

CATULLUS, POEM 4: A NEGLECTED INTERPRETATION REVIVED

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THIS FAMILIAR AND WELL-LIKED POEM has attracted comment and controversy out of all proportion to its length,¹ so that if it were not that agreement is as far off as ever, it might seem presumptuous to add yet another entry to the bibliography. In 1958 F. O. Copley² listed an assortment of ten questions which have been raised about the poem. Since these effectively outline the present state of opinion, I reproduce them here: "What kind of ship was a *phaselus*? How big? If big enough for a sea-voyage, how did Catullus get it up the Po and Mincio to Lake Garda? Is the *limpidus lacus* indeed Lake Garda, or is it some other lake, and, if so, what lake? Was the *phaselus* not an actual ship, but only a model or picture or carving? Whose ship was it:—Catullus', or somebody else's? Did Catullus come home from Bithynia in it? If so, then why does he in poem 46 seem to be talking about a return by land? How many trees is a *silva*? Was the ship made of one tree or many? If we are to believe the commentators, these and many similar questions must be answered before we may be sure of having grasped the meaning and intent of the poem." Some of these questions are trivial, others perversely conceived and, apart from the one which forms the subject of this paper, it might be maintained that demonstrable answers to any or all of the remainder might do little more than satisfy curiosity without materially advancing the appreciation of the poem's distinctive qualities. As things stand, however, highly respected critics of generally sound judgment have gone their several ways, seemingly indifferent to the persistence of views opposed to their own, with recourse to assertion when argument gives out. This tacit agreement to differ is all the more regrettable, since a suggestion put forward over 50 years ago has been trampled underfoot in the conflict of opinion and never been given the benefit of scrutiny which it deserves. If it can be sustained, it will have as a consequence the dispelling of much of the fog which surrounds this poem

¹There is no need to swell this article with a lengthy bibliography. Most of the earlier literature which bears on Poem 4 is listed by J. Svennung in a usefully documented but, in my judgment, somewhat misguided article in *Acta Instituti Romani Regni Sueciae*, ser. 4, 18 (1954 Lund-Glerup) 109–124. It is accessible in the reprint in *Wege der Forschung* 308 (1974) 399–424. References prior to 1948 can be assembled from *RE* 7 A 2 (1948) 2372 (M. Schuster) and *JAW* 183 (1920) 1–72 (esp. 3–4, 39, 43) and 212 (1927) 196–197. More recent matter is registered by K. Quinn in his edition of 1971, 107. The edition of C. J. Fordyce (1961), 99 and bibliography 411, may also be consulted.

²*TAPA* 89 (1958) 9–13. Also accessible in *Wege der Forschung* 308 (1974) 425–430 (in German translation).

and lead to the recognition of a neat piece of characteristically Catullan *urbanitas* which is lost on any other interpretation known to me.

It was Lenchantin de Gubernatis who in his edition of 1928 scouted the possibility of Catullus' *phaselus* having been a model boat (*modellino*).³ Unfortunately he then went off course and resuscitated a wrong-headed idea of Cichorius,⁴ according to which the *phaselus* belonged to a friend of the poet, who invited him to join him on a cruise to the *clarae Asiae urbes*, so that the lake became Lake Aphrodisias, linked to the Propontis by the Rhyndacus river. Why de Gubernatis failed to follow up the former suggestion remains a mystery. For if the *phaselus* was a model yacht, nothing forbids our thinking that it was Catullus' own property, a souvenir acquired in Asia and brought back by him to an Italian lake, be it Lake Garda or another, and dedicated to the Dioscuri. Unlike most other proposed solutions to the difficulties of this poem, which can not be either certified or refuted, this one can be put to the test of direct question: does Catullus give his readers a clue to the understanding of the poem in this way which is of a kind which a modern reader might well have overlooked? If he cannot be shown to have done so, then, when all allowances have been made for the legitimate demands which a sophisticated poet in the neoteric tradition might have made upon the imagination of his audience or his public, the suggestion is, for responsible critics at least, ruled out. If however it can be shown that he does, *quid plura*? Has something then been overlooked?

Prominently placed last word in line 13, at almost the exact centre of this 27-line poem, is the arresting adjective *buxifer* applied to Mount Cytorus, which, with the nearby town Amastris on the Southern Black Sea coast, is designated as the *ultima origo* of the *phaselus* (15). Cytorus was famed in antiquity as a source of box wood, but it will not do to dismiss the adjective here as a mere *epitheton ornans*. Its importance is shown not only by its conspicuous position at line-end but also by its form: compound adjectives in *-fer* and *-ger* are at home in early Latin poetry,⁵ and the use of a word of

³M. Lenchantin de Gubernatis (Turin 1928, reprinted 1933) 9. I have not succeeded in tracing the idea further back, and take it to be his own. He thinks in terms of an *ex-voto*, "supposizione non inverosimile" in view of the custom of travellers dedicating "uno modellino della loro nave" after a journey. Having rejected this view of the poem, he is worried by Catullus' supposed lack of means to buy his own yacht, and believes that he accompanied a friend who owned one for the tour of the *clarae Asiae urbes*.

⁴In *Festschrift für O. Hirschfeld* (Berlin 1903) 467 f.

⁵So, to take an obvious instance, *terrai frugiferai* Enn. Ann. 489 Vahlen (= 84 Steuart); cf. Martial 11.90, who would not have cited the phrase if it had not been a familiar "tag" characteristic of this idiom. On the use of adjectives in *-fer* and *-ger* in early Latin see Norden's note on Virgil *Aen.* 6.796 (*caelifer*). Cf. too H. D. Jocelyn's note on Enn. *trag.* fr. 15 (= fr. 50 Vahlen). It may be remarked that among later poets Ovid favoured them, particularly in his *Metamorphoses*, and this familiarity may make us less sensitive to the "antique patina" of such adjectives than readers of Catullus' own day may have been.

this kind with an epic ring to it in connection with a model boat is a flash of piquant verbal elegance that should not be missed, but ought rather to arouse in an alert reader a suspicion that it was chosen or more probably (since the word does not recur elsewhere) coined by Catullus to convey a special point. Be that as it may, one does not need to be a professional forester to know that ships' timbers in classical antiquity were made from pine, fir, or alder.⁶ Oak may have been used for false-keels,⁷ but the oak hulls of medieval navies were made from trees which grow best in more northerly latitudes. Pine, fir, and alder (ξύλα ναπηγήσιμα) combine the necessary strength with a no less essential degree of flexibility: not only must ships' timbers be capable of being curved by the shipwright to fit the rounded contours of the hull, but also be resilient enough to withstand the buffeting of a heavy sea without parting. By contrast, box wood is hard and its close grain makes for rigidity and stiffness, characteristics quite unsuitable for ship building.⁸ Its commonest uses are defined in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*¹¹ (s.v., 352) as follows: ". . . box wood is structurally very dense, of fine and uniform grain: used in the manufacture of measuring rules, flutes and musical instruments, as well as for turning into minor articles and for inlaying, and it is a favourite wood for small carvings. Use of box wood for turnery and musical instruments is mentioned by Pliny (the Elder), Virgil and Ovid." *Uno verbo*, in antiquity as since, the ideal wood for precise model-making. The entries in *TLL* (s.v. *buxus*, etc., cols. 2263–64) give detailed information about ancient uses, listing 11 articles:

- (i) spinning-top: Virgil's *volubile buxum* (*Aen.* 7.382; cf. *Pers.* 3.51).
- (ii) flute (*tibia*): Virgil *Aen.* 9.616 *et saepe*. Three out of 4 references in Ovid mention the holes in the instrument (e.g., *Met.* 12.158 *multifori tibia buxi*). The fine grain of the wood makes the precise location and piercing of air-holes with a hand-drill possible.
- (iii) writing tablets: *Prop.* 3.23.8 *et al.*
- (iv) comb (*pecten*): *Juv.* 14.194: *caput intactum buxo*.

⁶On this see C. Torr, *Ancient Ships* (1894) 31 ff. The *loci classici* for box-wood in antiquity are Theophr. *Hist. Plant.* 5.7.1 ff. and Pliny *N.H.* 16.70. Pliny (*ibid.* 203) reports that for want of fir (*inopia abietum*) cedar-wood was used for shipbuilding in Syria and Egypt: in his day cedar grew freely in Cyprus as well as in what is now the Lebanon.

⁷A false-keel would be needed for portage of ships over an isthmus, such as the *διολκός* at Corinth or Leucas.

⁸*Buxus sempervirens*, used for topiary, only grows to a height of about 16 feet, but *buxus Balearica* attains as much as 80 feet; it is found in Western Europe and around the Black Sea coast, and presumably flourished there in antiquity. It is not therefore the size of the box-tree that would have precluded its use for shipbuilding, but the nature of its wood.

It is to the credit of H. Akbar Khan (*AJP* 88 [1967] 167–168) that he came close to the point of *buxifer* in line 13 when he remarked: "there was no evidence that box wood was used for ships." Unfortunately his argument then went badly off-course, for the notion of box wood competing with Pontic pine is out of the question and the fantastic inference of servile status extracted from *erum tulisse* is best forgotten.

- (v) pepper-mill (*mola buxea*): Petron. *Sat.* 74.
- (vi) dice-box (*fritillus*): Auson. *carm.* 191.28 *excisi per cava buxa gradus*.
- (vii) finger-rings (*anuli buxei*): Petron. *Sat.* 52.
- (viii) *vasa buxina*: Paul. *sent.* 3.6.7.
- (ix) medicine-box: *pyxis buxea* (a tautology, but no matter) Scribon. Larg. 74.
- (x) letters of the alphabet for teaching reading (*litterae vel buxear vel eburnear*): Jerome *Ep.* 107.4.1 (cf. Apul. *Apol.* 61, where a box wood statue or statuette is also mentioned).
- (xi) false teeth: Martial 2.41.⁹

In fact the unique use of box wood for a strictly nautical purpose comes many centuries later with the discovery of the magnetic compass, *la bussola* in Italian, so called because the compass-points could be inscribed on this wood more precisely and clearly than on any other.

Thus to an ancient reading public familiar with the idiom in which names of trees for ships' timber denoted the ship itself *κατὰ συνεκδοχὴν* (as *pinus* in Horace (*Odes* 1.14.11 or *alnus* in Juvenal 3.266), the epithet *buxifer* in a poem about a yacht could hardly have failed to convey its meaning. Catullus has even given a preparatory hint in line 4, with the use of the diminutive *palmulis*, which recurs in line 17.¹⁰ It is true that the normal form of the plural of this noun cannot be used in the pure iambic metre of this poem, but a diminutive need not lose its force because it happens to satisfy a metrical constraint.

Once it is seen that a model boat is intended, the focus of the whole poem sharpens. In line 26 *senet*, an archaic-sounding verb, gains in point, since a model is not likely to last indefinitely, unless preserved as an heirloom in general family use: this one can look forward to a relatively long old age as a dedication. Any topographical puzzles which the poem has been alleged to contain evaporate: if the returning traveller, whether Catullus or another, did not in fact do the whole journey by sea but took in some of the *clarae Asiae urbes* overland, it matters not, for the model yacht could have travelled all the way on board the real one with its master's baggage. Nor need we be troubled by the mention of Amastris and Cytorus in view of the naming of

⁹On *empti dentes* see the epigram of Lucilius in *Anth. Pal.* 11.310 and Martial 1.19, with P. A. Howell's note, comparing 5.43, 9.37 and 12.23. Sidon. Apollin. *Epist.* 3.13.6 is doubtfully relevant, since in that piece of artificial invective (*ω*) . . . *buxum dentibus* may only refer to discoloration.

¹⁰It is difficult for a modern reader to guess what precise weight should be attached to the opening word *phaselus*. Elsewhere it is used of light or small craft, such as Nile boats (as in Juv. 15.127 *ficilibus* . . . *dare vela phaselis*). This might settle the matter, were it not that Sallust *Hist.* 3.8 speaks of a whole cohort having been put aboard a *grandis phaselus*. Could this perhaps have been a piece of soldiers' slang? In English a phrase such as "outsize cockleshell" could be applied, somewhat whimsically, to an ocean-going troopship.

Nicaea as the point of embarkation (Cat. 46.5): the homeward-bound passenger could have acquired the model as a souvenir at any time or place during his stay in foreign parts. No financial problems arise, for however meagre the pickings Catullus may have made from his tour of duty in Asia Minor (10.9 ff., if these lines are to be taken at face-value), he could surely have afforded this small luxury. At last we can admire the subtle conceit which makes Poem 4 the miniature masterpiece it is. If the full-size ship proved, for poetic purposes at least, too fast to be overtaken on its voyage westwards, the same could be said of the model it bore along with it. As the real ship tacked to port or starboard (*laeva sive dextera / vocaret aura* 19–20), so the model's owner may be pictured holding his possession as he sat or stood on deck and watching its tiny sail (. . . *sive linteo* 5) flapping in sympathy with that of the larger boat that conveyed him, for grown-ups in all ages may enjoy such make-believe to beguile the tedium of a long sea-voyage. The grandiloquent language, *natantis impetum trabis*, the doubled negatives, even perhaps the unusual lengthening of the short final *-ā* before *-tr* (9) and *-fr* (18) all enhance this effect.¹¹

It remains to explain the curious device Catullus has used whereby the *phaselus* speaks to its onlookers through an intermediary (*ait* 2 and 15, *dicit* 16). This has generally been taken as a variation on the common form of sepulchral or other epigram in which the deceased or the dedicator addresses the passer-by directly.¹² There is however more to it than mere novelty for its own sake. The poet is enabled thereby to slip into *oratio obliqua* at the start

¹¹I am grateful to one of the referees of this journal (those unsung and unthanked heroes of scholarly activity) for pointing out the need to explain line 17 (*tuo imbuisse palmulas in aequore*), which seemed to him to suit a real ship better than a model. I had thought it sufficient to rely on the diminutive *palmulas* (4), but if pressed on the point, I would point out that the anaphora of *tuo* (16–17) means that both the mountain-top whence the timber came and the water on which the *phaselus* was first launched are to be located near Amastris. It is however doubtful, to say the least, whether there was a vigorous ship-building industry on the South coast of the Black Sea. The towns there are small and not notably prosperous, with so far as I know no archaeological evidence of extensive dockyards in antiquity, while the references (mostly in the Greek Orators) to the export to the Aegean of ξύλα ναυπηγήσιμα from the Pontic area suggest that Greek fleets were built in Greek ports. Nevertheless, the possibility that Catullus' *phaselus* was a full-scale vessel which was launched and underwent sea-worthiness trials in waters near Amastris cannot, I suppose, be ruled out. But I find line 17 more pointed on the surmise (it can be no more, in the nature of the case) that we have to do with a locally-made box-wood ship model, with which its builder or purchaser amused himself by seeing if it would float on a sheet of local water, in some lake or harbour. Amastris and its neighbourhood were in the Roman province of Bithynia, and it is not fanciful to think that Catullus bought his souvenir either while travelling on leave or in the course of his tour of administrative duty in that part. I cannot therefore see that 17 presents any serious difficulty to the view I have argued: if anything, it tends to confirm it.

¹²This too may have been unusual enough to catch the attention of a perceptive reader of the day: we have no means of telling.

and sustain it for nearly the whole of the poem, and so to achieve a consummate piece of verbal or rather syntactical virtuosity which has escaped notice. He has turned to his own use an ambiguity inherent in Latin syntax with the phrase *erum tulisse* (19). This has always been taken to mean, as it naturally does on first glance, that the *phaselus* "bore its master," and so has reinforced, if it did not indeed generate, the unshaken preconception that the *phaselus* was a sea-going vessel. *Hinc illae lacrimae*: the words can equally mean that it was its master who carried it all the way from Asia to the Adriatic, and from what has been said above it will not be necessary to argue that this is what Catullus intended. We are in the presence of what W. R. Hardie called the "Delphic ambiguity,"¹³ the epithet being suggested to him by the Latin form of the oracle given at Delphi to Pyrrhus, king of Epirus: *aio te, Aeacida, Romanos vincere posse*. The Delphic oracle fooled Pyrrhus, but the ghost of Catullus must be smiling at the reflection that his deft piece of characteristic *urbanitas* has not only defeated the comprehension of the learned down the centuries but also led them into strange contortions to explain a poem that needed no such explanations. This, we may believe, is the kind of sophistication which lies beneath the opening lines of his Poem 50:

*hesterno, Licini, die otiosi
multum lusimus in meis tabellis,
ut convenerat esse delicatos . . .*

If Poem 4 is anything to go by, much of what passed between Catullus and his friends on such occasions would have gone right over the heads of *inficeti oloi vñv βροτοί έσμεν*.¹⁴

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¹³*Latin Prose Composition* (1908) 73. It may be added that this ambiguity is not possible in Greek, where in similar cases the object of the infinitive precedes it and the subject follows it (see W. J. Hickie on Andoc. *de Myst.* 16).

¹⁴I am very grateful to Mr. Russell Meiggs for kindly reading and commenting on an early draft of this article.