

UBI MURES FERRUM RODUNT  
(Seneca, *Apocolocyntosis* 7.1)

(1.) Being by nature prompt to anger (*irae properus*: Tac. *Ann.* 11. 26; *irae atque iracundiae conscius sibi, utramque excusavit edicto*: Suet. *Claud.* 38), Claudius in heaven loses his temper (*excandescit hoc loco Claudius et quanto potest murmure irascitur*: *Apocol.* 6. 2) and orders my lady of Fever to be taken away and decapitated (*ille autem Febrim duci iubebat... iusserat illi collum praecidi*).

Hercules wants to put Claudius to his place by frightening him considerably (*et quo terribilior esset...*): "Where the hell do you think you are? In your Rome?" Thus he produces the following threatening words: "Audi me, inquit, tu desine fatuari. Venisti huc, *ubi mures ferrum rodunt*. Citius mihi verum, ne tibi alogias excutiam."

This worked. Claudius understands at once that he is no more in Rome and in power, and changes his attitude of arrogance (*Claudius ut vidit virum valentem, oblitus nugarum, intellexit neminem Romae sibi parem fuisse, illic non habere se idem gratiae: gallum in suo sterquilino plurimum posse*).

(2.) Now, what is so frightening in this obscure proverbial expression: *ubi mures ferrum rodunt*? ("You just listen to me, and stop playing the fool. You have come to the place where the mice nibble iron").

(a) In 1864 Bücheler had suggested this explanation: This is a different world, where even a small creature like mouse may become dangerous and frightful<sup>1</sup>).

(b) But August Otto preferred the interpretation offered by H. Genthe: "Hier bist du gefangen, wie die Maus in der

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1) Fr. Bücheler, *Divi Claudii Apocolocyntosis. Symb. Philol. Bonn.* 1 (1864) 51 = *Kl. Schriften* I (Berlin, 1915) 459: "Hercules meint: wo es anders als im gewöhnlichen Erdenleben zugeht und auch das Kleinste fürchterlich wird; er sucht damit den äußerst furchtsamen (Sueton 35) Claudius zu ängstigen."

Falle, hier gibt es keine Ausflucht", though there is no mention of the mousetrap in the text<sup>2</sup>).

(c) It was an easy task for Crusius to dismiss Otto's interpretation, and to come back to Bücheler's suggestion which implied "a Fairyland of Nowhere, where the things are topsyturvy": "Das Jenseits wird mit Zügen aus den Märchenutopien und der 'verkehrten Welt' ausgestattet."<sup>3</sup>)

(d) Continuing the line of interpretation Bücheler-Crusius, Weinreich wrote: "Wo schon ängstliche Mäuse das Eisen fressen, was für Kerle müssen dann erst Hercules und die anderen Himmelsbewohner sein!"<sup>4</sup>) Weinreich especially stressed the *adynaton*-element of such an Utopia.

(e) A new twist to this interpretation was given by Morris C. Sutphen<sup>5</sup>), who saw in Seneca's dictum a *double entente*. Namely, in view of the evidence that on the Cycladic island of Gyarus (Yaros, between Ceos and Tenos) mice nibbled iron<sup>6</sup>), and also of the fact that Yaros was used as one of Rome's (and not only Rome's) political prisons since the times of Tiberius<sup>7</sup>), Sutphen suggested that Seneca's intention was to bring Claudius to the prison of the other world.

(f) Apparently without being aware of Sutphen's interpretation, C.F. Russo, in his recent useful edition of the *Apocolocyntosis*<sup>8</sup>), advanced the same suggestion: "Questo luogo terribile, a quanto pare, era nell' isola di Giaro".

(g) Finally, following a second suggestion offered by Bücheler<sup>9</sup>): "ubi nihil est hominum neque humanitatis", W.H. Alexander<sup>10</sup>) referred to the American expression "Tough guy chewed nails" and took the saying to mean: "Claudius... has come to a rough and tough place".

2) A. Otto, *Die Sprichwörter der Römer* (Leipzig, 1890), No 1168.

3) Otto Crusius, in *Wochenschr. f. kl. Philol.* 8 (1891) 432 = *Nachträge zu A. Otto, Sprichwörter* etc., ed. R. Häussler (Hildesheim, Olms, 1968) 13, and also in his *Untersuchungen zu den Mimiamben des Herondas* (Leipzig, 1892) 72-74 (ad Herodas 3, 74-76).

4) Otto Weinreich, *Senecas Apocolocyntosis*. Einführung, Analyse u. Untersuchungen, Übersetzung (Berlin, 1923) 74 n. 1; 75.

5) 'A Further Collection of Latin Proverbs', *Amer. Journ. Philol.* 22 (1901) 251 = Häussler (cf. n. 3) 190.

6) Antigonus *Mirab.* 18; Aelian *N. A.* 5, 15; Pliny *N. H.* 8, 222.

7) Tac. *Ann.* 3, 68; 4, 30; Juvenal 1, 73; Plutarch *De exilio* 8 (602 C).

8) L. Annaei Senecae *Apocolocyntosis*. Ed. C.F. Russo, Florence (La Nuova Italia), 2nd ed., 1955, p. 74.

9) In his edition of Herodas (1892), ad 3, 74-76.

10) *Class. Philology* 30 (1935) 351.

(3.) We can safely discard the interpretation of the saying *ubi mures ferrum rodunt* in the sense of a Yaros-prison in heaven, (e) and (f). For Gyarus is not the only place where reportedly mice gnaw iron, other such places in antiquity being, e.g., Teredon in Caspia<sup>11</sup>) or the land of the Chalybes in Pontus<sup>12</sup>).

(4.) As for the Bücheler-Crusius-Weinreich line of interpretation, (a), (c), (d), about the heaven as a topsy-turvy land of Nowhere ("eine verkehrte Welt"), I would think it is not likely either, for the simple reason that the phenomenon of *mice gnawing iron* is not an *adynaton* but a real fact. After all, mice and rats are rodents, and in order to keep their teeth in good shape they just have to gnaw any hard object, even metal: iron<sup>13</sup>), lead<sup>14</sup>), silver<sup>15</sup>), or gold<sup>16</sup>).

I think the example adduced by Weinreich and others from *Kathâ Sarit Sâgara* 10. 60 is misleading. For, in the anecdote about the cheating merchant who claimed that mice had eaten a whole large balance, confided to him, made of one thousand *palas* (pound) of iron<sup>17</sup>), the *adynaton* does not consist in the fact that mice gnaw iron (as Weinreich and others took it), but in the merchant's claim that mice have eaten the *whole* scales, made of *one thousand* pound of iron.

11) Amyntas ap. Aelian *N. A.* 5. 14; 17. 17.

12) Aristotle *Mirab. ausc.* 25-26 (p. 832a 22): 'Ἐν Κύπρῳ (codd.: Γνάρω ed. Didot.) τῆ νήσῳ λέγεται τοὺς μῦς τὸν σίδηρον ἐσθίειν· φασὶ δὲ καὶ τοὺς Χάλυβας ἔν τινι ὑπερκειμένῳ αὐτοῖς νησιδίῳ τὸ χρυσίον συμφορεῖσθαι παρὰ πλείονων etc.; Pliny *N. H.* 8. 222: id quod natura quadam et ad Chalybas facere (sc. mures ferrum rodere) in ferrariis officinis. Cf. *Kathâ Sarit Sâgara* 10. 60. Tr. C.H. Tawney (Calcutta, 1884), p. 41 f.

13) The references adduced in notes 6, 11, 12 and 16.

14) Cf., e.g., Alfred Brehm, *Tierleben*, 4th ed., II (Leipzig und Wien, 1914), 344: "Sogar die Bleirohre der Wasserleitung nagen sie durch (sc. die Wanderratten)... Landois erhielt mehrfach solche Fraßstücke für das Museum in Münster."

15) Pliny *N. H.* 8. 221: adrosis Lanuvi clipeis argenteis Marsicum portendere bellum (sc. mures). Cf. Cic. *De div.* 1. 99; 2. 59: Quasi vero quicquam intersit, mures diem noctem aliquid rodentes scuta an cribra corroserint.

16) Aristotle *Mirab.* 26 (cf. n. 12); Theophrast. *Fr.* 174. 8 (III, p. 221 Wimmer): ὅτι οἱ μῦες ἰστοροῦνται καὶ σίδηρον κατεσθίειν καὶ χρυσίον· διὸ καὶ ἀνατέμνοντες αὐτοὺς οἱ ἐν τοῖς χρυσεῖσι τὸν χρυσὸν ἀνιμῶνται; Livy 30. 2. 10: mures Antii coronam auream adrosere; Pliny *N. H.* 8. 222.

17) Arabic and Western parallels of the anecdote are to be found in Tawney (cf. n. 12), 42 n. 1; J. Bolte and G. Polivka, *Anmerkungen zu den Kinder- u. Hausmärchen der Brüder Grimm*, II (Leipzig, 1915) 372 n. 1; Weinreich (cf. n. 4) 74 n. 1; Stith Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*, 2nd ed. (1958), J1531. 2.

(5.) We may now ask: when such a phenomenon of rats attacking iron-objects is likely to take place? I think the answer is obvious: when they have eaten everything else. When the overpopulation of rats has reached the point of *famine*, with no other food to eat left over, they will gnaw even objects of metal. This seems to be typical of small islands (such as Gyarus, Elymnum, etc.), from which rats cannot easily emigrate, as they usually do in such circumstances. I think the evidence supports such an interpretation of the mice-gnawing-iron dictum as implying extreme hunger, famine and starvation.

(a) There is a piece of evidence which seems to have been neglected by all scholars: Heraclidis Lembi *Excerpta Politiarum* 62 ed. Dilts<sup>18</sup>) = Aristotle Fr. 611 Rose: *Κατόκισαν δὲ καὶ Κλεωνᾶς Χαλυδαεῖς οἱ ἐν τῷ Ἄθῳ, ἐξαναστάντες ἐξ Ἐλυμνίου, ὡς μὲν μυθολογοῦσιν, ὑπὸ μύων, οἱ τὰ τ' ἄλλα κατήσθιον αὐτῶν καὶ τὸν σίδηρον.* From this testimony it becomes clear that the inhabitants of the island of Elymnum were forced to emigrate by a mice-plague. With nothing else left to eat rats started attacking iron-objects.

(b) The same will be true of Pliny's report about the island of Gyarus (*N.H.* 8. 222): Theophrastus auctor est in Gyara insula cum incolas fugassent (sc. mures), ferrum quoque rosisse eos. After driving away the inhabitants of the island rats started gnawing even objects of iron.

(c) What about the lines Herodas 3. 74-76, adduced by Crusius in 1891? I think they too yield to the suggested interpretation, implying extreme *poverty*:

*Λαμπρόσκοπος·*

*Ἄλλ' εἰς πονηρός, Κότταλε, ὥστε καὶ περὶὰς*

*οὐδείς σ' ἐπαιέσειεν, οὐδ' ὄκον χόρης*

*οἱ μῦς ὁμοίως τὸν σίδηρον τρώγουσιν.*

To Crusius' interpretation (adopted by Weinreich): "Das Land, 'wo die Mäuse auch... das Eisen fressen', liegt dort, wo die Esel und Wölfe durch die Lüfte fliegen, wo die Böcke gemolken und die Kühe gesattelt werden"<sup>19</sup>), I would object: who would think of a boy being sold as slave in a nowhere-land? I think the adage implies the following: "Cottalus, you are such a chap good-for-nothing that no slaves-trader (no matter how good a liar he may be) would be able to sell you to anybody, not even to the people of the *poorest* country in the whole world."

18) Greek, Roman and Byzantine Monographs, 5 (Duke University, 1971).

19) *Untersuchungen* 72 (cf. n. 3).

(d) Maybe we can now better understand why mice (a *Seelentier* by preference<sup>20</sup>) can predict *war* by gnawing metal: Ante vero Marsicum bellum quod clipeos Lanuvii, ut a te dictum est (1. 99), mures rosissent, maximum id portentum haruspices esse dixerunt (Cic. *De div.* 2. 59; Pliny *N.H.* 8. 221; Livy 30. 2. 10). Possibly, mice gnawing the silver-shields at Lanuvium was considered by the soothsayers as the most ominous sign of all simply because they associated *war* with *famine*, situation in which mice would attack objects of metal.

(6.) Back to Seneca's dictum. Desine fatuari: venisti huc, ubi mures ferrum rodunt. In view of the fact that the phenomenon of mice gnawing iron usually implies famine and starvation, I would advance the following interpretation: "Stop joking. This is a serious situation for you. This is no more Rome: you will get *nothing to eat here*." I think Seneca hints at Claudius' notorious *gluttony*: Cibi vinique quocumque et tempore et loco appetentissimus... nec temere umquam triclinio abscessit nisi distentus ac madens... Convivia agitavit et ampla et assidua (Sueton. *Claud.* 33; 32).

This suggestion is supported by the fact that Seneca makes another allusion to Claudius' voracity at *Apocol.* 9. 5. In the senate of the gods Diespiter proposes that Claudius be given the status of god, since "it is for the public good that there be some one able to join Romulus in devouring boiled turnips" (cum... sitque e re publica esse aliquem qui cum Romulo possit 'ferventia rapa vorare', censeo uti divus Claudius ex hac die deus sit).

(7.) Possibly, Seneca's image of a heaven with no food for the souls of the dead was inspired by the Stoic eschatological idea about the souls of the dead being nourished only from exhalations that reach them in the ethereal regions about the moon: ὑπὸ τῆς τυχοῦσης ἀναθυμιάσεως τρέφεσθαι (Plutarch *De facie* 943 E); animus... aletur et sustentabitur iisdem rebus, quibus astra sustentantur et aluntur (Cic. *Tusc.* 1. 43); τροφῆ τε χρωῶνται οἰκεία τῇ ἀπὸ γῆς ἀναθυμιάσει, ὡς καὶ τὰ λοιπὰ ἄστρα (Sext. Emp. *Adv. math.* 9. 73)<sup>21</sup>).

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20) Cf., e.g., Steier, in PW RE, s.v. Maus, 14 (1930) 2406f.; Otto Keller, *Die antike Tierwelt* (Leipzig, 1909), I, 196.

21) Cf. H. Cherniss ad Plut. *De facie* 943 E (Loeb, Plutarch, *Moralia*, XII, 1968), p. 203 n. e. *Korrekturzusatz*. On (5.) (c) cf. also E. Wendling, *Philol.* 51 (1892) 180, and I. C. Cunningham, *Herodas Mimiambi* (Oxford, 1971) 122.