

“METELLUS PONTIFEX” AND OPS OPIFERA:
A NOTE ON PLINY *NATURALIS HISTORIA* 11.174

M. GWYN MORGAN

IN A DISQUISITION on the shapes and uses of the tongue in various animals the Elder Pliny includes a single human *exemplum*. A certain “Metellus pontifex,” he declares, was allegedly so tongue-tied that he was supposed to have suffered many months of anguish while he practised the formula to be spoken at the dedication of a temple to Ops Opifera: *Metellum pontificem adeo inexplanatae* [sc. *linguae*] *fuisse accipimus ut multis mensibus tortus credatur dum meditatur in dedicanda aede Opi Opiferae dicere*.¹ Although scholars have often discussed the location of the temple, work after work of reference repeats the statement that the subject of the anecdote is L. Metellus Delmaticus, the consul of 119. But since this conclusion rests on arguments which are by no means unassailable, it will not be amiss to examine once again the three questions raised by the story: who was this Metellus, when did he dedicate the temple, and where was the structure located?

There has never been any doubt but that the temple was built by a Metellus, nor is there any plausible reason to question that it was financed *de manubiis*.² However, there were no less than nine *triumphatores* among the Metelli, and at least four of them were also *pontifices*: L. Metellus (*cos.* 125, 11247), L. Metellus Delmaticus himself, Q. Metellus Pius (*cos.* 80), and Q. Metellus Creticus (*cos.* 69).³ Of these four we can safely exclude Metellus Pius and Metellus Creticus, since they lived in an age sufficiently well documented for any such building activity by them not to have gone unmentioned in the sources.⁴ As for

¹Pliny, *HN* 11.171–174 at 174. The final words of the passage are not altogether certain, and for *Opi Opiferae* von Jan suggested *Opi uerba*. But see the apparatus criticus of A. Ernout's edition (Budé, Paris 1947), or the discussion by T. Köves-Zulauf, *Reden und Schweigen: römische Religion bei Plinius Maior* (Munich 1972) 73–74. All dates are B.C.

²The evidence shows that temples built *de manubiis* were the rule, those constructed by aediles from the fines they had collected very much the exception; cf. H. Bardon, *REL* 33 (1955) 166 ff.; D. Strong, *BICS* 15 (1968) 99–100.

³For the sources see T. R. S. Broughton, *The Magistrates of the Roman Republic* (New York 1951–1952) 1.218 and 234 (L. Metellus), 534 and 564–565 (Delmaticus); 2.37 and 171 (Pius); 113–114 and 206 (Creticus).

⁴A. Degrassi, *Inscriptiones Italiae* 13.2 (Rome 1963) 501, excludes them on the ground that “*Metellus qui dedicauit, ut a Cicerone accepimus, proauus fuit Q. Caecilii Metelli Pii Scipionis consulis a. 52.*” The relevant Ciceronian passage (*Att.* 6.1.17) is concerned with the consul's Scipionic ancestors: see W. S. Watt, *Mnemosyne* 16 (1963) 380 ff.; F. Coarelli, *MEFR* 81 (1969) 145–146 and 148 ff.

the choice between L. Metellus and Metellus Delmaticus, Jordan is the only scholar to have argued the case.⁵ As he pointed out, there are two pieces of evidence which seem to rule out L. Metellus: the fact that Pliny himself elsewhere styles this man a good orator, and Valerius Maximus' statement that during the twenty-two years in which L. Metellus was Pontifex Maximus, *tutelam caerimoniarum neque ore in uerbis nuncupandis haesitante neque in sacrificiis faciendis tremula manu gessit*.⁶ By contrast, the sources say nothing whatever about Metellus Delmaticus' oratory, whereas he is known to have engaged in building activity in any case, restoring the Temple of Castor in the Forum Romanum *de manubiis*.⁷ On the face of it, therefore, Metellus Delmaticus can readily be credited with the temple of Ops Opifera also, and this is the conclusion of all the standard works which touch on the subject.⁸

If we are to argue against this view, it cannot plausibly be maintained that Metellus Delmaticus would not have won booty enough *de Delmateis* to finance both works. We do not know how much plunder he brought back from Illyria, nor can we estimate at all precisely the likely cost of restoring the temple of Castor and building the temple to Ops Opifera. It may be emphasized, however, that there is no explicit evidence that Metellus Delmaticus built the temple, whereas there are a number of reasons for thinking L. Metellus responsible. For one thing, as Coarelli has seen, it is significant that in three other passages of the *Naturalis Historia* Pliny uses the expressions "Metellus pontifex" and "L. Metellus pontifex" to refer to the consul of 251;⁹ even if it is pressing the evidence too hard to regard these as formulas which must always refer to L. Metellus, they certainly do not help the case for Delmaticus. Again,

⁵H. Jordan, *Ephemeris Epigraphica* 1 (1872) 229–230.

⁶Pliny, *HN* 7.140: *optimus orator* (ironically enough, *orator* in this passage probably refers to political *savoir faire* rather than to rhetorical skill [cf. W. Steidle, *MusHelv* 9 (1952) 27], but as we shall see, nothing can be made of the point, since Pliny clearly took the word in the same sense as Jordan); Valerius Maximus 8.13.2.

⁷See S. B. Platner and T. Ashby, *A Topographical Dictionary of Ancient Rome* (Oxford 1929) 102 ff.

⁸O. Gilbert, *Geschichte und Topographie der Stadt Rom im Altertum* (Leipzig 1883) 1.247, n. 1; H. Jordan, *Topographie der Stadt Rom im Altertum* 1.2 (Berlin 1885), 43; F. Münzer, "Caecilii (91)," *RE* 3 (1897) 1213 and *Beiträge zur Quellenkritik der Naturgeschichte des Plinius* (Berlin 1897) 364; O. Richter, *Topographie der Stadt Rom*² (Munich 1901) 129; G. Wissowa, *Religion und Kultus der Römer*² (Munich 1912) 203; Platner and Ashby, *op. cit.* (above, note 7) 372; G. Rohde, "Ops (3)," *RE* 18 (1939) 752; G. Lugli, *Roma antica: il centro monumentale* (Rome 1946) 30; G. De Sanctis, *Storia dei Romani* 4.2.1 (Florence 1953) 228; Degraffi, *loc. cit.* (above, note 4); K. Latte, *Römische Religionsgeschichte* (Munich 1960) 72, n. 2; Köves-Zulauf, *op. cit.* (above, note 1), 74–75.

⁹Coarelli, *op. cit.* (above, note 4) 149, n. 1, on the basis of Pliny, *HN* 7.157 (*Metellus pontifex*); 7.139 and 8.16 (*L. Metellus pontifex*). He appears again at *HN* 18.17 as *L. Metellus*. There is no clear reference to Metellus Delmaticus in the *Naturalis Historia*.

though Pliny was capable of the most egregious errors,¹⁰ the very phraseology of the passage under consideration suggests that his source, whoever it may have been,¹¹ was indeed referring to the consul of 251, and that Pliny himself would have preferred to find another member of the family of whom to tell the tale. For it was surely Pliny's belief that L. Metellus had been a fine orator which led him almost to disown the account he gives: "Metellus pontifex," he says, was allegedly (*accipimus*) so tongue-tied that he supposedly (*credatur*) suffered many months of anguish. Finally, there is Valerius Maximus' stating that L. Metellus carried out his functions as pontifex maximus *neque ore in uerbis nuncupandis haesitante neque in sacrificiis faciendis tremula manu*. Since Valerius thought L. Metellus died at the age of 100, it may seem as if these details are reported primarily to show what a splendid old man he was. In Roman thought, however, *lingua haesitare* and *ore haesitare* have no connexion with old age.¹² Hence it is not too fanciful to argue that Valerius was also aware of the story that L. Metellus was tongue-tied, and chose deliberately to disprove it by emphasizing the faultless manner in which he performed his duties.¹³

There seems to be no way of explaining how a story of this kind came to be associated with L. Metellus. But he was obviously something of a fabled figure, since he is also the subject of at least two other patently false tales. The first, as we have seen already, centres on the claim that he lived to the ripe old age of 100.¹⁴ The second relates to his rescuing the Palladium from the burning temple of Vesta in 241; though the earlier sources make it clear that he escaped unscathed, the story somehow

¹⁰See, e.g., the comments collected by K. G. Sallmann, *Die Geographie des Älteren Plinius in ihrem Verhältnis zu Varro* (Berlin 1971) 28 ff.

¹¹HN 11.171–174 for the most part derives from Aristotle's *Historia animalium* (cf. Ernout, *ad loc.*), but there is nothing to indicate where Pliny found the story of Metellus. Münzer, *Beiträge* 364, conjectured that it came from a collection of anecdotes, perhaps that of Melissus (*ibid.* 358 ff.); but this is incapable of proof, even though the man's name appears in the index of authors for Book 11.

¹²See especially Cicero, *De Domo* 134–135, talking of a pontiff who but six years earlier had been termed *summo loco adulescens* (Mur. 73). Further examples may be found in Cicero, *De Or.* 1.115 and 3.218; Livy 34.59.1; Q. Curtius 7.1.8; Quintilian 10.7.22; Tacitus, *Hist.* 4.31; Pliny, *Epist.* 4.7.4; cf. Seneca, *Controv.* 7 praef. 3.

¹³Though Valerius Maximus frequently embroidered his material (cf. R. Helm, *RhM* 89 [1940] 241 ff.), the present passage cannot be considered simply an expansion of the description of L. Metellus which Cicero puts in Cato's mouth (*De Sen.* 30): *ego L. Metellum meminisse puer, qui cum . . . pontifex maximus factus esset, uiginti et duos annos ei sacerdotio praefuit, ita bonis esse uiribus extremo tempore aetatis, ut adulescentiam non requireret*. See Helm, *o.c.* 255 f. This, of course, is not to deny that there is religious significance in the flawless performance of priestly duties; but despite the lengthy discussion of Köves-Zulauf, *op. cit.* (above, note 1), 75 ff., I see no reason to think this the sole cause for Valerius Maximus' stressing Metellus' efficiency in the way he does.

¹⁴Pliny, HN 7.157; Valerius Maximus, *loc. cit.* (above, note 6).

grew up that he was blinded by the flames.¹⁵ But be that as it may, there is certainly no obstacle to the view that L. Metellus built the temple of Ops Opifera. He undoubtedly secured a large amount of booty by his victory over the Carthaginian general Hasdrubal at Panormus in 250; hence the assertion made in Pliny's summary of the *laudatio funebris* of 221, that he had fulfilled his aim *pecuniam magnam bono modo inuenire*.¹⁶ The foundation of temples by triumphing generals was already common practice in the third century.¹⁷ And the cult of Ops was of sufficient antiquity for L. Metellus to have been able to honour this deity if he so chose.¹⁸

His reasons for choosing to honour Ops in particular are more difficult to determine, but the answer may lie in Ops' being a deity closely associated with the harvest.¹⁹ In 250 Hasdrubal marched on Panormus, as Polybius expressly states, "when the harvest was at its height" (*ἄκμαζούσης τῆς συγκομιδῆς*).²⁰ In itself this is hardly surprising. In context, however, the event takes on much greater significance. When L. Metellus decided to fight Hasdrubal, he was risking a very great deal: the battle would undoubtedly decide whether the five years of stalemate which had lasted since M. Atilius Regulus' defeat in 255 would be broken, and could well influence the outcome of the First Punic War as a whole.²¹ These were circumstances to warrant Metellus' vowing a temple to some deity in the event of a Roman victory. They were also circumstances in which Rome's Sicilian allies would at least waver in their allegiance if Metellus was defeated. He, therefore, had to do more than just avoid defeat; he had to convince the allies of Rome's ability to protect them. Which could hardly be done more concretely than by safeguarding (and being seen to safeguard) their crops, and that in turn could well have led him to make his vow specifically to Ops Opifera.²²

¹⁵Attempts to explain the story's origin have been made by O. Leuze, *Philologus* 64 (1905) 95 ff.; A. Brelich, *SMR* 15 (1939) 30 ff.; and F. Bömer, *P. Ovidius Naso: Die Fasten* (Heidelberg 1957–1958) 2.369–370.

¹⁶Pliny, *HN* 7.140. He seems also to have feasted the people after his triumph (Dio, frag. 29b).

¹⁷A. Lippold, *Consules* (Bonn 1963) 323 ff.

¹⁸Cf. Wissowa, *Religion u. Kultus* 203–204; Rohde, *RE* 18.749 ff. That the temple is not mentioned in the *laudatio funebris* of 221 (Pliny, *HN* 7.140) is not significant; it omits a great deal.

¹⁹Wissowa, *loc. cit.* (above, note 18); Rohde, *loc. cit.* (above, note 18); H. Le Bonniec, *Le culte de Cérès à Rome* (Paris 1958) 193 ff. I have not been able to consult P. H. N. G. Stehouwer, *Étude sur Ops et Consus* (Diss. Utrecht 1956).

²⁰Polybius 1.40.1.

²¹On this aspect see *CQ* 22 (1972) 123 ff.

²²From Polybius 1.40.1–5 it emerges that Hasdrubal ravaged the crops along his line of march without interference, but there is no way of telling what proportion of the total harvest they constituted.

Whatever L. Metellus' reasons for choosing Ops Opifera, however, we still have a strong case for crediting him with the temple's construction, and we may turn now to a consideration of the dates at which the contracts for the temple were let and the completed building dedicated. Metellus' triumph *de Poeneis* in late 250 provides the terminus post quem, and the terminus ante quem is of course his death in 221.²³ The rest must be largely guesswork, but we can safely assume at least that the work was carried through quickly. L. Metellus himself was unquestionably a devout man: whatever motives we read into his clash with the *flamen Martialis* A. Postumius Albinus in 242, he gave a striking demonstration of his simple religious faith when he rescued the Palladium in 241.²⁴ Nor are his contemporaries likely to have been less eager than he to see the vow carried into effect. The Romans appear to have been sensitive to the will of the gods throughout the First Punic War; they became especially scrupulous once P. Claudius Pulcher had been disastrously defeated in 249, for they attributed this setback to his hurling the sacred chickens overboard beforehand.²⁵ In all probability, then, the work began almost as soon as Metellus returned to Rome.²⁶

Metellus' second consulship in 247 provides the obvious date for the temple's completion and dedication. The ceremony of dedication, after all, had to be undertaken by a magistrate with *imperium* or else by a man empowered under a special law,²⁷ and of these the former was the more convenient and more certain arrangement. Of course, Metellus is not likely to have known in 250 that he would be re-elected consul for 247, but he could at least take care that the work would be brought to completion at a time when he himself was holding a magistracy enabling him personally to dedicate his temple.²⁸ And he must have had a full year's notice of the date by which work would need to be completed. The consuls for 248 were P. Servilius Geminus and C. Aurelius Cotta, men who had held the office for the first time in 252 (the year before Metellus' first consulship) and clearly his political allies; this all but guaranteed him a

²³Broughton, *op. cit.* (above, note 3), 1.213–214 and 234. Nothing can be made of Pliny's use of the term *pontifex* in this connexion, since we do not know when L. Metellus entered the college, only that he became Pontifex Maximus by 243 (*ibid.* 218).

²⁴Cf. J.-Cl. Richard, *Latomus* 27 (1968) 798. The clash between Metellus and Postumius, much discussed by scholars, is reported by Livy 38.51.1–2 and *Epit.* 19; Valerius Maximus 1.1.2; and Tacitus, *Ann.* 3.58 and 71. I see no reason to doubt that on both occasions Metellus acted only from religious conviction—on the conscious level at least.

²⁵The sources are collected by Münzer, "Claudius (304)," *RE* 3 (1899) 2857–2858; Broughton, *op. cit.* (above, note 3), 214.

²⁶It is simplest to assume that *duoviri ad aedem locandam* were appointed and that Metellus himself was one of them (on such boards see *Hermes* 99 [1971] 500 and n. 2).

²⁷Wissowa, "Dedicatio," *RE* 4 (1901) 2357.

²⁸For the tenacity with which nobles tried to keep temples and other public buildings in the family see *Klio* 55 (1973) 222–223.

second consulship in 247.²⁹ On this view, it is true, the time between the letting of contracts and the actual dedication must have been short, but not impossibly so. C. Cornelius Cethegus let the contracts for his temple to Iuno Sospita while consul in 197 and dedicated it as censor in 194.³⁰ So the hypothesis that the contracts were let late in 250 and that the temple was dedicated during Metellus' second consulship in 247 is consistent not only with the few facts that we possess but also with the political and religious realities that Metellus surely faced.

Which leaves the problem of identifying the temple itself, apparently the most intractable question of all. The oldest attested shrine to Ops in Rome, set up *in regia*, was that of Ops Consiva, and the *Acta Fratrum Arvalium* place its anniversary on August 25.³¹ Even when this shrine is discounted, however, there remain two or three other possibilities. First, there is the famous temple of Ops on the Capitol, known to have been in existence as early as 186 and probably going back into the third century.³² No source states explicitly to what manifestation of Ops it was dedicated; but according to the *Fasti Vallenses* its anniversary was also on August 25, and since it was not unknown for the same manifestation of a deity to be honoured on the same day in different parts of the city, probability definitely favours the conclusion that Ops Consiva was the tutelary goddess.³³ Next comes a temple of Ops Opifera whose anniversary is set on August 23 by the *Acta Fratrum Arvalium* but whose site has not been preserved.³⁴ And finally, the *Fasti Amiternini* record a temple of Ops Opifera with its anniversary on December 19 and sited *ad forum*.³⁵

The two attested temples of Ops Opifera were probably separate structures, or we could be dealing with a single temple, dedicated and

²⁹The alliance is best discussed by E. Badian, *Studies in Greek and Roman History* (Oxford 1964) 36–37.

³⁰Livy 32.30.10 and 34.53.3; cf. *Hermes* 99 (1971) 499–500.

³¹Varro, *LL* 6. 21; Festus 202 L; Degrassi, *op. cit.* (above, note 4) 30–31, 502–503. Cf. Gilbert, *Geschichte und Topographie* 1.344–345; Rohde, *RE* 18.750–751; Latte, *Röm. Religionsgeschichte* 73.

³²Livy 39.22.4; cf. Jordan, *Topographie* 1.2.43; Platner and Ashby, *Top. Dict.* 372; Rohde, *RE* 18.751–752; Lugli, *Roma antica* 30–31. That this temple was restored by Metellus Delmaticus is maintained by Gilbert, *op. cit.* (above, note 8), 1.247, n. 1; Jordan, *loc. cit.* (above, note 8); Richter, *Topographie* 129; and Platner and Ashby, *loc. cit.*

³³Degrassi, *op. cit.* (above, note 4), 148–149 and 500–503; cf. Latte, *op. cit.* (above, note 8) 72, n. 2. The objections of Coarelli, *MEFR* 81 (1969) 146–148 are muddled and unconvincing.

³⁴Degrassi, *op. cit.* (above, note 4), 30–31 and 501–502. Like Lugli, *op. cit.* (above, note 8), 30, he attributes this temple to Metellus Delmaticus.

³⁵Degrassi, *op. cit.* (above, note 4), 198–199 and 541. This is the temple credited to Delmaticus by Wissowa, *Religion u. Kultus* 203; Platner and Ashby, *op. cit.* (above, note 7) 372 (as a second choice); Rohde, *RE* 18.753; De Sanctis, *Storia* 4.2.1.228, n. 433; and Latte, *loc. cit.* (above, note 8).

rededicated. But the economical nature of the latter hypothesis scarcely makes it obligatory *per se*,³⁶ nor does uncertainty on this point affect the argument. For in either event it is most plausible to assume that a temple erected *ad forum* was an early foundation. As a glance at any map of the forum area will show, most of the major buildings of the republican period erected in its immediate neighbourhood had been built by the middle of the second century.³⁷ In the same way, the fact that the temple's anniversary falls on December 19 points to its being an early foundation, since this is the date of the ancient festival of the Opalia.³⁸ No such significance attaches to the anniversary recorded in the *Acta Fratrum Arvalium*, August 23,³⁹ and so it may readily be seen either as the date on which a later temple was built or, perhaps, as that when the original temple—restored for whatever reason—was rededicated.

In short, Pliny's anecdote about a tongue-tied pontiff is best referred to L. Metellus (*cos.* I 251, II 247). Once this is granted, the most likely sequence of events is the following: Metellus vowed a temple to Ops Opifera before he fought the Carthaginians at Panormus in 250, and financed its construction with the booty he won as a result of that victory. The contracts for the building were probably let late in 250 and the temple itself, erected *ad forum*, was brought to completion by late 247. Thus Metellus was able to perform the ceremony of dedication while consul, the date being—by Roman reckoning—December 19.⁴⁰

UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

³⁶Cf. Lugli, *op. cit.* (above, note 8), 30; Degrassi, *op. cit.* (above, note 4), 501.

³⁷The Basilica Opimia of 121 appears to be the last major structure put up before the closing years of the Republic (cf. Jordan, *op. cit.* [above, note 8], 383 ff.).

³⁸See Macrobius, *Saturn.* 1.10.18; Degrassi, *op. cit.* (above, note 4), 541.

³⁹Wissowa, *op. cit.* (above, note 8), 203 is unconvincing on this point. This is not the place to discuss the common assumption that the Roman calendar corresponded almost exactly to the Julian Year during the First Punic War (cf. *CQ* 22 [1972] 121, n. 4). But if we assume that the two calendars were within a month or so of each other, it is worth noting that L. Metellus, assigned Sicily as his *prouincia* for 247 (Zonaras 8.16; Broughton, *op. cit.* [above, note 3], 1.216), could not have been in Rome in (Roman) August 247, whereas he could well have returned to the city by (Roman) December: cf. De Sanctis, *Storia dei Romani* 3.1 (Turin 1916) 248–249 with Lippold, *Consules* 108, n. 129.

⁴⁰I wish to thank the two anonymous referees for their comments on a draft of this paper.