

OCLOPETA

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Many attempts have been made to shed light on this intriguing hapax at Petronius 35.4 ‘super sagittarium oclopetam’, but none has attained the honour of appearing in critical apparatuses of the best editions. So one need not beg indulgence for looking at the matter afresh.

The essential points to be taken into account are: i) the transmitted reading conceals a seafood article, because it is located between the signs of the Scorpion and the Goat, to which are attached *+pisciculum marinum+* and lobster, the three items perhaps designed by Trimalchio’s cook to form a complete fish course; ii) either the name or the food should have a more or less enigmatic relation to the Zodiac sign concerned;¹ iii) the word seems too obscure to be considered as an explanatory gloss. Further, if we accept that *-o-* is a linking vowel of a nominal compound (cf. the pair *meribiba/merobiba*) and displays a trait of vulgar Latin,² then there is nothing to prevent us from positing another such trait in the second part of the word, namely the diphthong */ae/* reduced to */e/*, even though no instance of this has yet been spotted in the *Satyrica*.³ These reasons together suggest that *oclopeta* is derived from *oc(u)lus* +

¹ Suggested by 39.4 ‘sicut ille fer[i]culus ... habuit praxim’ (*praxis* = ‘trickery’?).

² With R. Oniga, “La création lexicale chez Pétrone” (in Michèle Fruyt – Christian Nicholas (eds.), *La création lexicale en latin* [Actes de la Table Ronde du IXème Colloque International de Linguistique Latine ... à Madrid le 16 Avril 1997], Presses de l’ Université de Paris-Sorbonne 2000), pp. 162–163.

³ According to Hubert Petersmann, “Soziale und lokale Aspekte in der Vulgärsprache Petrons” (in Louis Callebat (ed.), *Latin vulgaire – latin tardif iv*, 1995) p. 541.

*p(a)etus*⁴ = 'looking askew'.⁵ The context makes it arbitrary to speak of a Petronian neologism, but not at all arbitrary to suggest a local designation which disappeared without leaving a trace in the Italian Romance languages.

The second task is to identify the item referred to by such an expressive name. If the above explanation is accepted, it may support the case of those scholars who believe that a member of the cuttle-fish family is meant.⁶ Some types of this mollusc indeed have their eyes on opposite sides of the head and a large body that ends with a tail shaped like an arrow. The association with Sagittarius would then be easy to discern.

⁴ We have to reconstruct **paetere*, the second lexeme in this kind of composition being normally of verbal origin.

⁵ The same pattern and sense as in Spanish 'ojibizco'.

⁶ See F. Capponi, *Latomus* 42 (1983), pp. 397–403; *Maia* 43 (1991), pp. 17–20.