

Horace *Epodes* 16.7: *caerulea pube*

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In his sixteenth Epode Horace laments that the Civil Wars are bringing about the destruction of Rome, a calamity which none of Rome's mighty enemies had been able to bring about. Among the list of failed foes is included Germany:

Nec fera *caerulea* domuit Germania *pube* (line 7).

There is no question that the word *pubes* stands here as a metonym for *iuventus*, i.e. *milites*. But why are these youths described as *caerulei* (literally, "blue")?

The traditional assumption shared by the standard authorities is that in this passage the adjective means "blue-eyed."¹) And of course this assumption fits the ethnographic facts nicely (cf., e.g., Tacitus *Germania* 4.2: *caerulei oculi*).

But the soundness of this assumption is brought into question by the complete lack of supporting data. Unique instances of usage of a term of well-established meaning are justly objects of suspicion. In the T.L.L. entry *s. v.* "*caeruleus, caeruleus*," of the passages cited (at A. 3. a.) in reference to eye color, all include explicit mention of *oculi* or *lumina* except for this line and one other.²) (This second passage, which affords no true parallel, will be discussed in detail below.) These passages include Juvenal 13.164, Tacitus *Germania* 4.2 (cited above), Ausonius 328.10, Pliny *N.H.* VI.88 (of the Sri Lankans!), and Suetonius *Galba* 21, to which may be added Cicero *De Natura Deorum* I.83. That establishes the norm. If *caeruleus* taken by itself can mean "blue-eyed," why are there no other instances of its use in this sense?

¹) Oxford Latin Dictionary (Oxford 1968) I pp.253–254; Karl Ernst Georges, *Ausführliches lateinisch-deutsches Handwörterbuch*⁹ (Hannover und Leipzig 1951, repr. 1958), p.907, glosses this passage as "blauäugige"; Aegidius Forcellini and Ioseph Furlanetto, *Lexicon Totius Latinitatis* (Padua 1940) I p.486. The phrase is glossed as "*caeruleos oculos habens*" by Dominicus Bo, *Lexicon Horatianum* (Hildesheim 1965) p.63. The error goes back to Porphyry, who is unreliable as an authority on color terms: cf. R. Edgeworth, "Does 'Purpureus' Mean 'Bright'?" *Glotta* 57 (1979) p.284 n.11.

²) G. Goetz, *Thesaurus Linguae Latinae* III (1906–1912) 103–107, "*caeruleus, caeruleus*."

But if the term does not mean "blue-eyed" here, then what did Horace intend? I argue that the poet here envisions the German warriors as painted blue for battle, with war paint. The fact that this picture is anthropologically incorrect is not a fatal objection to the suggestion, as will be argued below.

The practice of dying the body blue for warfare is well attested for the Britons of this period. The *locus classicus* is Caesar, *De Bello Gallico* V.14: "Omnes vero se Britanni vitro inficiunt, quod caeruleum efficit colorem, atque hoc horridiores sunt in pugna aspectu . . ." Other references to this practice include Ovid *Amores* II.16(17).39, Silius Italicus XVII.416 (of the inhabitants of Thule), Martial XI.53.1 and XIV.99.1, and cf. Propertius II.18.31 (which refers to the Britanni dyeing their tempora [hair?] blue).

Another possible source for such a practice is the Agathyrsi, a Scythian tribe first mentioned by Herodotus (IV.49, 100, 104). They are described as picti Agathyrsi by Vergil at *Aeneid* IV.146; but in what respect are they painted? Pliny the Elder takes it that they dye their hair (*N.H.* IV.88: caeruleo capillo Agathyrsi), while Ammianus Marcellinus declares that they dye both hair and skin blue: interincti colore caeruleo corpora simul et crines (XXXI.2.14).³⁾

I suggest that Horace has transferred the use of blue war paint from its correct *locus* (Britain, or perhaps Scythia) to the Germans either by inadvertent error or by feigned error. The former explanation is not inconceivable; and the latter may be defended as an instance of a practice in which both Horace and his contemporary Vergil engage from time to time.

Again, at *Odes* III.1.44, he refers to balsam as Achæmeniumque costum (where the adjective must mean "Persian"); and at *Epodes* 13.8–9, in regard to perfume, he writes Achaemenio / perfundi nardo. In the former passage surely, and in the latter very probably, the geographical reference is actually to India; but Horace has transferred the *locus*.

Further, Horace is well content to refer to the Parthians by a pair

³⁾ It has been suggested by Arthur Stanley Pease, *Publi Vergili Maronis Aeneidos Liber Quartus* (Cambridge [Mass.] 1935), ad IV.146, that the coloring of the Agathyrsi "more probably . . . refers to tattooing" than to dyeing the skin. Such an interpretation would fit the Geloni well (both are referred to as picti: *Georgics* II.115, *Aeneid* loc. cit.), judging from the line of Claudian, *In Rufinum* I.313: membraque qui ferro gaudet pinxisse Gelonus. Despite the reference to woad (vitrum) in Caesar's description of the Britanni, tattooing must also be considered a possibility in that case.

of terms which do not really apply to them. Thus: *Odes* I.2.22, Persae; I.2.51, Medos; I.21.15, Persas; III.5.4, Persis: all these should strictly be Parthi. Cf. IV.14.42, where Horace writes Medus, but Parthus is probably intended; and the Euphrates itself is inaccurately described as Medum flumen at II.9.21.

Vergil, too, commits several geographical solecisms, and probably not by accident. At *Georgics* III.44 we read: domitrixque Epidaurus equorum, where the epithet translates the Homeric catchphrase "Ἄργος ἰππόβοτον,"⁴) but with the location transferred to nearby Epidaurus.

At *Georgics* I.490–492, Vergil places both Pharsalus and Philippi in Emathia, which is not correct; Emathia = Paeonia, *not* Thessaly. This error created a precedent followed by later writers, e.g. Ovid *Metamorphoses* XV.824, Manilius I.906, Lucan *passim*.

Vergil seems to indulge in a similar practice at *Georgics* II.139: totaque turiferis Panchaia pinguis arenis. The comment of John Conington on this line is pertinent: "‘Panchaia,’ the happy island of Euhemerus, is here put for Arabia, near which his fancy placed it."⁵)

Of course, Vergil often calls Dido "Sidonian" when she was actually Tyrian: *Aeneid* I.446, 613, 619, 678, IV.75, 137, 545, 683, V.571, IX.266, XI.74.

The immortal Maro also had an interest in the Geloni, another Scythian tribe; he mentions them at *Georgics* II.115 (where they are pictosque Gelonos, like their neighbors the Agathyrsi) and at *Aeneid* VIII.725. At *Georgics* III.461–463, he specifically declares that the Geloni drink the blood of mares.⁶) Now, Horace, too, is well aware of the Geloni, mentioning them at *Odes* II.20.18–19, III.4.35, and III.9.23; but at III.4.34 he attributes the drinking of horses' blood to the Concani, a Spanish tribe. It is conceivable that two widely separated tribes might have this same outlandish custom; but it is more likely that either Vergil or Horace has assigned the practice to the wrong people, perhaps deliberately.

Horace thus confuses Assyria with Syria, Medes with Parthians, India with Persia, and quite possibly Scythians with Spaniards. It is no radical suggestion, then, that he may have admitted some confusion of detail between Germans and Britons.

⁴) *Iliad* B 287, Γ 75, 258, Z 152, I 246, O 30, T 329, *Odyssey* γ 263, δ 99, 562, ο 239, 274.

⁵) John Conington, ed., *Publi Vergili Maronis Opera*³ (London 1872) I *ad. loc.*

⁶) Conington's comment, "Virg. is likely enough to have mistaken the people, even if he be right about the custom," will apply equally well to Horace.

If such instances of "confusion" were in fact deliberate on the part of Horace or Vergil, what purpose would they have served? It may be suggested that a certain indulgent vagueness about geographic and ethnographic details provides an attractive sense of relief from the demands of Alexandrian pedantry in regard to *doctrina*. The poet, after all, is not giving a classroom lecture, and his occasional "forgetfulness," whether real or affected, can at times be quite delightful to the reader.

What of the supposed parallel to this passage, to be found at Sidonius Apollinaris *Epistulae* XI.5.21:

istic Saxona caerulum videmus ?

We need but observe the line which immediately follows it:

assuetum ante *salo* solum timere.

The color reference here is not to the eyes of the Saxon, but to his seafarer's status as a virtual creature of the sea. It is already the established convention in Latin literature that beings of the sea are referred to as caerul(e)i, in reference to hair and clothing and even skin, as shown by the host of references (including *mater caerulea* [i.e. Thetis], *Epodes* 13.16, Horace's only other use of this color term) collected under A.2.b. in the *T.L.L.* entry.

That this line of interpretation is sound is shown by the reference later in this same poem of Sidonius to the Herulian, said to be "almost of the same color" (*paene concolor*) as the depths of the ocean which he frequents (lines 31–33). Surely *concolor* cannot be taken directly of the eyes alone, and should be understood to refer hyperbolically to the Herulian's status as a marine creature.

Hence, there is no actual parallel. The supposed datum stands alone, too slender to support the weight of traditional inference. The phrase has been misunderstood; let the lexica be amended.