. Attempts to derive its origins from Near Eastern words in asam- have produced only vague correspondences, the most striking of which are Sumerian an.za.am 'drinking vessel' and its Akkadian offspring assammu(m) 'goblet, drinking vessel (especially for beer)'.

Suspicion has remained high that some sort of metanalysis has occurred after the incorporation of ἀσάμινθος into the Greek lexicon, thereby disguising the earlier form of the loan word; and hope has remained high that if only the specific details of the metanalysis can be determined, the revelation of the earlier form will allow more foreign cognates to present themselves.

Though I am merely stating the obvious, it is perhaps worthwhile to remind ourselves that the three occurrences in Homer of ἀσάμινθος with δέ suggest, and the single occurrence without any particle confirms, that what we have here is not simply a case of textual misanalysis of scriptio continua by readers of Homer. If there was a metanalysis, it had already occurred long before the existence of a text, during a period of oral transmission, and the metanalyzed ἀσάμινθος had since then become a legitimate word in the Greek lexicon.

M.L. West suggested in 1967 that ἀσάμινθος is a misanalysis of *μασάμινθος. The phonetic channel for this metanalysis is wide, since in seven of its eleven occurrences in Homer ἀσάμινθος is preceded by the particle ἐπ', three times by δ' (and in all three instances ἐπ' is a variant reading), and only once with no particle of any kind. Since ἐπ' is neither semantically nor metrically necessary (ἐξ and ἐκ could have been substituted for ἐξ ἐπ' and ἐκ ἐπ'), and is in places even syntactically cumbersome (cf. Od. 8.450), it is difficult to imagine why it is so tenacious here unless it was part of the original form. The presence of Minos' brother 'Ῥωδάμινθος shows that *μασάμινθος was comfortable, phonetically at least, in a Minoan/ Mycenaean context.

R. Renehan came independently to a similar solution at about the same time but offered a model that involved prothesis rather than aphaeresis; i.e., *μασάμινθος > ἐπ' ἀσάμινθος. He posits as semantic support for the phonetic shift Σάμινθος, the name of a locality in the Argolid mentioned by Thucydides (5.58.4), and sa-me-ti-jo, a proper name on a Linear B tablet from Κνωσσός (KN K 875), though neither has any notable association with the Homeric bath.

The dynamic nature of the field of historical Greek linguistics was well