



T. Peter Wiseman

The Prehistory of Roman Hellenism

I must first apologise for my presumption in addressing this audience, since I am not an archaeologist. I am a classicist who works primarily with texts, and the methods and preconceptions of classicists and archaeologists do not always coincide. Indeed, I think some archaeologists would regard the title of our host institution, and the very idea of 'classical archaeology', *archeologia classica*, as a deplorable anachronism, implying an obsolete way of looking at Greco-Roman antiquity as if the 'classic' texts were somehow privileged.

When we consider the question of Hellenism, the influence of Greek culture on Roman society, it must be admitted that the classic texts are profoundly misleading. One in particular, Horace's account of the origin of Roman poetry, has exerted an absurdly powerful influence (Horace *Epistles* 2.1.156-63):

*Graecia capta ferum uictorem cepit et artes
intulit agresti Latio. sic horridus ille
defluxit numerus Saturnius et graue uirus
munditiae pepulere; sed in longum tamen aeuum
manserunt hodieque manent uestigia ruris.
serus enim Graecis admouit acumina chartis,
et post Punica bella quietus quaerere coepit
quid Sophocles et Thespis et Aeschylus utile ferrent.*

When Greece was captured, it took the fierce victor captive and brought the arts into rustic Latium. That's how the crude Saturnian metre drained away, and elegance drove out the offensive smell; but traces of the farmyard remained for a long time, and still remain today. For it was only late that [the Roman] applied his intelligence to Greek pages, and in the peace after the Punic Wars began to ask what use Sophocles and Thespis and Aeschylus could be.

Here is a classic author telling us that Rome was innocent of Greek cultural influence until the conquest of Greece after the Punic wars in the early second century BC; and generations of classicists have believed him.

Of course the second and first centuries BC did indeed see a real Hellenization of Roman culture, with the import of luxury goods from the Greek world, the use of marble for statuary and public buildings, the conscious attempt by Roman authors to equal or surpass the masterpieces of Greek literature, and so on. But the idea that there was no Greek influence on Rome before the Punic Wars is an absurdity, as the material evidence of archaeology makes very clear.

A few of the best-known examples are: (1) the *cista Ficoroni*, made in Rome in the second half of the fourth century BC, with its elegantly engraved scene of the binding of Amykos by Polydeukes, a story from the voyage of the Argonauts¹; (2) the Silenus-mask terracotta antefix of the early fifth century BC, found beneath the Basilica Giulia and probably from the archaic temple of Castor²; (3) the fragmentary statue-group of Pallas Athene escorting Herakles to Olympos, from a temple in the Forum Bovarium built in the second half of the sixth century BC³; and (4) the remains of an Athenian black-figure mixing-bowl of about 560 BC, showing the return of Hephaistos to Olympos and found at the site next to the Comitium which thanks to Filippo Coarelli we can identify as the Volcanal⁴.

The antefix, the statue-group and the ceramic fragments can be used to illustrate the early stages of Rome because Rome is where they were found. But the *cista Ficoroni* was found near Palestrina; how do we know it was made in Rome? The answer, of course, is because it says so, on the inscription cut by Novios Plautios, the craftsman who made it⁵. It is not the artefact itself that gives us the information, but the words inscribed on it – and they take us into a world where neither the excavating archaeologist nor the student of classical literature can claim a particular expertise. Let us look at one or two other bronzes engraved in the late fourth century BC by the colleagues and contemporaries of Novios Plautios.

On a *cista* in Berlin, we see Apollo and Dionysos, named in fourth-century Latin as Apolo and Leiber⁶. Note the non-duplicated consonant and the EI diphthong which would later be spelt as a long I:

Ἀπόλλων = APOLO > APOLLO
Λεΐβερ = LEIBER > LIBER

On a *cista* in the Villa Giulia, we see Helen and Achilles, named as Elena and Aciles⁷. There were no aspirates in early Latin, and again we have a non-duplicated consonant:

Ἑλένη = ELENA > HELENA
Ἀχιλλεύς = ACILES > ACHILLES

On a mirror in the Villa Giulia, we see a Paniskos and the satyr Marsyas, with the signature of the artist Vibius Philippus, spelt Vibis Pilipus⁸. Again, no aspirate and a non-duplicated consonant:

Φίλιππος = PILIPVS > PHILIPPUS

If we go back a century and a half earlier, to the Satricum inscription of about 500 BC, we find evidence of an even earlier stage in Latin orthography before the 'rhotacism' of intervocalic S⁹. The Poplios Valesios whose *suodales* set up the dedication would have called himself Poplios Valerios by the third century BC:

POPLIOS VALESIOS > POPLIOS VALERIOS > PVBLIVS VALERIVS

The same archaic spelling appears in the first line of the Arval hymn, *e nos, Lases, iuuate*¹⁰:

LASES > LARES

Now, bearing all that in mind, let us go back to the sixth-century statue group from the Forum Bovarium. It faced the Ara Maxima of the deified Herakles, 300 metres away across a piazza which was believed to have taken its name from the cattle of Geryoneus, captured by Herakles in his tenth Labour¹¹. On his way back to Argos, the hero came to the Arkadian Evander's colony of Pallantion at the site of Rome¹².

¹ BORDENACHE BATTAGLIA, EMILIOZZI 1990, 211–226 (no. 68); *CIL* I² 561; *ILLRP* 1197.

² CRISTOFANI 1990, 63 and tav. VI (no. 3.4.1).

³ *Ibid.* 119–120 and tav. IX (no. 5.1.1)

⁴ *Ibid.* 56 and tav. II (no. 3.1.22); COARELLI 1983, 161–178.

⁵ RITSCHLIUS 1862, tav. I(a).

⁶ BORDENACHE BATTAGLIA, EMILIOZZI 1979, 50–54 (no. 5); BORDENACHE BATTAGLIA, EMILIOZZI 1990, 277–280 (no. 83); *CIL* I² 563, *ILLRP* 1198.

⁷ BORDENACHE BATTAGLIA, EMILIOZZI 1990, 277–280 (no. 83).

⁸ GERHARD 1884–97, V, tav. 45; *CIL* I² 552, *ILLRP* 1201.

⁹ STIBBE *ET AL.* 1980, plate 1.

¹⁰ RITSCHLIUS 1862, n. 5, tav. XXXVI; *CIL* I² 2, *ILLRP* 4.

¹¹ Propertius 4.9.15–20, Ovid *Fasti* 1.579–82.

¹² Livy 1.7.3–14, Dionysius of Halicarnassus 1.39–42.

That story is in the eighth book of Virgil's *Aeneid*, but Virgil did not invent it. Evander's colony at Rome was known to Eratosthenes in the third century BC¹³, and the classic narrative of Herakles' tenth labour was the *Geryoneis* of the sixth-century poet Stesichoros of Himera on the north coast of Sicily, just across the water from Latium¹⁴. We know that Stesichoros referred to Evander's home town, the Arkadian Pallantion after which he named his settlement on the Tiber¹⁵, and it is quite possible that the story of Herakles' visit was part of Stesichoros' poem, or at least an early elaboration of it.

When Virgil's Evander explains to Aeneas the origin of the Ara Maxima, he mentions the two Roman families who were originally in charge of the cult (Virgil *Aeneid* 8.268-72):

*ex illo celebratus honos laetique minores
seruauere diem, primusque Potitius auctor
et domus Herculei custos Pinaria sacri
hanc aram luco statuit, quae maxima semper
dicetur nobis et erit quae maxima semper.*

Ever since that time we have honoured his name, and succeeding generations have celebrated this day with rejoicing. This altar was set up in its grove by Potitius, the first founder of these rites of Hercules, and by the Pinarii, the guardians of the rites. We shall always call it the Greatest Altar, and the greatest altar it will always be.

In his commentary on this passage, Servius reports a story omitted by Virgil, that the Pinarii came late to the inaugural sacrifice at the altar, and were thereafter banned from sharing in the banquet. And he explains the derivation of the two names (Servius on Virgil *Aeneid* 8.269):

fertur ...Potitios dici quod eorum auctor epulis sacris potitus est, Pinarios quod eis, sicut dictum est, fames epularum sacrarum indicta sit. hoc enim eis Hercules dixisse dicitur: ὑμεῖς δὲ ΠΕΙΝΩΣΕΤΕ.

It is said that the Potitii were so called because their ancestor was in charge of the sacred feast, and the Pinarii because on them, as explained above, abstention from the sacred feast had been imposed as a punishment. For this is what Hercules is said to have said to them: "As for you, you will go hungry (*peinasete*)."

Servius was writing in the fourth century AD, but the story he reports must go back to the time of the Arval hymn and the Satricum dedication, because it is an explanation not of the name Pinarius, nor yet of the name Peinarius, with the EI diphthong we saw on the Berlin *cista*, but of the name Peinasios, with intervocalic S, as it was spelt in the fifth century BC:

PEINASIOS > PEINARIOS > PINARIVS

That confirms what the Forum Boarium statue-group suggests, that the story of Herakles in Rome is very early, and that at least one episode of it was explained in Greek.

A similar argument can be constructed from the cry 'Talasio' that was traditional at Roman weddings. Two texts written within thirty years of each other in the first century BC treat it as the dative case of a proper noun. Catullus in his wedding song (61.126-7) tells the bridegroom's *concupinus* that he must now serve the god of marriage:

*...lubet
nunc seruire Talasio*

¹³ Schol. Plato *Phaedrus* 244b (Ruhnck p. 61): τετάρτη Ἰταλική. ἡ ἐν ἐρημίᾳ τῆς Ἰταλίας τὴν διατριβὴν λαχοῦσα, ἧς υἱὸς ἐγένετο Εὐάνδρος, ὃ τὸ ἐν Ἑὼμῃ τοῦ Πανὸς ἱερόν, τὸ καλούμενον Λούπερκον, κτίσας. περὶ ἧς ἔγραψεν Ἐρατοσθένης (The fourth is the Italian [Sibyl]. It was her lot to spend her life in the wilderness of Italy; her son was Evander, who founded the cult-place of Pan in Rome, which is called Luperkon. Eratosthenes wrote about her).

¹⁴ PAGE 1973, 138–54; BRIZE 1980.

¹⁵ Pausanias 8.3.1-2 (Stesichorus fr. 182).

And Livy's account of the abduction of the Sabine women by Romulus' men explains the origin of the cry as the snatching of a particularly desirable young woman for someone called Thalassius (1.9.12):

...identidem ne quis uiolaret Thalassio ferri clamitatum; inde nuptialem hanc uocem factam.
To prevent any interference they kept on shouting that she was being taken 'for Thalassius';
and so this word was used at weddings.

The traditional spelling and pronunciation had no aspiration and no duplicated consonant, and it is clear from Livy's explanation that later Romans knew those features had to be added to make sense of the word in modern Latin. That is, Talasio was indeed archaic Latin for Thalassio, but the rest of the explanation doesn't make sense, since Thalassios was not a Roman or a Latin name. In Greek, however, it was one of the names of the god Poseidon¹⁶:

Θαλασσίω = TALASIO > THALASSIO

Poseidon was the Latin Neptunus, and the games Romulus was hosting for his Latin and Sabine neighbours were in honour of Neptunus Equester¹⁷.

Thanks to Fausto Zevi, we now have good reason to believe that Tarquin's claim to Corinthian descent is likely to be historically reliable, and that the first games instituted in the valley that became the Circus Maximus were probably an imitation of the Isthmian Games for Poseidon Hippios, or Neptunus Equester in Latin¹⁸. It is possible to conjecture that they may have involved a ritual of marriage by capture, later mythologised into the Rape of the Sabine Women when the Roman foundation legend was being developed in the fourth and third centuries BC¹⁹. If so, the wedding cry Talasio, 'for the sea-god!', may date back to the reign of a Corinthian Tarquinius in the sixth century BC.

If we are right to see πεινάσετε and Θαλασσίω as Greek phrases embedded in the experience of fifth- and sixth-century archaic Rome, we may begin to understand how it comes about that the detectable history of the Greek alphabet begins in Iron-Age Latium, with the five Greek letters scratched on the pot that marked tomb no. 482 in the cemetery of Osteria dell'Osa in the period archaeologically defined as *Cultura laziale IIB*²⁰. We know that in the next phase, *Cultura laziale III*, the Latins of the eighth century BC must have been familiar with the Euboeans of Ischia, whose knowledge of the Tyrrhenian coast of Italy is archaeologically attested by their use of metals from northern Etruria and Elba.

The eighth century BC is the date of the earliest of the Palatine walls discovered by Andrea Carandini twenty years ago, and I still see no reason to doubt that the people who built those walls were as used to hearing Greek spoken at their river harbour as they were to hearing Etruscan, Oscan or even Punic²¹. And when they and their neighbours by the Tiber crossing created a common meeting place below the Capitol, perhaps some time in the seventh century BC, it seems they called their town 'Ρώμη, 'strength', a Greek word for which the unaspirated Latin spelling was a familiar name:

Ῥώμη = ROMA

It would be hard to imagine a more significant 'meeting of cultures'.

¹⁶ Aristophanes *Wasps* 1519 (= *trag. adesp.* fr. 69 Nauck), *Plutus* 396.

¹⁷ Dionysius of Halicarnassus 1.33.2, Livy 1.9.6, Plutarch *Romulus* 14.3, *Moralia* 276C (*Quaestiones Romanae* 48), Servius *auctus* on *Aeneid* 8.635, Servius on *Aeneid* 8.636, Lydus *De magistratibus* 1.30.

¹⁸ Zevi 1995, 291–314, at 307–8.

¹⁹ Wiseman 2008, 149–52.

²⁰ Peruzzi 1998, 19–22 and fig. 2. See now Canali de Rossi 2005, 165–8, who suggests that the graffito might read *NIKE* from right to left.

²¹ Wiseman 1994, 6–7. *Contra* Carandini 2002, 125–6: 'Evandro, *rhome*, gli Eubei, tutto viene per Wiseman dalla Grecia, che è una tipica inclinazione classicista cui si oppone ormai una generazione di risultati univoci provenienti dalle diverse scuole di protostoria in Italia, risultati anche questi da Wiseman ignorati. Ah, cari classicisti: niente protostoria, niente sociologia, niente etnologia, niente storia delle religioni, niente linguistica, niente protostoria e solo un pizzico di archeologia. Come potremo intenderci, con i nostri diversi generi di *imagination*?'

T. Peter Wiseman
Department of Classics and Ancient History
Amory Building
University of Exeter
E-mail: T.P.Wiseman@exeter.ac.uk

Bibliography

- BORDENACHE BATTAGLIA G., EMILIOZZI A., 1979. *Le ciste prenestine*, I Corpus: 1.1. Roma.
- BORDENACHE BATTAGLIA G., EMILIOZZI A., 1990. *Le ciste prenestine*, I Corpus: 1.2 . Rome.
- BRIZE PH., 1980. *Die Geryoneis des Stesichoros und die frühe griechische Kunst*. Würzburg.
- CANALI DE ROSSI F., 2005. *Le relazioni diplomatiche di Roma*, I. Roma.
- CARANDINI A., 2002. *Archeologia del mito*. Torino.
- COARELLI F., 1983. *Il foro romano: periodo arcaico*. Roma.
- CRISTOFANI M. (ed.), 1990. *La grande Roma dei Tarquinii*. Catalogo della mostra. Roma.
- GERHARD E., 1884-97. *Etruskische Spiegel*. Berlin.
- PAGE D., 1973. Stesichorus: the Geryonei. *Journal of Hellenic Studies*, 93, 138–54.
- PERUZZI E., 1998. *Civiltà greca nel Lazio preromano*. Studi dell'Accademia Toscana 'La Columbaria' 165. Florence.
- RITSCHLIUS F. (ed.), 1862. *Priscae Latinitatis monumenta epigraphica ad archetyporum fidem exemplis lithographis repraesentata*. Berlin.
- STIBBE C. M., COLONNA G., DE SIMONE C., VERSNEL H., 1980. *Lapis Satricanus: Archaeological, Epigraphical, Linguistic and Historical Aspects of the New Inscription from Satricum*. Archeologische Studiën van het Nederlands Instituut te Rome, Scripta Minora 5. The Hague.
- WISEMAN T. P., 1994. *Historiography and Imagination*. Exeter.
- WISEMAN T. P., 2008. *Unwritten Rome*. Exeter.
- ZEVI F., 1995. Demarato e i re "corinzi" di Roma. In A. STORCHI MARINO (ed.), *L'incidenza dell'antico: studi in memoria di Ettore Lepore*, I. Naples, 291–314.