## IV EPIGRAM IN THE SECOND SOPHISTIC AND AFTER

'After [the Alexandrian era] comes nothing new but the jokes of Rome', 'corrupted by the lusts of Rome and the decadence of the East'.[1] These and similar reactions to post-Hellenistic epigram – explicitly teleological[2] and, from a twenty-first-century perspective, often startlingly racist – are typical of the late nineteenth century and much of the twentieth. Scholars felt almost as strongly about Greek epigrammatists under Rome as they did about Rome's own major epigrammatist, Martial (discussed in the previous chapter). His fellow travellers in genre came too late in epigram's history: they could not possibly be any good, and the public were advised to remain at a safe distance to avoid aesthetic and even sexual contamination. The interloper Martial had wrecked ancient epigram's manners and morals, and the Greeks who came after him could only sport grimly in the ruins: 'The brothel and the grave are all that is left for Rufinus and his contemporaries.'[3] This revealingly overwrought response is essentially late Victorian, but its echoes are still felt; our final chapter will follow the trail of panic quotes back to John Addington Symonds and Uranian Love, laying bare the contingency and special pleading that lie behind *any* modern account of ancient epigram.

Our own account of Greek and Latin epigram in the Roman Empire is naturally very different from the pessimism of the Victorians. The early centuries CE are, if anything, epigram's golden age. The genre permeates every level of literate society. Emperors crack jokes in (occasionally wobbly) elegiacs, and compose verse epitaphs for the restored tombs of formerly neglected Hellenistic poets; prefects of Egypt carve Latin tags onto crumbling colossi.[4] New Greek epigrammatists, writing varieties of epigram probably unknown to the Hellenistic age, circulate widely and attract important Roman patrons, and ordinary consumers track and mark favourite poems for personal

[1] Lothian 1920: n.p.; Symonds 1920: 527.

[2] By 'teleological' in this context I mean making no attempt to understand ancient Greece on its own terms, whatever those were, but interpreting it as the first chapter of a story predestined to reach its climax in the modern nation-state.

[3] Symonds 1920: 528.

[4] For an engaging survey of epigram under the Antonine emperors, see Bowie 1990.

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use. Everyone is now their own anthologist, if they want to be: the papyrus scraps that in our Introduction underpinned the image of a Greco-Roman culture of collecting are all from the early centuries CE.

In part, this chronological clustering in the papyri must reflect the nature of the evidence. At Oxyrhynchus and other sites, survivals of pre-Roman material are very rare simply because the bottoms of the rubbish mounds sit nearer the water table. The older the papyrus, the further down it is in the heap and the likelier it is to turn to mush. Still, we find epigram in *so* many other important contexts in the Roman period that the picture we get from the papyrus record may not be so distorted after all. In a world of increased social and physical mobility, these most mobile of texts were doing very well for themselves.

## The poetry of numbers: new kinds of epigram

Some of epigram's new varieties have seemed strange to modern eyes. Leonides, a former astrologer from Alexandria in Egypt, wrote 'isopsephic' poems under Nero; approximately forty-two of them survive. He courts the emperor's patronage, offering a birthday poem as a bloodless equivalent to the regular sacrifice to his divine ruler (*AP* 6.231 = *FGE* Leonides 1):

> The Nile-dwelling Muse of Leonides dedicates this poem to you on your birthday, Caesar; for Calliope's offerings are always without smoke. If you are willing, next time she will offer a poem outdoing this one.

The term 'isopsephic' means equal in numerical reckoning, as this opening poem explains (*AP* 9.356 = *FGE* Leonides 33):

> We broach the drink of a different fountain in order to enjoy the marvellous poetry of the bard Leonides. For the couplets equal each other in their tallies. But you, Blame, begone, and harm others with your sharp bite.

Each Greek letter from alpha to omega doubles up as a numeral in mathematics – alpha is one, beta is two, and so on, stepping up to tens at iota and hundreds at rho; omega, the last letter of the alphabet, thus doubles as the numeral for eight hundred. Therefore every word and sentence is potentially also a larger number, the sum of its letters.

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Leonides' poems are almost all of four lines each: two elegiac couplets. Add up all the letters in the first couplet and you arrive at a very large number indeed; repeat the sum for the second, and you get *the exact same number*. Or rather, you get the same number once the ingenious modern editor has repaired the received text (which hardly ever *does* add up) through extensive and bold emendation.

These are poems that suffer in transmission – any tiny slip ruins the maths – and that by definition lose everything that made them distinctive when read in translation. Doing the sums on them drives modern scholars to distraction.[5] Even the standard modern text of their Greek original is the product of a scholarly party trick that naughtily mimics the 'perverse ingenuity' of Leonides' original 'parlour game', play for play.[6] To show how it is done, the virtuoso editor Denys Page randomly selects a non-Leonidean *Anthology* poem and *makes* it isopsephic by tinkering with spellings and changing a couple of words, replicating Leonides' feat 'at the cost of a few minutes' experimenting'. Pick an epigram, any epigram, and note that there is absolutely nothing up his sleeves. Page then applies his talents to the poems of Leonides and succeeds in making their numbers add up too – although whether this is isopsephy recreated or invented from scratch is hard to say. A typical editorial intervention 'is not wholly pleasing, but the restoration of *isopsephia* at so trifling a cost is a strong argument in its favour'. Page is too dry a critic to allow himself irony quotes around 'restoration'.[7]

Epigram's brevity encourages other types of parlour game too. Nicodemus of Heraclea writes about works of art; his unique selling point is that each poem can be read backwards.[8] Nicodemus' ingenuity, combined with the properties of Greek as an inflected language, creates semi-palindromes that make sense – and fit the elegiac metre – in both directions simultaneously. His poems are even less translatable into English than Leonides'. (For an idea of how awful a literal version would be, read the words in this sentence in reverse order.)

Another new variety seems much less odd to modern readers, and probably less odd than it should. This is skoptic epigram, discussed in our last chapter. In its Roman reception by Martial, and more or

[5] Page in *FGE* pp. 508–10 on errors in modern editions.

[6] 'Perverse ingenuity': J. Powell 1917: 143. For the ancient parlour game and modern editorial intervention, see Page in *FGE* pp. 504–6.

[7] Page in *FGE* p. 523.

[8] *AP* 6.314–20 and perhaps also 6.323, attributed to Leonides; for discussion, see *FGE* pp. 541–5.

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less by accident, skoptic epigram became the Latin West's paradigm for the genre of epigram from Late Antiquity onwards; it established the expectation of a satirical punch line or twist. At the time, though, these poems were probably unprecedented. At the very least, they were developed on an unprecedented scale as a distinct specialism, something they had never been before.[9]

## An altar for Hadrian: Greek culture in a Roman world

It is surely no accident that these new varieties of epigram are also the ones that speak explicitly of, and to, Roman power in a Greco-Roman world. The more established types of poem maintained the antiquarian focus and local feel of their Hellenistic models; they typically addressed the interface between cultures only obliquely, if at all.[10] Epigram in this period is almost always composed in Greek, and operates within a Hellenic, and typically nostalgic, frame of reference. This regardless of whether the individual writer is 'Greek' or 'Roman' – and most are both, by citizenship and/or acculturation.

One of Hadrian's officials, for instance, writes a pattern-poem – a classic Hellenistic literary game made famous by Simias and Theocritus in the fourth and third centuries BCE.[11] The poems are descriptions (*ekphrases*), written in the shape of the objects they describe: Simias' *Egg* is ovoid, Theocritus' *Syrinx* is shaped like a shepherd's pipe, and so on. These poems can now be found in *AP* 15, Cephalas' book of miscellaneous odds and ends.[12] Like these famous Hellenistic poems, Vestinus' poem (*AP* 15.25) must use several different metres in order to keep its shape when written out on the page. This convenient and concise advertisement of the author's literary education, versatility, and skill also helps Vestinus align himself with fashionable Callimachean poetics. No translator rises to the challenge of replicating the effect in English, and this has to be a good thing. Like Leonides' isopsephic epigrams, these poems are all about the visual and cognitive effect

[9] On the absence of Hellenistic skoptic epigram, see Nisbet 2007b.

[10] Readers interested in seeing how Second Sophistic rhetoric made space for implicit political comment through allegory should begin with the valuable and accessible treatment by Whitmarsh 2005: 57–73.

[11] On Vestinus as Hadrianic functionary, see briefly Bowie 1990: 61. The poem also comes down under the variant name 'Besantinus', preferred by the Loeb edition.

[12] These examples by Simias and Theocritus are at *AP* 15.21 and 27; cf. 15.22 and 24, also by Simias.

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of the *written* text in the papyrus roll. As puzzles, they expect an individual reader with time and ingenuity to spare – and a very careful copyist; anyone who merely listens in misses the point. This is about as far as we can get from the sympotic ideal of Hellenistic epigrams on life, love, and wine.

Vestinus' *Altar* takes its shape and inspiration from a famous Hellenistic pattern-poem by Dosiadas of Rhodes, but is constructed on a grander scale – twenty-six lines to Dosiadas' eighteen. ('Typical Roman!' a contemporary reader might have thought, 'always having to go one better.') The author also works in an acrostic, meandering down the line-beginnings of the altar's left-hand side. It is a prayer, and one highly appropriate to its context: 'Olympian, may you offer sacrifices for many years to come'. The Olympian deity is surely Hadrian, flattered as a good emperor (and thus destined for posthumous deification) with specifically Greek sympathies; Vestinus prays for the long life of his emperor and boss. Perhaps this pattern-epigram was presented in lieu of a birthday present, like Leonides' isopsephic poem; or perhaps it was written to accompany a real gift, like Martial's *Xenia* and *Apophoreta* (collections of gift-tag epigrams presented in modern editions as Books 13 and 14).

We present the top half of Vestinus' *Altar* as an example of the kinds of Roman-era material that Cephalas found so hard to categorize – a poem as far from the traditional elegiac epigram as can be imagined. In a sense it is the ultimate faux-inscriptional epigram, supplying a cut-out template for building the object it is supposed to adorn:

*Ὅλὸς οὔ με λιβρὸς ἱρῶν*
*Λιβαδέσσιν, οἷα κάλχη*
*Ὑποφοινίῃσι τέγγει·*
*Μαύλιες δ' ὕπερθε πέτρης Ναξίας θοούμεναι*
*Παμάτων φείδοντο Πανός· οὐ στροβίλῳ λιγνύϊ*
*Ἱξὸς εὐώδης μελαίνει τρεχνέων με Νυσίων.*
*Ἐς γὰρ βωμὸν ὁρῇς με μήτε γλούρου*
*Πλίνθοις, μήτ' Ἀλύβης παγέντα βώλοις·*
*Οὐδ' ὃν Κυνθογενὴς ἔτευξε φύτλη*
*Λαβόντε μηκάδων κέρα,*
*Λισσαῖσιν ἀμφὶ δειράσιν*
*Ὅσσαι νέμονται Κυνθίαις,*
*Ἰσόρροπος πέλοιτο μοι.*
…

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The acrostic can be read down the wiggly left margin: *ΟΛΥΜΠΙΕ* ('Olympian'), etc. A few lines down, the altar widens again to form a slanted base. The metres are various and obscure, and the difficult Greek is full of learned allusion to local cult. Look at this poem in Paton's Loeb if you get the chance (Paton 1916–18): he gives it no fewer than nine footnotes, far more than any other poem in his five volumes, and his faithfully literal English translation is practically unreadable.

I am not the sort of altar on which beasts are sacrificed, says this first part of the *Altar*; no smoke rises from me, and I am not built of gold, silver, or horn. (Not that Vestinus *says* silver; instead he makes an incredibly obscure Homeric reference – even most professional scholars would be lost without the Loeb footnote. Ancient readers would not have got very far without an expert knowledge of Callimachus either.) The next four lines of the poem identify its builders: the text *seems* to specify the Muses, but in such a tortuous way that even Paton (a very skilled and perceptive reader of epigram) is hard pressed to explain exactly how Vestinus gets there. The topos of presenting a clever epigram as a bloodless sacrifice of course recalls Leonides' dedication of his book of newfangled isopsephic poems to the emperor Nero; so Vestinus expects a readership well enough versed in recent genre history to get the reference. The remaining nine lines, progressively lengthening to form the base of the *Altar*, compliment Hadrian as a fellow poet – again in a very roundabout way.

## Epigram and the sophists

Hadrian is himself attested as a newfangled skoptic epigrammatist – and as a 'satirical' one, in Latin.[13] But he is also the author of epigrams in the oldest Greek varieties of all, dedicatory and funerary epigram. These poems are not merely inscriptional in form; we know that some were actually inscribed. A rare example of epigram in hendecasyllables from Thespiae in Boeotia (*FGE* Hadrian 5 = *IG* VII 1827) commemorates a bear hunt, and may relate to the foundation of the city of Hadrianoutherae. From an inept transcript of an ancient stone copy comes a conventional and touching epitaph (*FGE* Hadrian 7 = *IG* XIV 1089), composed for inscription on the newly restored

[13] In Greek: *FGE* Hadrian 3. In Latin: Courtney 1993: 375–5.

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tomb of the Hellenistic poet Parthenius.[14] The historian Dio attributes to Hadrian a verse epitaph for Pompey, which also survives in the *Anthology* (*FGE* Hadrian 4 = *AP* 9.402).[15] Pompey was murdered between ship and shore, and his headless corpse was buried in an unmarked grave. Hadrian thus dramatically declaimed his single hexameter line; there was no monument on which to inscribe it. His response to Roman epic treatment of Pompey's death scene has long been noted, but Hadrian's quasi-inscriptional performance also evokes fictional epitaphs for the shipwrecked dead of the type we find in the new Posidippus:

> He had the lion's share of temples; how great a loss that he should have no tomb.

Hadrian's range as a poet advertises his mastery of *paideia* while simultaneously alluding to Republican elite traditions of witty light verse.[16] Epigram makes him not just a good Greek sophist but also a good Roman senator. Hadrian's background is atypical but symptomatic of his age: an emperor who is also a former archon of Athens; a career soldier with a Greek-style younger boyfriend in whose memory, Alexander-like, he founds a city (Antinoöpolis, the City of Antinous).

Hadrian's fellow Greek intellectuals are drawn to epigram as an established element of the sympotic culture that, in their eyes, unites them with the revered classical past. Their ideas of how epigram really fits into this tradition are perhaps a little confused. Plutarch's *Table-Talk*, a voluminous work of commentary on the culture of the symposium, ignores epigram completely – it is not part of *his* idea of the ideal dinner party, so he leaves it out. (Presumably the sticking-point, as in education at the time, was its lack of a copper-bottomed classical pedigree. Contrastingly, Plutarch often quotes funerary epigrams – which *do* have such a pedigree – in his parallel biographies of famous Greeks and Romans, the *Lives*.) Perhaps at around the same time, the anonymous author of the *AP* 11 preface goes to the other extreme, representing skoptic epigram in particular as a subgenre that had always been at the heart of the symposium among 'the ancients'.

[14] For a brief discussion, see Nisbet 2007a: 553–4. On Parthenius, see the modern commentary by Lightfoot 1999.

[15] The line is ascribed to Hadrian in both *AP* and *APl*. See also Pompey in Lucan: 9.789–822, recently discussed by Spencer 2005.

[16] Nisbet 2007a; on Hadrian as Greek poet, see Bowie 1990.

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This is clearly a desperate piece of fudging, as we saw in Chapter 1; but Plutarch is probably no better. Veiling prescription as description, each of these prose writers makes a case for (or, in Plutarch's case, implicitly against) epigram's place, status, and pedigree.

Other authors attempt to rewrite genre history through more direct intervention, composing a spurious back catalogue of erotic epigrams for the philosopher Plato:[17]

> As I kissed Agathon, I held back my soul at my lips; the naughty thing was trying to pass through and enter him.
>
> I throw you an apple; if you really love me, girl, pick it up, and give me your virginity in exchange. But if you are thinking what you should not be, take this very same apple and consider how fleeting is the prime of youthful beauty.
>
> I am an apple: the one who throws me, loves you. Please consent, Xanthippe; both you and I are subject to decay.

The thrown apple is a standard love offering in Hellenistic poetry. Many of the pseudo-Platonic poems must be Hellenistic themselves; Meleager boasts in his preface that his *Garland* includes 'the golden bough of ever-divine Plato'. The third example seems a likely case in point: in its unlikely conceit of an epigram 'upon' an apple it resembles one of Martial's poetic gift tags, but the still more improbable idea of incision into the apple's skin chimes with the playful meta-inscriptionality of the new Milan text. In fact, this third epigram can now be ascribed with some confidence to Philodemus of Gadara, writing (as we saw in our chapter on Hellenistic epigram) in imitation of Hellenistic models in the first century BCE, on the cusp of empire.[18] Others will be imperial in date, minor props in the Second Sophistic's consensual hallucination of its Attic heritage. Working out contemporary erotics against the backdrop of a utopian past fleshed out from Plato's own classic texts – Xanthippe is the wife of his teacher Socrates (*Phaedo*), and Agathon is the host of the *Symposium* – they bear close comparison to prose texts such as Lucian's *Dialogues of Courtesans*.[19]

[17] These examples are at *AP* 5.78–80. *FGE* 'Plato' (note Page's irony quotes) runs to twenty-three poems.

[18] Sider 1997: 64–7, citing as evidence the papyrus incipit list, P.Oxy. LIV 3724.

[19] On literary treatment of sexual desire and relationships in the Second Sophistic, see Goldhill 1995.

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The culture fans who retroactively concocted a corpus of epigrams for Plato can never seriously have expected or intended to fool fellow aficionados; they are paying witty homage and displaying rhetorical virtuosity. Nevertheless, as we will see in our final chapter, the modern critical literature on epigram found advantage in postponing the final death of Plato-the-poet until quite recently.[20] The ancient consumers of these epigrams will have been in on the joke, deriving a pleasurable kick from the fantasy of the Father of Philosophy mastered by Eros. A similar story – sadly post-classical – has Aristotle robbed of reason and ridden like a donkey by another famous *hetaira*; more germanely, the Epicurean and literary critic Philodemus had earlier written funny epigrams on his own helplessness (so contrary to the strictures of his philosophical master) in the face of sexual desire.[21]

Viewed in this light, many of the pseudo-Platonic epigrams are perhaps not so much fakes in our modern sense (composed in earnest to deceive) as exercises in the sophists' favourite game of virtuoso rhetorical impersonation, *prosopopoeia* (literally, something like 'pulling faces'). Not being fooled was the payoff, confirming the reader's worth and wit as an educated person (*pepaideumenos*). Only a careless and imperfectly acculturated reader would swallow such a line, becoming a figure of fun for the *pepaideumenos* in the process. Nero famously fell for such tall stories (or was said to have done) on more than one occasion; for Greek authors in particular, his naïve readings marked him as a poor student of the Hellenism that he made such a show of pursuing.[22] So the epigrams of Plato reveal nothing about Plato but plenty about how the sophists of the early centuries CE fashioned their ideal – and always already ironized – classical past.

They also used epigram to jostle for position in the present. Ammianus, a puzzle addict in second-century Smyrna, gouges away at the public reputation of a local VIP in a series of skoptic epigrams preserved in *AP* 11. Marcus Antonius Polemo was a descendant of local royalty and a friend of emperors, but Ammianus' epigrams cut him down to size. As with Leonidas' poems, they lose a lot in

[20] The attributions in Paton's Loeb (Paton 1916–18) are a case in point. Page in *FGE* smites wishful predecessors who took the ascriptions at face value: 'It is remarkable that some modern scholars have been caught in the web…ascription to Plato is plainly false…[the content] absolutely condemns the ascription' (161–2, 169).

[21] For Aristotle ridden by Alexander's mistress, Phyllis, see Tatum 1994: 1–2. Examples of Philodemus in love include Philodemus 1 (see above, p. 000), 4 (love as 'madness'), 5, and 7.

[22] On dissimulation and fakes under Nero, see the contemporaneous monographs of Bartsch 1994 and Bowersock 1994.

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translation. Typically Ammianus lops bits off his target's proper name to reveal a hidden Greek word, and thus the ugly truth of their identity. This process has affinities with the pseudoscience of the contemporary physiognomists (famously including Polemo), who diagnosed the hidden truths of individual and ethnic character by reference to details of physical appearance – the shape of the head, the distance between the eyes, or, in extreme cases, the relative length of finger joints.[23] In one poem (*AP* 11.181), the reader is instructed to subtract the first three letters of the target's name. Cutting three letters from his Roman *nomen* Antonius (*Antōnios* in Ammianus' Greek) gives *ōnios*, meaning up for sale – Polemo's financial irregularities were notorious:

> We all knew, Polemon, that your name was Antonius; how do you suddenly find yourself three letters short?

Other poems by Ammianus skewer the pretensions of contemporary intellectuals generally. *AP* 11.157, for instance, ridicules sophists whose public performances aspire to recreate the flawless fifth-century Greek of the canonized Attic orators, cramming in as many obscure archaisms as they can find (or invent); Paton's Loeb translation (Paton 1916–18) does a good job of conveying the flavour. Numerous epigrams by Lucian do the same.[24]

Other sophists dip into epigram only occasionally, at least as far as we can see from what survives. The surviving handful of poems attributable to major sophistic figures are intricate in their intertextual play with ancient and modern genre figures. Philostratus compresses into a nutshell (*AP* Appendix 110) dense allusion to his landmark literary achievement, the *Imagines* ('Images' – *ekphrases* of the paintings in an art gallery), transposing for this purpose Meleager's pederastic clichés into a new context of art criticism. Fronto constructs erudite and very smutty double entendres, riffing on Ammianus, Strato, and Callimachus *all in the same poem* (*AP* 12.174) while naming none of them (we are expected to keep up). In his other surviving poem (*AP* 12.233), which owes much to Lucillius, Fronto turns the canonical plays of New Comedy (all set texts in the ancient schoolroom) into

[23] For context and an accessible overview, see Gleason 1995, précised by Whitmarsh 2005: 29–32; also Barton 1994.

[24] For a thorough and lucid account of Atticism, see Swain 1996: 17–42; Whitmarsh 2005: 41–52 is accessible and lively. On Ammianus and Lucian, see generally Nisbet 2003a: 134–81.

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an increasingly pornographic chat-up routine to get a schoolboy into bed:[25]

> …Time will make you *The Despised One*, and then *The Ploughman*, and then you will crave *The Clipped Woman*.

In other words, with the onset of puberty the boy will find himself suddenly spurned (*The Despised One*) by the male admirers who now surround him; he will shift role from passive beloved (*erōmenos*) to active lover (*erastēs*), no longer pursued but pursuing (*The Ploughman* – attested in Old Comedy as an agricultural metaphor for penetrative sex).[26] Shockingly, he will even become interested in women, specifically *hetairai* (whose shaving of intimate areas was a source of fascination to male customers.) So he might as well submit now, while Fronto is still interested. This is heady stuff and loses much in the explanation, to say nothing of translation; in any case, these isolated survivals can give little to no indication of how epigram was being used in more run-of-the-mill contexts. The same applies to the most famous site of inscriptional epigram-production in the Second Sophistic: the singing Colossus of Memnon at Thebes in Egypt.

## Colossal graffiti

The Colossus started life in the mid-fourteenth century BCE as half of a matched pair of large sandstone statues of an enthroned Amenhotep III, a pharaoh of the Eighteenth Dynasty. During the reign of Augustus the right-hand statue was broken in two, perhaps by an earthquake. Amenhotep's story was long forgotten, and the fractured stump took on a new identity: Memnon, son of the dawn goddess, Eos. This famous Ethiopian warrior king and ally of Troy was well known from art and literature; his exploits and death in a duel with Achilles were related in the *Aethiopis*, the Cyclic epic that picked up where Homer's *Iliad* left off. Now his name became attached to a statue that lay perhaps not too far from his Ethiopian homeland – although Homer had been vague as to which 'Ethiopia' he meant.[27] The wrecked colossus often

[25] For a fuller discussion of these poems, see Nisbet 2007c.

[26] Henderson 1991: 166 – only the one example, suggesting that Fronto anticipates either a very well-read or a very dirty-minded reader, and the context seems to link ploughing to vaginal rather than anal penetration; but cf. ibid.: 168, on the more common 'digging' metaphor.

[27] On antiquity's two Ethiopias, see Romm 1992: 45–60.

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made a hollow knocking noise as it warmed up in the sun: this was explained as Memnon greeting his mother, the Dawn. As word of Memnon spread, Thebes began to do very well out of its new tourist attraction; by Hadrian's time, its legs and base were quickly filling up with the erudite graffiti of important visitors. These often expertly inscribed texts were almost all epigrams.

Hadrian's entourage visited Memnon in November CE 130. Hadrian, whose boyfriend Antinous had recently drowned in the Nile, does not seem to have composed a poem – but a member of his entourage left several. She was Julia Balbilla, the travelling companion and perhaps the lover of the emperor's wife, Sabina. Balbilla is a fascinating instance of hybrid identity in the Mediterranean world of the early centuries CE: one of her grandfathers was the last independent ruler of the Hellenized Mesopotamian kingdom of Commagene (gobbled up by Roman Syria), the other a Roman tribune with an Egyptian background who played an important role in Claudius' invasion of Britain and was later appointed head of the Museum in Alexandria. Her brother Philopappus was a friend of Hadrian from his time in Athens; there is still a monument to him there. Balbilla's epigrams on Memnon extravagantly praise Sabina's beauty, in a poetic dialect designed to recall the Lesbian poet Sappho. This one is on the statue's left ankle:[28]

> When on the first day we did not hear Memnon.
>
> Yesterday Memnon greeted the husband in silence, so that the lovely Sabina might make her way again to this place. For the desirable beauty of our queen delights you. But he greeted her arrival with a divine cry, lest the emperor should grow angry with you: for too long now you have fearlessly detained his august and wedded wife. Yes, Memnon himself, fearing the wrath of great Hadrian, suddenly gave voice; and hearing it, she was delighted.

Balbilla *seems* to be hinting at a lesbian relationship in the imperial household, but it could be a literary game – Hadrian was after all a fellow poet with a shared penchant for antiquarianism. Readings of the Balbilla poems dominate modern discussions of the Memnon graffiti.

[28] Bernand and Bernand 1960: text 30.

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They reflect our own predilections back at us – scholarly (postmodern metafiction), popular (lesbian chic), or often both at once.[29]

## Latin epigram (long) after Martial

The Latin inscriptions on Memnon are in dull, semi-official prose.[30] Latin literary epigram, too, is largely silent in this period. A major topos of Martial's poetics is that he was exploiting his genre to its breaking point and perhaps beyond, just as Ovid had for elegy; perhaps through anxiety of influence, no major literary author took it up again until the fourth century CE.[31] The new poets of Late Antiquity looked back less to Martial than to Hellenistic and Imperial Greek collections, including the two *Garlands*; they may have known these sources only through an intermediary proto-Anthology of their own era.[32] Epigram was now one literary accomplishment among many, not a lifetime specialization as it had been for Martial, and many of these later writers were active in prose as well as verse.

Ausonius, a politician in the consciously classicizing late Roman milieu of fourth-century Gaul, was particularly fond of epigrams on works of art in imitation of classic Greek models; he also embraced the skoptic epigram of the immediately preceding centuries. He was not just an epigrammatist: Kay, his most accessible modern editor, reasonably calls him 'the dominant literary figure of the Latin West in the fourth century'.[33] Ausonius invokes Martial as a pretext for writing rude poems but finds ways around Martial's own obscene vocabulary, and is keener to flag up his adherence to non-epigrammatic Latin verse heroes including Vergil, Catullus, Horace, and post-Augustan Latin poets – all the while surreptitiously ripping off Martial's back catalogue.[34]

[29] On Memnon visitors, including Balbilla, see briefly Bowie 1990: 61–6; on Balbilla in reception, see Nisbet 2007a: 555–8.

[30] Bernand and Bernand 1960: texts 1–10, 13–17, 24–6.

[31] The very thin evidence for Latin epigram in the centuries-long gap between Martial and Ausonius is usefully summarized by Kay 2001: 21–2.

[32] Cameron 1993: 78–96, densely argued.

[33] Kay 2001: 23, concluding a serviceable summary account of Ausonius' life and literary career.

[34] Ibid.: 18 for correspondences with the skoptic epigrammatists; 19–20 on Martial and other Latin models. Kay confidently detects allusions only to Catullus' longer and polymetric poems, not his elegiac epigrams.

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He also wrote epigrams in Greek, and sometimes showed off with alternate lines of Latin *and* Greek, maintaining seamless metricality and syntax across the join. The following epigram responds closely to Hellenistic and Imperial Greek epideictic epigrams from *AP* 7 and 9 – Sappho was a favourite subject for literary epitaphs – but its explicit bilingualism has hardly any antecedents.[35] The visual juxtaposition of alphabets dramatizes Ausonius' virtuosity in handling the inherited literary traditions of Greece and Rome alike; careful choice of words advertises his ability to blend them harmoniously. (The *Pierides*, named in Latin, are Greek Muses; the *Aonidae*, named in Greek, are Latin ones.) We include the text to illustrate the transition between languages. Epigram had never looked like this before:

> *Lesbia Pieriis Sappho soror addita Musis*
> *εἶμ᾽ ἐνάτη λυρικῶν, Ἀονίδων δεκάτη.*
>
> I, Sappho of Lesbos, who was added as a sister to the Muses of Pieria,
> *suis la neuvième poète lyrique, et la dixième fille d'Aon*.[36]

At least one Ausonian juxtaposition, poems 64–5 in Kay's edition, ratchets up the tension between Greek and Latin literary *and* cultural codes. The first of these poems tackles a very familiar Hellenistic theme, centuries on – Myron's *Cow*:

> Why do you butt against the chill udders of your brazen mother, little calf, and why try to suck nourishing milk from bronze? I would supply this too, if a god had fashioned my inside as finely as Myron my outside.

The second, immediately following the first, invokes a famous Greek artificer but evokes Martial:

> Daedalus, why do you exhaust your labour in pointless craftsmanship? Instead offer me to the bull with Pasiphae inside.[37]

[35] A couple of Ammianus' plays on words are self-consciously provocative by being even *implicitly* bilingual: Nisbet 2003a: 137–52. The closest precedent we know for Ausonius' explicit bilingualism is a literary self-epitaph by the renowned Meleager (1 *HE* = *AP* 7.419), which places the poet at the crossroads of not two but three distinct linguistic cultures. Meleager's poem greets potential passers-by in Syrian ('Salam!') and Phoenician ('Naidius!'), as well as in Greek – but he presents these greetings *in* Greek, and does not introduce a 'foreign' alphabet and syntax.

[36] Kay 2001: poem 35, with useful notes on Greek models at 150–1.Our use of French flags up the linguistic shift – for readers without it, the second line means '(I) am the ninth of the Lyric poets, and the tenth of the daughters of Aon'.

[37] In myth, Pasiphae, cursed by Poseidon to fall in love with a bull, had the legendary Athenian craftsman Daedalus construct a hollow artificial cow so that she could satisfy her

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Compare Martial *de Spectaculis* 6:

> Believe that Pasiphae was offered to the Dictaean bull: we have seen it, and the ancient myth is now believed. But venerable antiquity should not marvel at itself, Caesar: whatever Fame sings of, the arena supplies to you.

Complex webs are being woven here. The two Ausonian poems are placed within an elaborate and teasing sequence exploring the interplay of reality-effect and sexual desire; within it, legendary Greek special-effects technicians come and go.[38] Kay's poem 57 inaugurates the sequence. Niobe, in myth turned to stone, is polished by Praxiteles' wandering hands into a lifelike and thus a 'living' work of art.[39] Or rather, not; this is an ekphrastic cliché in praise of a canonical sculptor's verisimilitude. Praxiteles' skill might easily fool you into thinking that you were looking at the real Niobe:

> I was once alive; then I was made stone. Buffed by Praxiteles' hands I live once more – Niobe. The hand of the artificer restored everything except sense; but I already lacked that, when I insulted the gods.

Poem 58 is Niobe again, riffing for genre-bending effect on the famous eleventh line of Vergil's *Aeneid* – an epic that itself borrows repeatedly from epigram for its own internal epigraphic habit.[40] The earlier Niobe of poem 57 had calmly announced that she was a statue without *sensus* (variously 'sense impressions', 'common sense', and 'sensitivity'). In contrast, this second Niobe is a creature of pure *sensus* – pain, tears, and grief – without visible form. Her *imago* (likeness, appearance, death mask, phantom, copy, reflection…) has long since vanished:

> …
> What wickedness! *Can the hearts of the gods be so angry?*
> A mother's grief endures to this day; her image has perished.

In poem 59, a Venus clad in armour (and thus resembling a statue herself) scores points off Minerva; Ausonius works in a reference to the local cult of armed Aphrodite at Sparta, known from Pausanias (3.15.10). In poem 60, Lais, the most famous *hetaira* of all time, hangs

passion – the result of their unnatural union was the Minotaur.

[38] On Ausonius' fascination with reality-effect and its deconstruction, see the excellent essay by Nugent 1990: 240–7.

[39] Niobe was *silex*, 'hard stone' but also proverbially lacking feeling and emotion (*OLD silex* 3); Ausonius' choice of words plays upon this figurative meaning.

[40] On the *Aeneid*'s relation to epigram, see e.g. Dinter 2005.

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up her mirror – another maker of uncanny visual copies – as a thank-offering at a temple of Venus, much as a successful mercenary might dedicate his shield; the epigram invites us to imagine inscription, by a long-dead Greek woman, in Latin. Both of these poems are close variations on Hellenistic models, but their selection and juxtaposition by Ausonius create new effects. Poem 61 takes us to the birth (from a three-yolked egg) of Helen, ancient pin-up and doom of Troy – in hexameters, appropriately enough for the face that launched a thousand ships and several epics. In poem 62, the goddess Venus faces off against her world-famous statue, the Venus of Cnidus, and playfully accuses its maker, Praxiteles, of spying on her in the nude; just as playfully, he bats the accusation away. (Praxiteles has used iron tools; iron is in the care of Mars, Venus' husband; Mars knows what he likes Venus to look like.) Parallels identified by Kay make it clear that the charge and its rebuttal are both clichés from earlier Greek epigram.[41]

Poem 63 focuses the sequence specifically on Myron's *Cow*, ticking off all the clichés:

> I am the heifer made by the chisel of my father Myron; in my opinion I was not made, but born. This is why the bull mounts me, why the nearby heifer moos to me, and why the thirsty calf seeks my udders. Are you surprised that I deceive the herd? Even the herdsman tends to count me as one of his livestock.

It is tempting to read this epigram against the elaborate metapoetics of genre already evident in the Milan Posidippus' epigrams on gems, and elaborated in translation by Martial. Ausonius' ekphrasis speaks not just for the artwork it describes but for his own practice as a latecomer to a massively imitative genre; it dramatizes its own interpolation as a Latin impostor into the 'herd' of Hellenistic Greek epigrams on the *Cow*.

Poems 64–5 immediately follow. The first, as we have seen, modifies the stereotyped scenario of poem 63 by refocusing on a distinction already explored in some Greek models: interior/exterior (bearing in mind that ancient bronze statues were hollow).[42] The second poem crosses over into the bronze heifer's interior to summon up a Roman arena scenario out of Martial. Martial's *de Spectaculis* is all about the gladiatorial games and other shows that inaugurated the Flavian

[41] Kay 2001: 195–6.
[42] For parallels see ibid.: 203.

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Amphitheatre, better known today as the Colosseum. Ausonius in his poem 65 alludes to its sixth epigram, describing one of Domitian's famous executions dressed up as scenes from myth – 'fatal charades'.[43] Ausonius transposes Myron's work of art onto the bloody sand at Rome's heart, and turns it into a pretentious killing machine.

He also creates effects of *indirect* juxtaposition. Any reader intrigued enough by Ausonius' manipulation of tone to follow up on the allusion to *de Spectaculis* will find that Martial's sixth poem sits in a sequence of its own, between two others that add nuance to the Ausonian series. The fifth poem of *de Spectaculis* brags of Domitian's purge of informers from Rome. It becomes a kind of *sphragis*, a poetic signature for Ausonius' distinctive poetics of citation ('Ausonia' is a poetic name for Italy):

> The fugitive informer is exiled from the *Ausonian* city [*Ausonia…ab urbe*]; one may add this item to our emperor's expenses.

*De Spectaculis*' seventh poem is plausibly read by its modern editor as praising Domitian for introducing the novelty of women gladiators. Reconfigured through Ausonian allusion, it now ties Venus and Mars, the omnipresent divinities of Ausonius' sequence, to the emperor's pleasure. Greek technology of illusion meets Roman appetite in the service of imperial power:[44]

> That Mars serves you in unconquered arms, Caesar, is not sufficient: Venus herself serves you too.

Ausonius' sequence is not yet over. His business with Myron's *Cow* will not conclude until the closing words of poem 71: 'because I did not want to follow the other heifers'. Metapoetics again? Ausonius' intricate art of allusion and juxtaposition advertises his mastery of genre, and illustrates in miniature his virtuosity in crafting an original response to the classical literary inheritance that he shares with his peers in the Gallo-Latin elite. The sequence discussed above is self-consciously palimpsestic; the active reader must tease out its meaning

[43] Coleman 1990.

[44] Shackleton Bailey 1993 *ad loc*; on Ausonius' creative 'misreading' of canon texts, see Nugent 1990.

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against the precisely segmented virtual backdrop of Martial's juvenilia. 'Ausonius comfortably inhabits the work of his predecessors.'[45]

## Playing in the wreckage: late antique Latin epigram

Later Latin poets continued in the Ausonian tradition. In sixth-century Africa under the Vandals, Luxorius and the anonymous poet of *Anthologia Latina* 78–188 published books of epigrams.[46] The latter opens with an epigram addressing the reader, closely recalling the programmatic poems and sequences in which Martial tells his readers how to use his books. The allusion ties the poet to a specifically Roman tradition of dry wit associated with Republican free speech – *sal*, literally 'salt'. Edgy and urbane, *sal* defines the Latin genre of hexameter satire, and becomes a measure of success for Latin epigram in the hands of Catullus and Martial; subsequently, Hadrian co-opts their street cred by writing satirical epigrams of his own.[47] Here, though, *sal* is assigned to Greek Muses (*Pieridae*) in a cultural balancing-act that recalls Ausonius' own:[48]

> The games of my childhood, the passions of my youth, the bombast of a garrulous tongue seasoned with Pierian wit [*sale Pierio*]: this work encompasses them all. And you, reader, apply an expert mind to weigh them all up and pick out the ones you enjoy.

Several poems in the early part of the book praise bath-houses – perhaps a bigger deal in sixth-century Africa than in Martial's cosmopolitan Rome of five centuries earlier. Christian and pagan mythologies rub alongside one another.[49] The temptation is strong to

[45] Nugent 1990: 249 and see also 248: 'A kind of Joycean exuberance makes of the late antique poet an intellectual *bricoleur*, assembling creations to delight and astound his friends, from the *disiecta membra* of the poetic corpus they share.'

[46] *Anthologia Latina* is misleadingly named: it is not an organic collection like *AP* but a modern miscellany of ancient Latin verse compiled by a nineteenth-century editor who does not restrict himself to epigrams. A concise account is given in Kay 2006: 20–2. Luxorius' poems are at *Anth. Lat.* 291–375; scholars place him in Carthage. For reasons to place the anonymous poet of *Anth. Lat.* 78–188 in Africa, see Kay 2006: 5–7.

[47] See *OLD sal* 6, citing e.g. Hor. *Sat.* 1.10.3 (on Lucilius, pioneer of Latin satire), Catull. 16.7 (linking *sal* to *lepos*, 'charm'), and Mart. 12.95.2 ('pages tinged with prurient *sal*').

[48] Poem 79 in Kay 2006, whose numbering is again used in what follows; on Luxorius' very similar opening sequence, see Kay 2006: 65–6; on Martial and *sal*, see 66 n. 2.

[49] Contrast e.g. poems 81–2 (an epitaph for a Christian child and a poem on the judgement of Solomon – clearly designed to be read as a pair) to poems 86–7 (Bellerophon and the Chimaera – likewise).

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read for social history; old civic and religious infrastructure is falling apart in this book. As romantic moderns, reading with a hindsight not available to the poet or his original readers, we cannot help anticipating barbarians at the gates. Twelve epigrams in, a pagan temple has been pulled apart to supply stone for city fortifications – the poet's objectification of Mars and Venus may recall Ausonius:[50]

> …Mars has saved himself the trouble of long yearning; now Venus seeks her temple [*sua templa*] amid his walls.

Later in the book a former library has become a pick-up joint; the Muses who stood for its amassed learning, Latin ones this time (*Camenae*), have been driven out. Verbal repetition (*sua templa*) invites us to 'read back' to the Mars/Venus poem, and the Cyprian goddess is of course Venus under a well-known cult name, a regular patron of this bar-*cum*-brothel in her capacity as goddess of sexual desire. Bromius is a cult name for Bacchus, the Roman Dionysus, god of intoxication and half-brother to Apollo, the patron of literature and the arts:[51]

> *On a library turned into a bar:*
>
> This building, until recently dedicated to the nine Camenae, is now held by Bacchus – he calls it his temple [*sua templa*]. For in the place that preserved so many writings of men of old, the Cyprian delights in quaffing sweet wines. The shrine continues to be occupied by a god related to its former owner: where Phoebus lived, now lives Bromius!

As we saw in Chapter 3, this is exactly the kind of quasi-topographic literary factoid that drives a certain kind of Martial scholar to start sticking pins into a large-scale map of ancient Rome. Faced with an anonymous poet in an unknown city, though, the pressure is off. We can read outwards from the urban detail to track larger social concerns, or simply enjoy the text as a literary game of connections and allusions.

[50] Poem 89; we translate the final couplet, lines 5–6.
[51] Poem 115.

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## Icons and heretics: epigram in Byzantium

Greek epigram continues under Byzantium. Cephalas is not merely an antiquarian; he reports a living tradition. The very first Book of the *Anthology* is headed 'The Epigrams of the Christians'. A subtitle clarifies Cephalas' intent: 'Let the pious and godly epigrams of the Christians be placed first, even if the Hellenes are displeased.' He writes here like a sophist, in perfect Attic Greek, with one exception. Hellene now means not Greek but 'pagan', a negative sense found in Christian authors from Late Antiquity onwards.[52]

*AP* 1 is unusually varied in its content. The opening poem celebrates the restoration of icons to the great cathedral of Hagia Sophia following a phase of iconoclasm (in its literal sense of the doctrinally motivated destruction of religious images); subsequent epigrams attest the partial rebuilding of dilapidated churches by emperors and other powerful patrons. *AP* 1.4 nicely illustrates the mix of Christian sentiment and pagan offices. It runs to three lines of hexameters, bypassing the epigram tradition of the pagan Hellenes to touch base with Homer (long read allegorically). To a modern readership, the juxtaposition of epic diction, pious devotion, and late Roman bureaucracy is jarring, but clearly it worked for its intended readership:[53]

> *Τοῦτον Ἰωάννῃ, Χριστοῦ μεγᾶλῳ θεράποντι,*
> *Στούδιος ἀγλαὸν οἶκον ἐδείματο· καρπαλίμως δὲ*
> *τῶν κάμεν εὗρετο μισθόν, ἑλὼν ὑπατηΐδα ῥάβδον.*
>
> Studius built this splendid house for John, Christ's great servant; and he swiftly found the reward for which he toiled, taking up the consular *fasces*.

Many other *AP* 1 epigrams pursue this alternative literary pedigree. Homer was still a staple of the schoolroom, he had been read allegorically for hundreds of years, and his themes were redeemable for the Church.[54] Later in the Book (*AP* 1.56), within a long sequence by the compiler of the *Cycle*, Agathias Scholasticus, an epigram in two hexameter lines celebrates Christ's harrowing of Hell. Literary

[52] LSJ *Ἕλλην* 5, with examples of usage including the Christian emperor Julian (fourth century CE).

[53] Worth following up for Homeric associations are: *ἀγλαός* ('splendid'), *δέμω* ('build'), *καρπάλιμως* ('swiftly'), *θεράπων* ('servant'), *κάμνω* ('toil').

[54] The contributors to Lamberton and Keaney 1992 address instances of allegorical exegesis of Homer by Neoplatonists, Stoics, and other interested parties ranging from antiquity to the Renaissance; see also Lamberton 1986.

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association merges the Christian Hell with the underworld of pagan epic:

> Christ, being a god [or 'being God'], took all the dead out of Hades;
> Hades alone, bane of men, he left behind lifeless.

'Bane of men' (*brotoloigos*) is an impressively rare Homeric epithet; the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* each use it once of Ares, god of war. Agathias' epigram re-imagines Christ's redemption of the dead as a heroic *aristeia*, his most glorious feat of arms. Hades is of course the pagan god, brother to Zeus and Poseidon, to whose underworld so many Homeric heroes are bloodily despatched: 'to Hades' halls' is a common formula in the *Iliad*'s death scenes. Here the tables are turned, and Hades himself becomes the opponent whom Christ slays: 'lifeless' (*akērios* – lacking *kēr*, 'a heart') is a characteristically Iliadic description of a fallen enemy on the battlefield. Moreover, there may be a double sense: *kēr* can also mean 'death spirit', and Christ's self-sacrifice has deprived Hades of its power over the faithful. To die in Christ is not true death but the way to everlasting life.

Homer himself could even become a sacred text if properly reordered. Towards the end of Book 1, a hexameter poem by Ignatius (*AP* 1.119) celebrates another, larger hexameter poem that unfortunately does not survive in its original form: a Homeric cento by Patricius, an otherwise unknown fourth-century bishop. This book-length epic, narrating the story of Christ from birth to resurrection and ascension, consisted entirely of lines taken from the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. The cento was a popular late antique form: Ausonius had composed a *Nuptial Cento*, the closing part of which turned lines from Vergil into obscene double entendres (this still survives, and includes a handy preface setting out the rules of cento composition), but they were typically religious.[55] The pagan source text conferred canonical prestige on the Christian theme, and was in turn Christianized by lending service. (Cento would later become a favoured form of the Renaissance, as it explored its own problematic relation to rediscovered antiquity.) Patricius' cento was

[55] Ausonius introduces the closing section of the *Cento* with a Digression (*Parecbasis*) in which he humorously apologizes for turning Vergil into an obscene poet: 'Up to this point I have veiled the mystery of marriage in paraphrase and circumlocution, to make it fit to be heard by chaste ears… Stop reading here, if you like, and leave the remainder to the curious.' See Green 1991: 132–9 (text) and 518–26 (useful and detailed discussion and commentary).

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particularly famous: the empress Eudocia paid homage by composing an expanded and corrected version.[56]

Ignatius praises Patricius as a 'God-fearing priest' who has 'performed a mighty deed', composing a 'highly prized song of renowned words'. Patricius' deed wins him a warrior's glory, τιμή (*timē*). All of these words and ideas come straight out of Homer – surprisingly even 'God-fearing' (θεουδής), which occurs frequently in the *Odyssey* and hardly anywhere else in ancient literature. Ignatius keeps the act up for all twenty-eight lines of this poem about a poem made out of two other poems. Herod seeks the Iliadic 'doom' of the infant Christ (οἶτος, line 11) – the deadly fate that awaits a warrior in battle or a city under siege. Resurrected, the crucified Jesus arises on the 'early-born' (ἠριγένεια, line 27) third morning, borrowing a standard epithet of the goddess of dawn (Eos) in the *Odyssey*; and harrows Hades, just as in Agathias. Cephalas is underselling his material; the Hellenes would not have been so displeased after all. Because we go to the *Anthology* primarily as a source for the Greek epigrams of classical antiquity, we tend to downplay the extent to which it reflects a tradition that was still creatively alive.[57]

[56] On the cento in late antiquity, and Eudocia's (still extant) expansion of Patricius, see Usher 1998 and briefly Plant 2004: 198–9. Usher 1997: 305 concisely reports the rare examples of the cento in classical antiquity.

[57] Epigram was still being composed long after Cephalas' own time. For an eye-opening account that takes Greek inscriptional epigram into the fourteenth century, see Talbot 1999.

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