<o> for /u/

There are a number of processes which led to the possibility of using <o> as an old-fashioned spelling to represent /u/. I will begin by discussing examples which may be attributed to the following sound changes:

(1) /ɔ/ in final syllables was raised to /u/ before most consonants and consonant clusters in the course of the third century BC, e.g. Old Latin *filios* > *filius* 'son';

(2) /ɔ/ was raised to /u/ in a closed non-initial syllable during the second century BC, e.g. **eontis* > *euntis* 'going (gen. sg.)';

(3) /ɔ/ > /u/ before /l/ followed by any vowel other than /i/ and /eː/ in non-initial syllables (Sen 2015: 15–28), e.g. **famelos* > **famolos* > *famulus* 'servant' (cf. *familia* 'household').

For various reasons, including the relatively late confusion of /ɔː/ and /u/ discussed directly below, and the difficulty of removing false positives from searches in the database, trying to establish the rate at which old-fashioned <o> for /u/ appears in the epigraphic spellings of the first four centuries AD is not practical. In his list of changes wrought by time, all of which seem to be seen as deep archaisms, Quintilian includes some examples of type (1):

quid o atque u permutata inuicem? ut "Hecoba" et "nutrix Culchidis" et "Pulixena" scriberentur, ac, ne in Graecis id tantum notetur, "dederont" et "probaueront".

What about *o* and *u* taking each other's place? So that we find written *Hecoba* for *Hecuba* and *nutrix Culchidis* for *Colchidis*, and *Pulixena* for *Polyxena*, and, so as not to only give examples from Greek words, *dederont* for *dederunt* and *probaueront* for *probauerunt*. (Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria* 1.4.16)

Apart from after /u/, /w/ and /kʷ/, where the raising of /ɔ/ was retarded until the first century BC, which is discussed below (Chapter 8), there are few cases of <o> for <u> arising from

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these contexts in the corpora. Even where we do find <o>, a confounding factor in identifying old-fashioned spelling of /u/ of these types is the lowering of /u/ to [o] which eventually led in most Romance varieties to the merger of /u/ and /ɔ:/. According to Adams (2013: 63–70), this can be dated to between the third and fifth centuries AD, and did not take place at all in Africa.[1] This requires him to identify a number of forms which show <o> for /u/ as containing old-fashioned spelling (or having other explanations) in the Claudius Tiberianus letters (Adams 1977: 9–11, 52–3; 2013: 63–4).

He sees *posso* (P. Mich. VIII 469/CEL 144) not as a rendering of *possum*, but a morphological regularisation with the normal first singular present ending which shows up elsewhere; this is quite plausible. Also plausible, given the spelling with final <n>, is the influence of the preverb *con-* on the preposition *cum*, which is spelt *con* in 468/142 (8 times) and 471/146 (twice), but old-fashioned spelling could also be a factor.

The origin of the adverb *minus* 'less', is extremely uncertain. It could go back to **min-u-s*, since /u/ is also found in the stem of the related verb *minuō* 'I lessen'; this may also be the origin of the neuter of the comparative *minor* 'smaller, lesser' (Leumann 1977: 543; Sihler 1995: 360). If this is correct, the <o> in the final of *quominos* (470/145) would not be old-fashioned. But alternative explanations would see adverbial *minus* and the neuter of the comparative both coming from **minos > minus* (although this would have to be somehow secondary, since the usual comparative suffix is **-i̯os-*; Meiser 1998: 154; Weiss 2020: 384). If *minus* does come from **minus* rather than **minos*, *quominos* could be a false archaism, by influence from comparative *minus*, since the neuter of comparative adjectives normally did come from **-i̯os-*.

However, *sopera* (471/146) for *supra* certainly never had **o* in the first syllable. Adams (1977: 10–11) originally saw <o> here as due to the merger of /u/ and /ɔ:/, but subsequently (Adams 2013: 64) suggests that the scribe may have seen <o> as also being old-fashioned, bolstered by the possibility that the lack of syncope is

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[1] Adamik (2020) provides more detail on the development of the vowel system in Africa, more or less agreeing with Adams (although note that his data shows that confusion of <u> and <o> is rare but not completely absent in Africa).

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also an old-fashioned feature (*supera* is found in Livius Andronicus, in Cicero's *Aratea* and in Lucretius; Adams *loc. cit.* and OLD s.v. *supra*).[2] It is of course not impossible that the scribe was hypercorrect here, but in the absence of other evidence for this false etymology this explanation is not particularly appealing.

In my view, it is more likely that *sopera*, and perhaps *quominos*, suggests that either the author, Claudius Terentianus, or the scribe, was an early adopter of lowered [o] for /u/ (and note that both cases of <o> are in paradigmatically isolated formations which may have made it difficult for the scribe to identify which vowel was involved).[3] It is also possible that one or both were not native speakers of Latin, which may also have led to problems in identifying the vowel for the scribe.

There are quite a number of cases of <o> for /u/ in the curse tablets (see Table 2), but I am doubtful of how many really reflect archaisms. *con* (Kropp 1.4.2/2), *con* (twice), *co* (twice, 11.1.1/37) for *cum* can be explained in the same way as in the Tiberianus letters, while second declension nominative singular masculine forms in *-o(s)* may be due to influence from other languages: Celtic in the case of *Secundo*, *Secuno*, *Ssecundo* (8.1/1, Pannonia, first half of the second century AD), if it really represents *Secundus*.[4] This tablet also has *uolontas* for *uoluntās*, but it uses <u> for /o/ in *lucuiat* (apparently for *loquiat* or *loquiant*, an active equivalent of *loquātur* or *loquantur*), as well as a number of spellings which cannot be explained as due to normal features of spoken Latin (<i> for /ɛ/ in *ageri* for *agere* and *limbna* for *lingua*), so we cannot be sure *uolontas* does not arise from the writer's problems with spelling or abnormal phonology.

The fairly late date of *cor]pos* (1.4.4/13) for *corpus* and *paretator* (3.3/1) for *parentātur* allow them to be attributed to lowering of /u/; both also contain other substandard spellings.

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[2] In Adams (1977: 11) he suggested it was due to confusion between *super* and *supra*.
[3] See fn. 10 regarding some other claimed instances of early [o] for /u/.
[4] The name appears in a list of enemies headed by a phrase *aduerssaro nosstro* 'our adversaries', which is presumably intended to be in the accusative plural, and which is followed by a series of names sometimes in the nominative singular and sometimes in the accusative. In the case of *Paconios*, *[G]erillano* and *Varaios* (10.1/1) from Delos, we probably have to reckon with influence from Greek, although this tablet is anyway dated to the second century BC, when an <o> spelling was not so very old-fashioned.

Table 2 *<o> for /u/ in the curse tablets*

	Text	Date	Place
con	Kropp 1.4.2/2	100–50 BC	Nomentum, Latium
capilo	Kropp 1.4.2/3	100–50 BC	Nomentum, Latium
nascitor nascitor	Kropp 1.4.4/5	Second–third century AD	Rome
corpos	Kropp 1.4.4/13	Fourth–fifth century AD	Rome?
questo	Kropp 2.1.3/2	First century AD	Hispania Tarraconensis
consilio	Kropp 2.2.2/1	50–1 BC	Hispania Baetica
morbo	Kropp 2.2.2/1	50–1 BC	Hispania Baetica
dioso	Kropp 2.2.3/1	First century BC	Hispania Baetica
paretator	Kropp 3.3/1	Fourth century AD	Brandon
capolare	Kropp 3.7/1	No date	Caistor St. Edmund
eorom	Kropp 4.3.1/1	Mid-second century AD	Gallia Aquitania
grano	Kropp 4.4.1/1	First century AD	Gallia Narbonensis
nullom	Kropp 5.1.2/1	Mid-second century AD	Germania Superior
conscios	Kropp 5.1.7/1	First–third century AD	Germania Superior
Secundo	Kropp 8.1/1	First half of the second century AD	Pannonia Superior
Secuno	Kropp 8.1/1	First half of the second century AD	Pannonia Superior
Ssecundo	Kropp 8.1/1	First half of the second century AD	Pannonia Superior
uolontas	Kropp 8.1/1	First half of the second century AD	Pannonia Superior
Paconios	Kropp 10.1/1	Second half of the second century BC	Delos
Paconios	Kropp 10.1/1	Second half of the second century BC	Delos

Table 2 (*cont.*)

	Text	Date	Place
[G]erillano	Kropp 10.1/1	Second half of the second century BC	Delos
Varaios	Kropp 10.1/1	Second half of the second century BC	Delos
illoro	Kropp 11.1.1/5	Second–third century AD	Carthage
iloro	Kropp 11.1.1/5	Second–third century AD	Carthage
Cusconio	Kropp 11.1.1/6	Second–third century AD or first century AD	Carthage, Africa
cursoro[m](?)	Kropp 11.1.1/20	Third century AD	Carthage, Africa
manos	Kropp 11.1.1/25	Middle of the fourth century AD	Carthage, Africa
eo(?)]rom	Kropp 11.1.1/32	Second–third century AD (?)	Carthage, Africa
co	Kropp 11.1.1/37	Middle of the third century AD	Carthage, Africa
co	Kropp 11.1.1/37	Middle of the third century AD	Carthage, Africa
con	Kropp 11.1.1/37	Middle of the third century AD	Carthage, Africa
con	Kropp 11.1.1/37	Middle of the third century AD	Carthage, Africa
deo	Kropp 11.2.1/6	Third century AD	Africa
meo	Kropp 11.2.1/6	Third century AD	Africa
Incleto	Kropp 11.2.1/31	Third century AD	Africa

Undated *capolare* and *capeolare* (3.7/1) for *capitulāre* could also be due to lowering (in an inscription whose spelling is anyway highly deviant). And *nascitor* for *nascitur* (twice, 1.4.4/5), dated to the second or third centuries AD, could also be a precocious example of this; so could *conscios* (5.1.7/1) for *conscius* if it

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belongs towards the end of its date range. Both contain other substandard spellings. Having accepted that [o] for /u/ might be attested in the Claudius Tiberianus letters, I would suggest that this may also be a possibility for *eorom* (4.3.1/1) for *eōrum*, and *nullom* (5.1.2/1) for *nūllum*, also from the second century AD. The preponderance of cases in the final syllable might point to lowering occurring there first, in parallel to the situation of /i/ to [e].

Given their datings to the first century BC and first century AD, *capilo* (1.4.2.3) for *capillum*, *questo* (2.1.3/2) for *quaestum*, *cos[i]lio*, *morbo* (2.2.2/1) for *cōnsilium*, *morbus*, *dioso* (2.2.3/1) for *deorsum*, *granom* (4.4.1/1) for *grānum* could be old-fashioned spellings. Some of these texts also contain substandard spellings. None of them is in a context in which a mistake of ablative for nominative or accusative is very easy to envisage.

If Adams is right that the lowering of /u/ to /o/ did not take place in Africa (but see footnotes 1 and 10), old-fashioned spelling becomes a plausible explanation for a few instances there of <o> for /u/ from the second to third centuries AD. *Incleto* for *Inclitum* (11.2.1/31) I attribute to influence from the Greek second declension ending -ov, since the text has other examples of interference from Greek spelling.[5] 11.1.1/32 has *eo(?)]rom* for *eōrum*, but in addition to substandard spellings has a number of mechanical errors. So does 11.2.1/6, and there is also the possibility that *p]er deo meo* reflects an error in what case goes with *per* rather than an old-fashioned spelling of *deum meum*. The other example of a noun following *per* in this text is *Bonosa* for *Bonōsam*, so the author may have thought that *per* took the ablative. But we do find *illoro*, *iloro* for *illōrum* (11.1.1/5), *Cusconio* for *Cuscōnium* (11.1.1/6), *cursoro [m]* for *cursōrum* (11.1.1/20). There is no reason to imagine that *Cusconio* is an ablative since it forms part of a list of four names in the accusative. Many of these texts also contain substandard spellings.[6]

Overall, it is striking how many cases of <o> for /u/ there are in the curse tablets. I am reluctant to see them all as old-fashioned features, especially since few of the texts show any other such spellings; in practically all of the texts there are several other endings in -*us* or -*um,* and there seems no reason why a single word should be marked out in this way, especially in cases like the three names in sequence *Cosconio Ianuarium et Rufum* (11.1.1/6). I have more sympathy than Adams does with the idea that we may be seeing early signs of the lowering of /u/ to [o] that is better evidenced in much later texts; one could even suppose that in African Latin /u/ did lower to [o] in final syllables as elsewhere, but since /ɔː/ did not merge with /u/, [o] simply remained an allophone of /u/. One should also note that the intrinsic difficulties in the writing and reading of (often very damaged) curse tablets do make them more unreliable than other types of epigraphic evidence (Kropp 2008a: 8).[7] On the other hand, all the examples of <o> for /u/ from the curse tablets do come from original /ɔ/, unlike with *sopera* and perhaps *quominus* in the Claudius Tiberianus letters, and a few of them are very early compared to the emergence of good evidence for the merger of /ɔː/ and /u/. So I do not rule out the possibility that some of these <o> spellings are old-fashioned.

There is one Augustan example of <o> for /u/ < /ɔ/ in the letters, in the form of *Dìdom* (CEL 8, 24–21 BC), which appears to represent the name *Didium*. It seems strange that an old-fashioned spelling should be used here but not in the name *[I]ucundum* with which it is conjoined (or indeed in the other accusative singular second declension form in this letter, *decrìminatum*), but no other explanation arises.[8] Another damaged letter (CEL 166, around AD 150) has

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for *Obsecram*; 11.1.1/20: *os* for *hōs*, *ipsoru* for *ipsōrum*; 11.2.1/6: *obblegate* for *obligāte*, *illa* for *illam*, *isapientiam* for *sapientiam*, *demado* for *dēmandō*, *c]elum*, *celum* for *caelum*, *terra* for *terram*.

[7] As well as intentional obfuscation and variation, given the magical nature of these texts, as Katherine McDonald (p.c.) points out to me.

[8] Cugusi (1973: 661) suggests that the ending -*om* is analogical on words where the <o> was generally preserved in spelling like *paruom* and *seruom*, but this does not seem particularly plausible given how much more common words in -*um* were. And, again, why only in *Dìdom*?

epistolám, which is reasonably likely to be an old-fashioned spelling (assuming this is not an early example of lowering of /u/).

There are two possible examples in the Bu Njem ostraca, but *kamellarios* (O. BuNjem 76) is very uncertain: it could be a nominative singular for accusative, which is common in the ostraca (Adams 1994: 96–102), but could also be an accusative plural (this is how Adams understands it). The other is *]isṭolạ[* (114), which may reflect *epistola* for *epistula*; but apart from the fact that the reading is not certain, there is a certain amount of evidence for confusion between /ɔ:/ and /u/ at Bu Njem (see fn. 10).

Another case of <o> for <u> occurs in *cui*, the dative singular of the relative pronoun *quī* and the indefinite pronoun *quis*. An older form is *quoiei* (CIL I². 11, 583, 585) and it had come to be spelt *quoi* around the start of the first century AD, according to Quintilian:

illud nunc melius, quod "cui" tribus, quas praeposui, litteris enotamus, in quo pueris nobis ad pinguem sane sonum qu et oi utebantur, tantum ut ab illo "qui" distingueretur.

We now do better to spell *cui* with three letters, as I have given it here. When I was a boy, they used *qu* and *oi*, reflecting its fuller sound, just for the purpose of distinguishing it from *qui*. (Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria* 1.7.27)

The passages of Velius Longus (13.7 = GL 8.4.1–3) and Marius Victorinus (4.31–32 = GL 6.13.11–12) quoted on pp. 166–7 suggest that the spelling *quoi*, and its genitive equivalent *quoius*, was also old-fashioned for these writers. We find no examples of *quoi* in the corpora, but the strange spelling *cuoì*, *[c]ụ[o]i* (TPSulp. 48) in the parts of a tablet written by the scribe presumably reflects a sort of compromise between *quoi* and *cui* (the non-scribal writer spells the word *cuì*). I know of no other examples of this spelling in Latin epigraphy.

Another conceivable instance of an old-fashioned spelling involving <o> are *fornus* (O. BuNjem 7), *for[num* (49), *fornarius* (8, 25), *foṛ[narius]* (10) for *furnus*, *furnārius*. The sequence /ur/ < *or* or *ṛ* in the standard forms of these words is unexpected; a dialectal sound change or borrowing from other languages is often supposed (I have argued for the latter: Zair 2017). So these words could represent the original, older form, which is attested in

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manuscripts of Varro and by writers on language (Zair 2017: 259). However, influence from *fornāx* 'furnace, oven' is also possible (thus Adams 1994: 104);[9] another possibility is that /u/ was lowered by the following /r/ in syllable coda, which by this time was 'dark' in Latin (Sen and Zair 2022). This might be particularly likely if there was some confusion of /ɔ:/ and /u/ at Bu Njem.[10]

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[9] Marichal (1992: 47) curiously says that the <o> spelling in *fornus* could be under the influence of *fornarius*, but the <u> spelling was probably standard also in *furnārius* (at least the spelling with <u> is the only one found in other epigraphical contexts; TLL s.v. *furnārius* observes the spelling with <o> in some manuscripts of Augustine).

[10] Adams (1994: 104; 2007: 564; 2013: 65) has repeatedly stated that there is little or no evidence of this, with exceptions disregarded as special cases. But he provides no good alternative explanation for *ura* for *hōra* (O. BuNjem 113), while I would see *Urtato* for *Hortātō* in the same ostracon as the result of lengthening of /ɔ/ to [ɔ:] before /r/ followed by confusion with /u/ rather than as closing by coda /r/, which is unexpected at this stage (see Sen and Zair 2022). Nor does he mention *Iobenalị* (O. BuNjem 148) for *Iuuenālī*.