EMBOLA PETRONIANA

nos iam ad triclinium perveneramus, in cuius parte prima procurator rationes accipiebat. et quod praecipue miratus sum, in postibus triclinii fasces erant cum securibus fixi, quorum imam partem quasi embolum navis aeneum finiebat, in quo erat scriptum: 'C. Pompeio Trimalchioni, seviro Augustali, Cinnamus dispensator'. sub eodem titulo et lucerna bilychnis de camera pendebat.[1]

The device described in this passage presents two puzzles: how we, along with the narrator, the bewildered Encolpius, are to envision it, and why Petronius uses the word *embolum*, a *hapax legomenon* in Latin literature.[2] The answer to both puzzles lies in the two meanings of this word. Besides meaning 'ship's prow', as *rostrum* does, *embolum* means 'peg' or 'cross-piece'. These two meanings both reflect the general sense of this word, which is 'projection'. By contrast, *rostrum* has the transferred sense of a projection that is curved, like a beak.[3]

Embolum means 'peg' or 'cross-piece' in Euripides. First, *Phoenissae* 114–16:

> ἆρα πύλαι κλήιθροις χαλκόδετα τ' ἔμβολα
> λαϊνέοισιν Ἀμφίονος ὀργάνοις
> τείχεος ἥρμοσται;

If the verb is used in zeugma, the sense is, 'Have the gates been bolted shut and have their bronze-plated pegs been inserted into walls that are Amphion's work?' The pegs or, as Mastronarde says, 'bars', may be vertical or horizontal; Mastronarde says that they are horizontal, like μοχλοί, while the scholiast says that they are καθέται, which *LSJ* says may mean 'portcullis'.[4] If the scholiast is right, some of them are horizontal and others are vertical.[5]

Second, *Bacchae* 591:

> εἴδετε λάινα κίοσιν ἔμβολα
> τάδε διάδρομα;

Do you see how these stone cross-pieces between the columns have slipped out?

This time the *embola* form part of an architrave, so they are horizontal. Horizontal, not vertical *embola* are suitable for Petronius. Hesychius says that the word appears in two other plays of Euripides, but it is impossible to tell what it means.[6]

There are no other instances of *embolon* as 'peg' or 'cross-piece' in authors that we may be sure that Petronius knew, but Hesychius calls *embola* μοχλοί and refers to the ἔμβολον τοῦ θυρίου, and if this information derives from well-known authors, as is

[1] K. Müller, *Petronius Satyricon Reliquiae* (Stuttgart and Leipzig, 1995), 30.1–2.

[2] For *embolum*, later commentators have followed the observation of P. Burman, *Titi Petroni Arbitri Satyricon Quae Supersunt* (Amsterdam, 1743) ad loc., 'Petronius Graecam vocem retinuit'. For the appearance of the device, see the most recent discussions, found in the translation of P. Walsh, *Petronius. The Satyricon* (Oxford, 1996) and in the edition of M. Smith, *Petronii Arbitri Cena Trimalchionis* (Oxford, 1975) ad loc., preceded by F. Bücheler, *Petronii Saturae* (Berlin, 1862) ad loc. and L. Friedländer, *Petronii Cena Trimalchionis* (Leipzig, 1906) ad loc. Walsh and Smith translate *embolum* as 'beak', the root sense of *rostrum*; Friedländer translates it as 'Schiffsschnabel'.

[3] *LSJ* s.v. ἔμβολον; *OLD* s.v. *rostrum* 2.

[4] S.v. καθέτης.

[5] See D. Mastronarde, *Phoenissae. Euripides* (Leipzig, 1988) on 114–16 for textual difficulties that do not affect the translation of 'peg' or 'bar'. In his 1994 commentary (Cambridge), he defines the word as 'things which are inserted', and this meaning is suitable for this passage, but not for *Bacch.* 591, discussed immediately below.

[6] Hesych. s.v. ἔμβολα.

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typical in Hesychius, there may have been several such instances.[7] There is also an instance in a source that Petronius may not have known, Pherecydes, who describes the *embolon* or 'peg' that Myrtilus failed to insert all the way into the axle of Oenomaus' chariot. Even so, Petronius surely knew the story of Oenomaus, and hence may have seen the word used in this sense.[8]

The assumption that Petronius knew this meaning of the word, in particular, 'peg', facilitates interpretation of his statement that the lower part of the *fasces*, or the *imam partem*, ends in something like an *embolum*. This statement ought to mean the *fasces* are being supported or attached, and a peg could accomplish these purposes. The alternative meaning of *embolum*, 'ship's prow', could not, and so commentators and critics who have thought of the *embolum* as a prow have cast about for ways to explain the statement about the lower part of the *fasces*. Friedländer and Blümner suggested that the *fasces* are affixed to the doorposts, making any support or attachment unnecessary; Smith, the most recent commentator, said that the *fasces* were attached to not one but two door posts, even though *embolum* is singular.[9] In either case, the *fasces* would be harder to distinguish than if they rested on a peg and stood some small way from the surface of the doorpost or, better, the lintel.[10]

This is not to say that the *embolum* does not resemble a prow. The two meanings are not mutually exclusive, as shown by Maiuri's statement, 'Borchie bronzee [bronze supports, i.e. pegs or cross-pieces] in forma di aplustri [ship's stern-posts] o di rostri di navi [i.e. *embola*] su sipiti, porte, e case, sono uno dei motivi prediletti dell'arte decorativa pompeiana.'[11]

The device, then, is a peg that looks like a prow, or, alternatively, a prow that is something more than that, since it serves as a peg. It is an oddity, and perhaps unparalleled. After the defeat of Sextus Pompeius, Agrippa received a golden crown adorned with ship's prows, but this object, reported in Dio Cassius, is comparable to that of Petronius only because of the miniature prows. The *fasces* are missing, as are the other elements, including the tablet. Nor does a rival appear in the tablets that Diodorus anachronistically says were nailed to the *embola*, or *rostra*, in 427 B.C.E.[12] They are simpler, too, as are some *tintinnabula*, or bells, that include pegs that are not prows.[13]

The oddity of this device, in turn, explains why Petronius chose *embolum*, a *hapax legomenon*, instead of *rostrum*. For the odd device, he prefers the odd word, all the odder because *embolum* is a Greek word substituted for a Latin word with the same

[7] Hesych. s.v. *ἔμβολον*; Eust. *ad Od.* 1.43.

[8] Fragment 93b *FGH*; so also schol. *Il.* ed. Erbse 1.200.

[9] *Embolum* on the doorposts: L. Friedländer and H. Blümner, 'Kritisch-exegetische Bemerkungen zu Petrons Cena Trimalchionis', *Philologus* 76 (1920), 330–48 at 332–3, followed by Smith (n. 2).

[10] For the point being made, it makes no difference whether the cross-piece, and also the *fasces*, are bas-relief or painted representations. A. Mau, *Pompeji in Leben und Kunst* (Leipzig, 1899), 445, says the *fasces* were 'angebracht', though in his translation *Pompeii, Its Life and Art* (New York, 1907), F. Kelsey described them as 'painted on' (420).

[11] A. Maiuri, *La cena di Trimalchione di Petronio Arbitro: saggio, testo e commento* (Naples, 1945), on 30.1.

[12] Dio Cass. 49.14.3, Diod. Sic. 12.26.1.

[13] For example, C. Johns, *Sex or Symbol: Erotic Images of Greece and Rome* (Austin, 1982), pls. 13 and 14, two examples of *tintinnabula* with phallic pegs from first-century C.E. Campania. Although he presumably did not know of these or similar objects, Burman (n. 2) thought that the *embolum* in Petronius was phallic, too. In my view, Encolpius is not a narrator who would fail to remark on such an object.

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meaning, that is, for *rostrum*, and as such is without parallel in Petronius, whose other *hapax legomena* are Greek words without Latin equivalents.[14]

Yet this observation that the *hapax* is well chosen is not the whole story. Although he sees *embolum*, the reader will profit from remembering *rostrum*, which has a political meaning that *embolum* lacks, and he will wonder whether Encolpius is aware of this political meaning. In this respect, Encolpius' *embolum* is far from well chosen, and instead suggests ignorance; or we may call it well chosen because it is inadequate, and is therefore characteristic of him. The well-chosen word thus proves to be its opposite; in general terms, an aesthetic of fitness incorporates inappropriate, perverse effects. Or the terms might be reversed: an aesthetic of perversity allows for seemingly proper diction.

This same kind of reversal of meaning is possible in regard to Encolpius' statement, *praecipue miratus sum*. He might mean that he admires the device, and finds it fitting, or he might be speaking ironically, and find it unfitting. Either is possible, and perhaps both are possible. We cannot be sure, for Encolpius is not in control of the tone of what he says.

This type of difficulty or contradiction has attracted some attention in recent scholarship, which has shied away from the earlier view of Petronius as a satirist.[15] But the passage in question does not confine itself to aesthetics. It also prompts questions about bilingualism: should Encolpius limit himself to one language, and if so, which one? Or should he combine them, but more skilfully? The last of these answers, though seemingly the best, is not as easy as it appears. As the case of *embolum* shows, sometimes neither the Greek nor the Latin word is quite right. Having two languages to work with creates the possibility that neither is adequate.[16]

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[14] A conclusion in accord with each of three lists of such words: A. Marbach, *Wortbildung, Wortwahl und Wortbedeutung als Mittel der Charakterzeichnung bei Petron* (Giessen, 1931), 119–47; D. Swanson, *A Formal Analysis of Petronius' Vocabulary* (Minneapolis, 1963), 228–30; and A. Wilmi, 'Linguistische Bemerkungen zu den Gräzismen in Petrons *Cena Trimalchionis'*, *Arctos* n.s. 15 (1981), 125–30.

[15] Recent views: F. Zeitlin, 'Petronius as paradox: anarchy and artistic integrity', *TAPA* 102 (1971), 631–84; and especially N. Slater, 'Against interpretation: Petronius and art criticism', *Ramus* 10 (1987), 165–76, holding that Petronius is criticizing processes of interpretation, not vices. Petronius the satirist: G. Highet, 'Petronius the moralist', *TAPA* 72 (1941), 176–94.

[16] See also J.-C. Dumont, 'Le Décor de Trimalcion', *MEFRA* 102 (1990), 959–81, who regards Trimalchio's house as impossible to visualize using either the descriptions given in the novel or extrapolations from Roman architectural practice. I thank the reader for *CQ*, and also Sari Takacs, with whom I collaborated on a different version of this note.

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