

# CORRESPONDENCE

## THE MEANING OF ΟΙΝΟΠΑ

*From Sir Evelyn Howell, K.C.I.E., C.S.I.*

Sir,

The discussion between scholars about the meaning of γλαυκῶπις emboldens me, though only a layman, to raise a cognate question. What does Homer mean, when he calls a yoke of oxen or the sea οἶνοπα, as he does in both *Iliad* and *Odyssey*? Literally of course the word means 'wine-faced' or 'like wine on the surface'. But since the days of Andrew Lang we have been taught to shut our eyes and repeat the magic formula 'wine-dark'. The rendering is hallowed by long usage. But will it stand examination? In point of fact sea water and wine are only alike in one respect and that is not colour. And what about the oxen? Anyone who has ever seen a yoke of oxen labouring at the plough under a really hot sun, especially after midday, when the creatures are beginning to tire, can have no doubt but that βόε οἶνοπε means oxen covered with foam. They sweat copiously, especially round the base of the horns (exactly as described in the *Iliad*),<sup>1</sup> and foam round the muzzle in most distressing fashion. Their hair becomes matted and looks white, no matter what colour their skins may be. If the word means 'foaming' there, why not everywhere? I think it is only applied to breaking seas seen by daylight, whether from a small craft scudding before a brisk breeze, or a raft overwhelmed by a storm. Moreover the word οἶνος to an ancient (or indeed to any) Greek meant something quite different from 'wine' to us and conjured up a very different picture. We see wine only as a finished product, making its all too rare appearances in regrettably small quantities, usually under strong artificial light in perfectly transparent glasses. To the Greeks, both now and then, wine is a familiar of daily life seen in all stages—in the vat, where in the dim light of a cellar its surface looks very like the matted coats of oxen; in the cask, where, when the bung is lifted or the cask is broached, it is very apt to bubble and burst out in foam; and finally at table, where it is sometimes described as ἀθροπα—'sparkling on the surface'. In a metal goblet, such as the Homeric heroes used, bubbles can only be seen when they have reached the surface, where they burst into foam, like the waves of the sea. Taken all round then 'foaming' would seem to be the right answer, though Shakespeare offers a picturesque alternative:

Though you untie the winds and let them fight  
Against the churches, though the yeasty waves  
Confound and swallow navigation up.<sup>2</sup>

Yours faithfully,

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<sup>1</sup> xiii. 703-4.

<sup>2</sup> *Macbeth*, IV. i. 52-54.