

A Suggested Emended Reading of Iudicum 3:16

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ABSTRACT • This short note makes a case that *in medio* in Iudicum 3:16 should be read as *ab medio*.

KEYWORDS • Judg 3:15–25 – dagger – *palmus* measure – *anceps*

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG • Die kurze Notiz schlägt vor, *in medio* in Ri 3,16 zu *ab medio* zu emendieren.

SCHLAGWORTE • Ri 3,15–25 – Dolch – *palmus*-Maß – *anceps*

In the account of Aod’s stealth assassination of Moabite King Eglon presented in Iudicum 3:15–25, Eglon rises from his seat in anticipation of auspicious tidings from Aod. The left-handed Aod, however, draws a dagger strapped to his right thigh and plunges its entire length into Eglon’s large belly. Leaving the dagger lodged in its victim, Aod then locks the king’s secluded private quarters from the inside and makes good his escape via some other means of exit.

The weapon itself is described in v. 16, the Hebrew text stating that it was a *gomed* in length, a measurement still a matter of debate among scholars. The LXX gives the length of the weapon as a *spithamē* or half-cubit span of about 9 inches.¹ The Vulgata, however, complicates the description of the dagger by attaching the given measurement – a *palmus manus* – not to the length of the dagger but rather to the length of its *capulus* or hilt:

1 Because the cubit and its subdivisions dovetail with foot/inch measure—1 cubit \cong 18 inches—length will be discussed in inches; for reference, 18 in. = 45.72 cm.

qui fecit sibi gladium ancipitem habentem in medio capulum longitudinis palmae manus et accinctus est eo subter sagum in dextro femore

he fashioned for himself a dagger having in the middle a hilt as long as a man's palm, and he bound it to his right thigh under his garment.²

Here the dagger is described as having its hilt *in the middle* of the weapon when it should be at the other end of the weapon opposite the blade.

The *palmus* could be one of three lengths: (1) a small palm of 4 fingerbreadths or about 3 inches, a sixth of a cubit; (2) a large palm measured from the tip of the middle finger to the wrist, closely corresponding to the span of 9 inches; and (3) the literal space taken up by a man's fist wrapped around the hilt, about 4 inches. The problem, though, is that whatever the length of the palm, the hilt is puzzlingly said to be situated in the middle of the weapon.

The *Nova Vulgata* resolves the issue by giving the overall length of the dagger as a palm—undoubtedly the longest of the measurements mentioned above—and by omitting anything having to do with the hilt:

Fecitque Aod sibi gladium ancipitem longitudinis palmae manus et accinctus est eo subter vestem in dextro femore

And Aod fashioned for himself a two-edged dagger the length of a man's palm, and he bound it to his right thigh under his garment.

This resolution, however, is not based on any Latin manuscript evidence but rather on the intention to bring the *Vulgata* into accord with critical editions of the Hebrew and Greek texts which give the length of the dagger without mentioning the hilt.

Suggested here is that the original composition in Latin was clear and unambiguous, a minor scribal error subsequently introducing the confusion. The problem lies in the *in medio*, "in the middle"; *ab medio*, "from the middle," would make better sense, informing the reader that the hilt, extending from the middle of the dagger, made up half the dagger's length. Thus if the hilt was just long enough to accommodate a man's fist – about 4 inches – the full length of the dagger would have been about 8 inches.³ The wording emphasizes the compactness of the weapon; a dagger's blade, usually longer than the hilt, was in this instance no longer than the hilt.

The error probably crept in when a scribe came to *ancipitem* and took it not as meaning that the dagger had two edges but rather that it had *two blades*, each opposite the other with the hilt in the middle between them. With this mental picture in mind, the scribe unwittingly mis-copied *ab* as *in*.

² Unless otherwise noted, English translations are the author's own.

³ The short length of the dagger is obliquely attested by the grisly notation in v. 22 that the hilt went into the wound after the blade so deeply that body fat closed over the butt of the hilt. In order to achieve optimal penetration of a large target with a short dagger having no crossguard, the weapon would have to be punched home with the heel of the hand after the initial penetration.

The error has been repeated in vernacular translations from the venerable Douay-Rheims to the recent German Tusculum-Vulgate:

Who made himself a two edged sword, hauing in the middes a haft in length the palme of a hand, and was girded therewith vnder his callocke on the right thigh.

Er machte sich ein zweischneidiges Schwert, das in der Mitte einen Griff hatte von der Länge einer Hand, und rüstete sich damit unter seinem Gewand am rechten Oberschenkel.

A rogue digital translation, the Catholic Public Domain Version, actually attempts to correct the error:

And he made for himself a two-edged sword, having a handle, reaching to the middle, the length of the palm of a hand. And he was girded with it under his cloak, on the right thigh.

The problem here is that *in medio* would have to be read as *ad medium* – “to the middle” – not only the preposition but also the noun requiring emendation; Occam's razor would favor *ab medio* as previously suggested.

In conclusion, *in medio* is probably a scribal error for *ab medio*, and the scholarly apparatus of critical editions should note that *in medio* should be read as *ab medio*.