

Fumum vendere in the Historia Augusta

By BARRY BALDWIN, Calgary (Alberta)

Though not always credited nowadays, it was Erasmus who (*Adag.* Chil. I, Centur III, prov. 41) first singled out for attention the expression *fumos vendere*. The repertoire of examples assembled by Otto¹⁾ provided the *TLL* with its collection. The expression is most frequent in the *HA*, hence in recent years it has sometimes been brought into play in the debates over the date of that work. The one detailed discussion is that of Goffart²⁾ who concluded that *fumum vendere* was (in his words) a proverb, perhaps a bit of antiquarianism, perhaps an expression in current fourth-century use. Citing Goffart, Syme³⁾ represents this cautious view as a conjecture that ‘the erudite author lifted the phrase from Martial and wilfully extended its meaning’.

There is more to be said. From Erasmus to Syme, no commentator or lexicographer has unearthed any example earlier than Martial 4.5.7 where the poet, registering the virtues which disqualify his poor but honest friend Fabianus from advancement in Rome, says *vendere nec vanos circum Palatia fumos*.⁴⁾

The absence of *fumum vendere* from (for easy instance) Plautus, the Letters of Cicero, Petronius, and Suetonius suggests that there was no such idiom in the Latin of their times. Martial may very well have coined the expression, possibly inspired by Greek conceits involving smoke as a worthless commodity.⁵⁾ Certainly, his plural *fumos* implies that there was no uniform tag *fumum vendere*; he may have had in mind such Graecisms as *καπνούς καὶ σκιάς*.

In the second century, albeit in a different context, Apuleius (*Apol.* 60) could write *homini rustico fumum vendere*, which might suggest a degree of proverbiality; his singular *fumum* is noteworthy.

¹⁾ A. Otto, *Die Sprichwörter und sprichwörtlichen Redensarten der Römer* (Leipzig, 1890), 149.

²⁾ W. Goffart, ‘Did Julian combat venal *suffragium*?’ *Class. Phil.* 65 (1970), 149–50.

³⁾ R. Syme, ‘The Composition of the Historia Augusta: Recent Theories,’ *JRS* 62 (1972), 129.

⁴⁾ Martial’s sentiments and negative form of expression recall Juvenal 3.41 f., where, however, there is no equivalent of the phrase in question.

⁵⁾ Notably Sophocles, *Antig.* 1170–1; cf. Otto, also *LSJ* s.v. *kapnos*.

The singular also manifests itself in the *iudicium Coci et Pistoris* (= *Anth. Lat.* 199 Riese) of Vespa, a piece dated and datable anywhere from the second to the fifth centuries,⁶⁾ where (v.61) the cook proclaims that the baker cannot be trusted, being a man *qui semper multis dicit se vendere fumum*. Vespa is addicted to puns and pastiches. He could have had Martial in mind, but as my forthcoming commentary shows, the influence of Apuleius on him elsewhere is palpable. The joke here has nothing to do with how the baker looks—he had been introduced in v. 10 as white with flour, whereas it is the cook who is *ora niger studio*. The baker has bragged throughout his speech of the importance of his trade, hence a joke on his peddling influence admirably suits the context.⁷⁾

In the *HA*, smoke is sold in the *Pius* (11.1) of ‘Julius Capitolinus’, twice (10.3; 15.1) in the *Elagabalus* of ‘Aelius Lampridius’, and four times (23.8; 36.2 (bis); 67.2) in the Life of Alexander Severus, also by ‘Lampridius’. These passages are set out in full elsewhere.⁸⁾ There are three salient points: 1) it is suspicious that more than one of the alleged biographers should independently hit on so seemingly infrequent an expression; contrariwise, just as surprising that only two of them would use it if it really was common in their era; 2) apart from *Pius* 11.1 and *AS* 36.2 (the second occasion), the plural is used; 3) although such coincidences are possible, it is probably too good to be true that the character *fumo punitur qui vendidit fumum* should be called Turinus, given the obvious association with burning incense; and indeed, Verconius Turinus was long ago pronounced a fiction.⁹⁾

Noting that *AS* 38.2 contains a direct quotation from Martial, Goffart (*art. cit.*, 150, n.25) was inclined to doubt that *fumum vendere* represented a contemporary popular usage. It could also be the case that Vespa owed his choice of phrase to Martial or Apuleius. However, on the reading here offered of Vespa’s joke, the *HA*’s monopoly on *fumum vendere* in the sense of trafficking is broken. As to its connotation in Martial, Goffart reasonably insists on uncertainty. Since Fabianus is explicitly disqualified from gaining influence at court, he cannot be in a position to sell favours. On the other

⁶⁾ A matter fully discussed in my forthcoming commentary on this poem.

⁷⁾ F. Pini, in his edition (Rome, 1958) of Vespa, merely says ‘frase proverbiale,’ referring to Otto. D.R. Shackleton Bailey in his translation (*HSCP* 84 [1980], 215) just glosses the expression as ‘tell falsehoods.’

⁸⁾ In Otto, the *TLL*, and Lessing’s *Lexicon to the HA*.

⁹⁾ By Syme, ‘Missing Persons,’ *Historia* (1956), 211.

hand, since Martial is registering the things Fabianus' virtue will not allow him to do or be, trafficking could logically be one of them.

Since the *HA* has both singular and plural, it may be that Martial, Apuleius, and Vespa were all in the biographer's mind. His knowledge of the first two is beyond question,¹⁰⁾ and *omnia fingendo* at *AS* 35.6, standing as it does before the Turinus episode, may betray a debt to Vespa whose baker *fingere novit/qui semper multis dicit se vendere fumum*.

Latin *arr(h)a*

By ERIC P. HAMP, Chicago

The shorter form *arr(h)a* has been called a shortening of *arrabō* (< Gk *ἀρραβών* < Semitic), but we may wonder on what principle the shortening operated: It seems reasonable that the shortening arose in mercantile slang, whether or not *lēnōnes* were involved.

Now we know that Plautus facetiously shortened *arrabō* to *rabō*: *rabonem habeto – 'rabonem' ? quam esse dicam hanc beluam ? quin tu 'arrabonem' dicis ?* (*Truc.* 688) It seems that *arrabō* could be taken as *ad-rabō*.

If then *arrabō* in isolation could be understood as a delocutive from a future *arra-bō*, as if 'I will pay, I will reckon up', the pseudo-root *-ra-* could have been associated with *ratiō* 'reckoning', etc.

These shortenings would then have been morphologically motivated.

¹⁰⁾ Cf. Syme, *Ammianus and the Historia Augusta* (Oxford, 1968), 128, 199.