

Peatland poetry from the past: the neighbour of Catullus (first half of the 1st century BCE)

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SUMMARY

Texts from Antiquity include valuable information on how ancient cultures perceived peatlands and other wetlands. Catullus - a poet from the first half of the 1st century BCE - wrote a cynical wetland-related poem in which he wished one of his neighbours to fall into a sludgy “pool” because he was too stupid to notice that his wife had affairs with various lovers. The poem gives some indication of how the Romans designated unconsolidated wetland sediments (gyttja).

KEY WORDS: ancient societies, Latin poetry, past landscapes, Roman literature, Roman poets, wetland appreciation

INTRODUCTION

Written texts from ancient societies are a great asset for present-day studies of past wetlands and other landscape types. In 2018 research was initiated to inventory such texts and analyse them from a (palaeo)ecological viewpoint (de Klerk & Joosten 2019). There is a cynical wetland-related poem by the Roman author Catullus in which he bluntly says what he thinks about one of his townsmen and what should happen to him. In this article the poem is presented to an audience of wetland-, peatland- and earth-scientists.

THE POET

Gaius Valerius Catullus (Figure 1A) was born around 84 BCE into a wealthy family in Verona (Figure 2) and lived in Rome for some time (Howatson 1997, Wiseman 2007). As an artist, he departed from the traditional Roman writing style of his time and orientated himself towards ancient Greek literature (Sheets 2007). He fell in love with a married woman - called Lesbia in his poems (Figure 1B) - who possibly (but not certainly) was Clodia, the wife of Quintus Caecilius Metellus Celer (consul in 60 BCE) (Howatson 1997, Dyson 2007). Various poems by Catullus mirror his intense love as well as his desperation when he found out that she had - next to him - various other lovers (Syndikus 1996). Catullus died young, probably in or around 54 BCE (Syndikus 1996, Howatson 1997) and left behind a collection of almost 120 poems

THE POEM

In ‘poem 17’ a wetland plays a prominent role:

“O Colonia, you wish to have a long bridge [for people] to play and dance on [literary: “which is ready to dance upon”], but you fear the useless posts of the little bridge [that you have now] that stands on reused little planks and may fall sprawling backwards in the depths of the swamp. May a good bridge be made for you according to your yearnings, on which even the rites of the dancing Salii can be performed, if, Colonia, you give me the pleasure of the greatest laughter. There is a neighbour [more accurately “townsman”] of mine who I wish to plunge headlong - head over heels - from your bridge into the sludge [at the place] where the deep pit of the pool and foul swamp is the darkest and deepest. This man is extremely stupid, not cleverer than a two-year old boy dozing in the rocking arms of his father. He is married with a girl in her flowering youth; this girl - more tender than a frail young goat - is worth to be guarded more cautiously than the darkest grapes, yet he allows her to play as she wants. He does not care a straw, does not rise for himself, but lies like an alder felled by a Ligurian axe in a ditch, knowing as much of everything as if she would not exist anywhere. So is my blockhead: he sees nothing, hears nothing, he does not know who he is himself, and whether he exists at all or not. Now I want to throw him headlong from your bridge, perhaps it would shake him out of his stupid lethargy and leave behind his sluggish spirit in the heavy slurry, like the horseshoe [literary: “iron sole”] of a mule sticks in a deep pit.”



Figure 1. A: Fantasy-drawing of Catullus published in the English edition of the poems of Catullus by Nott (1795); B: Lesbia as imagined by John Reinhard Weguelin (1849–1927) (<https://jenikirbyhistory.getarchive.net/media/john-reinhard-weguelin-lesbia-6489a7>); C: The Adige River at Verona by Frits Thaulow (1847–1906) showing the Ponte Pietra (the Roman stone bridge) in the late 19th century BCE (The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore (USA), <https://art.thewalters.org/object/37.97/>).

“O colonia, quae cupis ponte loedere longo, et salire paratum habes, sed vereris inepta crura ponticuli axulis stantis in redivivis, ne supinus eat cavaque in palude recumbat; sic tibi bonus ex tua pons libidine fiat, in quo vel Salisubsili sacra suscipiantur: munus hoc mihi maximi da, colonia, risus. Quendam municipem meum de tuo volo ponte ire praecipitem in lutum per caputque pedesque, verum totius ut lacus putidaeque paludis lividissima maximeque est profunda vorago. Insulsissimus est homo, nec sapit pueri instar bimuli tremula patris dormientis in ulna. Quoi cum sit viridissimo nupta flore puella (et puella tenellulo delicatior haedo, adservanda nigerrimis diligentius uvis), ludere hanc sinit, ut lubet, nec pili facit uni nec se sublevat ex sua parte; sed velut alnus in fossa Liguri iacet supernata securi, tantundem omnia sentiens quam si nulla sit usquam, talis iste meus stupor nil videt, nihil audit, ipse qui sit, utrum sit an non sit, id quoque nescit. Nunc eum volo de tuo ponte mittere pronum, si pote stolidum repente excitare veterum et supinum animum in gravi derelinquere caeno, ferream ut soleam tenaci in voragine mula.” (Poem 17).

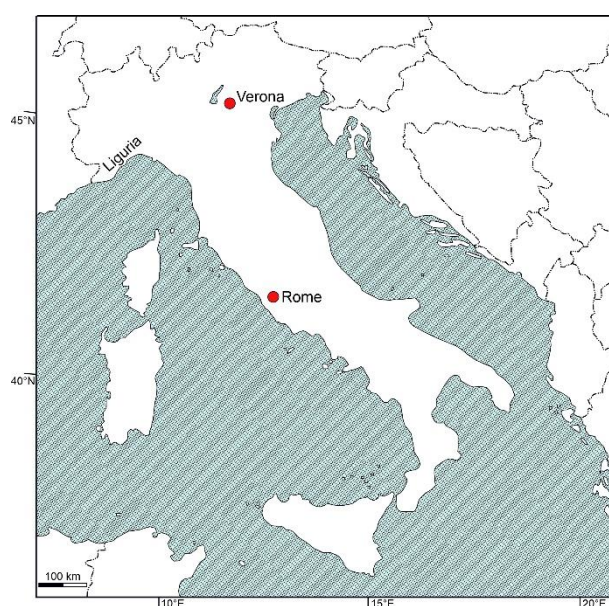


Figure 2. Map of Italy showing the locations of Verona, Rome and the region of Liguria.

COMMENTS ON THE TEXT

Verona had become a Roman colony (“Colonia”) in 89 BCE (Bolla 2019), a few years before Catullus was born. A wooden bridge was constructed over the Adige River in Verona that was later replaced with a stone arch bridge in the early 1st century BCE - the

Ponte Pietra (“stone bridge”; Figure 1C) - that was modified in the Medieval, destroyed during World War II, and rebuilt in the late 1950s (O’Connor 1993, Bolla 2019). However, the Colonia in ‘poem 17’ was not necessarily the hometown of Catullus and may have been any other small town that existed (Sherman-White *et al.* 1996) or was entirely fictional.

The poem is highly cynical and ridicules a townsman who, apparently, did not realise that his young wife played around with men as she liked. In general, the Roman attitude towards marriage was ambiguous. On the one hand adultery by women was despised and husbands and fathers were allowed to use severe punishments (including death) for their adulterous wives or daughters, whereas adultery by men was common and generally without negative consequences unless the mistress was a married woman (Dyson 2007, Jacobs 2015). It seems possible that Catullus based elements of his 'Poem 17' on the promiscuous Lesbia/Clodia and her husband.

The "dancing Salii" - as explained by Bailey & North (1996), Holford-Strevens (1996), Glinister (2011) and Ferri (2021) - were priests of the god Mars in Rome and were allegedly initiated around 700 BCE by Numa Pompilius, the mythological second king of Rome. In other cities they were also connected to Hercules. On March 19th and possibly also on October 19th they performed a procession - dressed as ancient foot-soldiers - with intense dancing and the singing of the 'Carmen Saliare' of which the text in archaic Latin was already incomprehensible during the times of the Roman Republic (see also Varro, 'On the Latin language' VII:26/27).

The darkest grapes are the ripe ones, and apparently, they were regularly stolen from vineyards and needed to be guarded. Liguria was a region along the Mediterranean coast at the foot of the Alps (Figure 2) that, according to Diodorus of Sicily ('Historical library' V:39), was rich in forests and in which, consequently, forestry flourished. Diodorus explicitly names heavy iron axes that Catullus mentions also and which, thus, will have been famous or at least well known in the Roman society.

The role of the "swamp" in the poem is evident: it was one of the most desperate and dark settings Catullus could imagine. The connection with a bridge suggests that the imagined wetland was wide, and a river with wetlands along its banks comes to mind. The succession of a wooden to a stone bridge in the poem fits the actual bridge-sequence in Verona, although in the poem a stone bridge had not yet been constructed. But it is not certain that such a riverine wetland was the kind of "swamp" Catullus envisaged or if he made it up based on his personal observations of wetlands. Wetland-related words were used differently by different Roman authors, or even by the same authors (see Traina 1988, Glare 2016, de Klerk *et al.* in press): the word "palus" and its derivative adjectives used by Catullus mean primarily "mire", but the words were also used for pools of standing water (although the prime word for these is "stagnum"). The word "lacus" - that Catullus used in

the same sentence - signifies not only a "lake" but frequently also "ponds" or "pools". The word "lutum" - the substance into which the neighbour should fall - means "mud", "clay" or "sludge", and may also have been in use for peat (de Klerk *et al.* 2022). Also "caenum" - that Catullus used towards the end of the poem - means "mud". The second-last word of the poem is "vorago" - in which the horseshoe of the mule got stuck - which means something like a "watery hollow" or "vortex" but may also designate a quagmire, a "bottomless pit" or an "abyss", and figuratively - as someone or something that devours endlessly - also a person with limitless appetite (Glare 2016). It is, thus, almost unambiguously that Catullus did not describe a "mire" in the modern sense of the term for a landscape with a peat-forming vegetation, but a fictional pool with only shallow water and thick layers of a muddy / slimy / sludgy / slurry substance that sucks-in humans when they fall into it. It is tempting to propose that this substance is gyttja, i.e., organic or clastic deposits at the base of a pond or pool that may reach such huge depths that - poetically - their settings can be designated as "abyss" or "deepest pit".

If this hypothesis is correct, the poem by Catullus gives a fair picture how the Roman cultural elite - or at least Catullus personally - perceived such deposits as dirty, sticky, or slimy. However, there may be poetical exaggeration in his use of these words.

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