Odysseus' "Winnowing-Shovel" (Hom. Od. 11. 119–37) and the Island of the Cattle of the Sun

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When Odysseus encounters Teiresias in the Underworld in Odyssey 11, the blind prophet does not give him detailed instructions for making his long way home, as Kirke had said he would (10. 539–40). Teiresias clearly knows what sort of information Odysseus is after (11. 100). All the same, he concentrates on only two things, one of them seemingly unconnected with the hero's return-voyage to Ithaka: the danger posed by the cattle of the Sun (11. 104–13) and the pilgrimage Odysseus must eventually make inland to sacrifice to Poseidon (11. 121–31). 1 To Teiresias, the decisive problem in Odysseus' future is clearly the wrath of the sea-god, to which the entire crew of the hero's one surviving ship is subject due to his blinding of Polyphemos (11. 100–03; cf. 9. 526–36). Whether all the men come back to Ithaka together or only Odysseus returns depends on whether they manage to leave the Sun's cattle unmolested (11. 104–13), as they ultimately prove unable to do (12. 339–65). Poseidon's anger guarantees a difficult journey home in any case (11. 100–04, 111, 113–15), however, and after Odysseus has somehow got rid of the Suitors (11. 115–20), he is accordingly to take an oar on his shoulder and make his way into the mainland on foot until he comes to people unacquainted with the sea (11. 121–25). 2 There he is to sacrifice to Poseidon (11. 129–34), thus introducing the god's cult into a spot where it did not exist before and so presumably winning his favor, and then return home a second time to await a "sleek old age" and a mysterious but easy death ἐξ ἀλός (11. 132–36). 3

1 For the extraordinary complexity of Teiresias' prophecy and its role in Homer's story, see J. Peradotto, Man in the Middle Voice: Name and Narration in the Odyssey, Martin Classical Lectures n.s. 1 (Princeton 1990) 59–93.
3 Odysseus repeats the final portion of the prophecy to Penelope on Ithaka near the end of the poem (23. 267–84 ~ 11. 121–37). For the significance of the hero's gesture and the sacrifice that accompanies it, see W. F. Hansen, "Odysseus' Last Journey," QUCC 24 (1977)
Teiresias’ remarks to Odysseus thus have their own internal logic, even if they do not answer the specific questions the hero has come prepared to ask, and the prophecy in fact has other features which help make it a single intellectual whole. The mark that Odysseus has reached the end of his travels inland, Teiresias tells him, will be that another wayfarer who meets him will call his oar an ἀθηρηλοιγός (lit. “chaff-ruin”), i.e. a winnowing-shovel (11. 126–28). The surface point of this confusion is that Odysseus will at last have come to a country whose inhabitants know nothing of ships, so that the man the hero meets will fail to recognize the object resting on his shoulder (cf. 11. 122–25). At the same time, however, the anonymous traveller’s remark can be taken as a significant comment on what happens on the island of the cattle of the Sun. We know from numerous ancient sources that after beans or wheat were harvested, they were trampled by animals on a threshing-floor (X. Oec. 18. 4–5) and then—provided a sufficiently strong breeze was blowing—thrown up into the air with a winnowing-shovel (II. 13. 588–90), which caused the grain or seeds to be separated from the chaff (II. 5. 499–502; cf. Hes. Op. 597–99; X. Oec. 18. 6–9). So too on the island of the cattle of the Sun, Odysseus and his men are put to the test by the appearance of high winds (12. 313–14, 325–26), and when he goes apart from them (12. 333–37), they are quickly marked out for destruction (esp. 12. 374–88, 417–19). That Odysseus’ oar is mistaken for a winnowing-shovel is thus a sign not only of how far from the sea he has come but also of the scrutiny he has undergone: He alone of all the crew has in the end been saved. That this is part of the point of Teiresias’ prophecy is confirmed by a further peculiarity of the blind seer’s language. Ἀθηρηλοιγός (11. 128) is a kenning, i.e. a riddling word that stands in for and thus points to some other, more pedestrian term familiar to the poem’s audience. Eustathius and ΣΩΒΗΝ gloss ἀθηρηλοιγός with the word πτούν (“shovel”), which is the name used for a winnowing-shovel in the description of threshing at Iliad 13. 558 (cf. A. fr. 210 Radt). What


4 For the similarity between the two objects, cf. the deliberately metaphorical language at Opp. H. 4. 498–99 (of winnowing grain) πνοίης χερσαίος τε διακρίνοντες ἐρετμοῖς / καρπάν.


6 Theoc. 7. 155–56 suggests that sticking the winnowing-shovel into the heap of clean grain may have been a ritual signal that the harvest was complete; cf. Σ ad loc., citing [Call.] fr. 799 P2. For possible connections between this signal and Odysseus’ gesture, see J. E. Harrison, “Mystica Vannus Iacchi (continued),” JHS 24 (1904) 241–54, at 246.

7 For images of this sort, see I. Waern, ΓΗΣ ΟΣΤΕΑ: The Kenning in Pre-Christian Greek Poetry (Uppsala 1951). For ἀθηρηλοιγός (not discussed by Waern) as a kenning, see A. Heubeck, A Commentary on Homer’s Odyssey II: Books IX–XVI (Oxford 1989) ad loc.
seems never to have been pointed out is that a πτύνον can also be called a θριναξ, and a θριναξ is quite specifically a wooden shovel with three or five short teeth and used for winnowing grain. The word is first attested in the fifth century (Ar. Pax 567; IG I 422.134), but there is no reason to think that it was not in use hundreds of years before that, and θριναξ in fact appears to be the root of the name Θρινακία, which is how Teiresias refers to the island of the cattle of the Sun when he mentions it for the first time at 11. 107. The spot where the winds separate Odysseus from his worthless crew, in other words, is precisely “Winnowing-Shovel Island,” and it accordingly comes as no surprise that the sign which will mark the moment when the hero can at last make his peace with Poseidon will be an oar mistaken for a “destroyer of chaff.”

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8 Hsch. Θ 756 Latte θριναξ: πτύνον σίτου; Cyr. p. 342 Schmidt θριναξ, σκεύος γεωργικόν, ο καὶ λέγεται λικμηθηριον . . . η πτύνον του σίτου; Suda Θ 498 θριναξ: το πτύνον. θριανον γεωργικον οδουτικον; cf. ΣΒΑΤ Hom. Il. 13. 588.

9 Nic. Th. 113–14 with Σ; Antiphil. AP 6. 95. 4 = GPh 874; Philipp. AP 6. 104. 6 = GPh 2762. Early in this century, a similar tool was still in use in Crete, where it was called a θυρνάκι, i.e. a θυρνάκι, diminutive of θριναξ/θριναξ; cf. J. E. Harrison, “Mystica Vannus Iaichi,” JHS 23 (1903) 292–324, at 301–05. “Winnowing-fan” is an unfortunate term for the tool, which is not used to produce a breeze; cf. Harrison 310–12.

10 Thrinakia was sometimes identified with Sicily, which according to Thucydides was originally called Τρινακρία (Th. 6. 2. 2; cf. Call. fr. 40 Pf; Nic. Th. 529), presumably because the island has three capes (τρία άκρα), as Timaios of Tauromenion (FRTH 566 F 37 ap. Σ A.R. 4. 965; cf. Eust. p. 1675. 6 – ΣΒV Hom. Od. 11. 107; Str. 6. 265; Σ Lyc. 966; Σ Nic. Th. 529; St. Byz. p. 635. 11 Meineke) explains. Cf. J. Béard, La colonisation grecque de l’Italie méridionale et de la Sicile dans l’antiquité: L’histoire et la légende, BEFAR 150 (Paris 1941) 319–38. Naturally this tells us nothing about the significance or origin of the name in Homer.

11 St. Byz. p. 635.13–14 Meineke, followed by H. Frisk, Griechisches etymologisches Wörterbuch I (Heidelberg 1954) s.v. θριναξ, and P. Chantraine, Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue grecque II (Paris 1970) s.v. θριναξ, notes the likely connection between θριναξ and Θρινακία, but does not explore the tool’s actual function or draw any larger conclusions. Cf. also Suda Θ 499 θριναξ: η Σικελία.