

## “Sporadic” syncope and Latin phonology’s wicked stepmother

Abstract submission for PLC 30

Pre-Latin *\*ōv* followed by short vowels seems to display contradictory developments in Latin: it becomes *ū* in some words (*prūdēns* ‘prudent’ < *\*pro-vidēns*, *nūdus* ‘naked’ < *\*novodos*, et al.) and *ō* in others (e.g., *nōnus* ‘ninth’ < *\*novenos*, *mōtus* ‘moved’ < *\*movetos*). In *noverca* ‘stepmother’, historical *ovV* apparently doesn’t change at all. Sihler (1994), like Sommer (1902), explains the appearance of both *ū* and *ō* from *\*ovV* as the result of the “sporadic” syncope of medial short vowels that occurred at various times in the history of Latin: In certain of these words, the short vowel following *\*ov* syncopated prior to the regular sound change of tautosyllabic *\*ou* to *ū* (so *\*novodos* > *\*noudos* > *nūdus*), while in the rest, the short vowel following *\*ov* remained in place long enough to undergo a notional later regular sound change from *\*ovV* to *ō* (so *\*novenos* > *nōnus*).

Sihler’s analysis is flawed at least in that it cannot account for *noverca*: the sound changes he posits predict regular development into  $\square$ *nōrca*. Furthermore it is inelegant, in that it depends crucially on the sporadicness of a particular sound change. In this paper, I posit that syncope of medial short vowels after *ov*, early enough for the resulting *\*ou* to become *ū* (as above in the derivation of *nūdus*), was in fact the result of a **regular** sound change, motivated elsewhere in the Latin lexicon; and I show how the words containing Classical Latin *ō* for historical *\*ovV* can have been created later than that, or recreated by analogy, and then undergone **another** regular sound change later of *\*ovV* > *ō*. *Noverca*, however, can have dodged all these developments by taking advantage of the presence of *r* following its *\*ovV*: since *r* is of such high sonority, we can posit that the result of syncope on *\*novVrca* was not disyllabic  $\square$ *nourca* but rather trisyllabic *novrca*, with a syllabic *r*. Thus sound changes affecting tautosyllabic *ou*, or *ov* followed by vowels, would not apply to it. And there is a known sound change in Latin which produces *er* from syllabic *r* (as in, e.g., *ager* ‘field’ < *agrs*: Sihler 1994). Thus the history I propose for Latin *\*ovV* overcomes both of the faults of Sihler’s and Sommer’s: It does account for (the apparently often-overlooked) *noverca*; and the analysis is based chiefly on sound changes that are independently motivated within Latin and on plausible morphological analogies, so it does not need to resort to sporadic sound change as an explanatory device.

### Selected references:

Sihler, Andrew L. 1994. *New Comparative Grammar of Greek and Latin*. New York, Oxford University Press.

Sommer, Ferdinand. 1902. *Handbuch der lateinischen Laut- und Formenlehre: eine Einführung in das sprachwissenschaftliche Studium des Lateins*. Heidelberg, Carl Winter.