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SABINUS THE MULETEER

It is well known that the tenth poem of the Vergilian *Catalepton* on Sabinus the Muleteer closely parodies Catullus' *Phaselus ille*. The one poem elegantly describes the career of a sleek ship, its heroic voyages and its final retirement from service. The other humorously reports the career of a lowly mule driver named Sabinus, his business trips, his life in retirement. There is less certainty, however, and even less agreement, about who the *Sabinus ille* of the parody might be, if indeed the character is not a complete fiction.[1] The identity of Sabinus is important not only because of its intrinsic interest for a better understanding of the poem itself, but also because of what a correct identity might suggest about the period and social context in which the parody was composed.[2] Since most identities that have been proffered for the Sabinus of the tenth *Catalepton* have been rejected, any new suggestion might be useful in elucidating both of these problems. Existing identifications have depended on the immediate influence of Catullus on the generation in which Vergil was composing. But the influential presence of the poet is also discernible in later ages. It is perhaps not without significance that one of the most powerful of these later echoes is to be found in Martial, the Flavian epigrammatist and satirical poet on whom the influence of Catullus is substantial—perhaps, indeed, the most substantial amongst Latin writers of later ages.[3] Other possibilities are therefore open.

The basic information on Sabinus the muleteer that is provided by the author of the parody—if his descriptions are to be believed—suggests a few main elements in a portrait sketch of the man. The cognomen 'Sabinus' might indicate a connection either with a family that typically bore this name or with someone who had real connections with the region of the Sabine peoples. The poet, however, also makes much of the fact that the cognomen of Sabinus was artificially assumed by our man, and that it signalled some kind of change in his social status. Sabinus, the poet says, was once known as Quinctio. It was only later in his life that he adopted the name Sabinus. In addition, he was somehow associated with a rival named Trypho, and with an *insula* of Cerylus. Above all, Sabinus had a special connection with mules and mule-driving.[4] Indeed, his single claim to fame was that he was one of the fastest and most efficient mule-drivers of his time—although this great achievement of his can be

[1] That the person cannot be identified with any known person, but is purely a poetic fiction was the final point of I. Kajanto's argument: 'Who was *Sabinus Ille*?', *Arctos* 9 (1975), 47–55, at 51: 'Sabinus was not a historical figure at all. He was a fictional character representing the *homo novus* of the revolutionary period' (all emphasized in bold type, no less).

[2] For such a peripheral piece of poetry, the literature is immense. For works up to the early 1960s, see R. E. H. Westendorp Boerma, *P. Vergili Maronis libellus qui inscribitur Catalepton*, 2 vols. (Assen, 1963). Interest since then has not abated.

[3] This is not the place for a detailed Nachleben, but it is manifest that there is a line of influence traceable in a later age from Seneca through Quintilian and Martial to Tacitus; of these, Martial is the most profoundly and obviously affected. The basic facts are retailed in J. P. Sullivan, *Martial: The Unexpected Classic* (Cambridge, 1991), 95–7; note, especially, 'Martial is quite capable of parodying Catullus and using some of his most elevated thoughts and phases in banal or comic contexts…' (p. 96).

[4] *Cat*. 10.1–5: *Sabinus ille, quem videtis, hospites / ait fuisse mulio celerrimus, / neque ullius volantis impetum cisi / nequisse praeterire, sive Mantuam / opus foret volare, sive Brixiam*.

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accepted as fact only with some care since, obviously, it is part of the poet's parody of the Catullan original.

Mule-driving, at any rate, was ostensibly an occupation with which Sabinus was particularly concerned. The regions that he was associated with in connection with his business of long-distance mule transport included northern Italy and Gaul. His mule transport business took him on long regular runs, following wagon trails over the Alps into Gaul and then back again into the region of the Po Valley: Brixia, Mantua and Cremona were well known to him. Once again, however, some caution has to be shown, since this particular mis-en-scène has to do with the nature of the parody itself: the home and base of Catullus' 'fast sleek ship' was similarly located in the poet's home region of the Po Valley. In the profession of mule-driving, however, our Sabinus was the quickest and the best, as could be attested by the rival 'house' of a certain Trypho and a place named after a Cerylus. At the end of the poem, after a long and successful career (just like Catullus' ship), our muleteer is found retired from his occupation and ensconced on an 'ivory seat' that manifestly represents a considerable elevation of his status out of the muck and mire that he had endured as part of the hard manual labour of his daily work:

> Cremona frigida, et lutosa Gallia,
> tibi haec fuisse et esse cognitissima
> ait Sabinus; ultima ex origine
> tua stetisse dicit in voragine,
> tua in palude deposisse sarcinas,
> et inde tot per orbitosa milia
> iugum tulisse…

As early as the sixteenth century, the humanist scholar Victorius identified our mule driver Sabinus with Publius Ventidius (Bassus), suffect consul in 43 B.C.E. Ventidius Bassus, as was well known, had risen from base origins to considerable wealth and power through his involvement in the business of mule transport. His low origins and the means by which he escaped them earned him the pejorative nickname of *mulio* from the likes of Cicero and others.[5] The identification made good contextual sense, if one accepted a Vergilian or immediately post-Vergilian authorship of the original. If Ventidius Bassus was our Sabinus, then the poem was at least generally of the Vergilian age. Although the identification of Sabinus with Ventidius Bassus received the imprimatur of authoritative scholarly voices, including those of Fraenkel and Münzer, Syme rightly rejected the connection.[6] Syme demonstrated that 'the link which connects the Sabinus of the poem with the historical "muleteer" P. Ventidius is really very fragile'. A further link was supposed to have been discovered in a friend of Gaius Trebonius, named Sabinus, to whom Cicero says that he had given a copy of his *Orator*.[7] Could this be our Sabinus? Following a characteristic dissection and demolition of the supporting evidence, Syme concluded: 'The link snaps. No valid reason subsists for discovering in Trebonius' friend either the muleteer "Sabinus ante Quinctio" or P. Ventidius.'[8]

[5] Plin. *HN* 7.135, quoting Cicero: *mulionem castrensis furnariae*; and Cic. *Fam*. 10.18.3, quoting Munatius Plancus: *Ventidiique mulionis castra despicio.*

[6] R. Syme, 'Sabinus the Muleteer', *Latomus* 17 (1958), 73–80 = ch. 31 in E. Badian (ed.), *Roman Papers* (Oxford, 1979), 1.393–9; at 73 and n. 1, where he records references to Fraenkel, Münzer and others who had assented. These include Mommsen and Bücheler.

[7] Cic. *Fam*. 15.20.1.

[8] Syme (n. 6), 394–5.

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In the course of his investigations, however, Syme did usefully draw attention to a general class of men—energetic entrepreneurs involved in army supply and transport whose fortunes, in every sense, rose in times of warfare, especially during the civil wars of the 40s. Such a man was C. Calvisius Sabinus who 'may easily have begun as a contractor of supplies or an equestrian officer'. Could he be our Sabinus? In the end, Syme allowed that this guess of his was probably as tenuous as the one that he had just rejected. Not only is the connection with transport and army supply merely surmised, Syme also had to admit that: 'Nobody, it is true, calls Calvisius Sabinus a *mulio*.'[9] That is a real problem. Furthermore, although the poem is a humorous parody, it is difficult to envisage eminent men, later-to-be consulars, like Ventidius Bassus and Calvisius Sabinus actually unloading mules in the muddy marshlands of the Po.

The career of Ventidius, and of men like him, however, is a useful model for what involvement with mule transport might achieve for an entrepreneurial man.[10] It draws attention to the much neglected subject of large-scale land transport in the Mediterranean, and its very great significance for ordinary trade and commerce in times of peace, as also for the immense supplies required by armies in peace and in war.[11] The career of Sabinus the Muleteer of *Catalepton* 10 suggests, rather humorously to its upper-class author, the sort of social elevation that was possible for someone who had invested in this business on a large scale. For those who were involved in mule-driving and transport in a very big way, the possibilities were bigger yet. The result was an odd and conflicting mix of low-class sources of income with high status that produced the humorous responses that were connected with other muleteers who, like our man, were Sabines.

I would suggest that there is an entirely different set of connections that suggest a different Sabinus and that point to quite another, post-Vergilian, age for the composition of the parody. Let us begin with a reinterpretation of some of the details. First, the cognomen Sabinus. The poet of the parody makes a point that it was the result of a name change. In some earlier existence, and certainly from his birth, this other Sabinus had borne the simple name of Quinctio. The closely related Quinctius, for example, is a perfectly acceptable name as part of a Roman *tria nomina*, although, naturally, it was also borne by slaves and freedpersons. But Quinctio was certainly in the latter category of names. Having a pejorative tone, it was a personal name that usually belonged to a much lower-class person, often a slave.[12] The lower status of the man surely makes better sense in the context of the parody.

[9] In fact, almost all the evidence is against, as Kajanto (n. 1), 48–9, points out: 'Calvisius is in a worse case than Ventidius Bassus. There is practically no connecting link between him and our Sabinus.'

[10] Gell. *NA* 15.4.3, provides the basic information on how Ventidius acquired his wealth, rising from 'the most ignoble of ranks' and 'humble origins,' by purchasing mules and vehicles which he then leased to officials as they departed for their provinces.

[11] P. Horden and N. Purcell, *The Corrupting Sea: A Study of Mediterranean History* (Oxford, 2000), 131, have drawn attention to an economic phenomenon that, because of its scale, deserves more attention that it has so far received.

[12] Quintus, to which Quin(c)tio is related, is attested as a slave name, meaning born fifth in order of birth, or born in the month of July: see J. Baumgart, *Die römischen Sklavennamen* (Breslau, 1936), 27; and also H. Solin, *Die Stadtrömischen Sklavennamen: ein Namenbuch*, 3 vols. (Stuttgart, 1996), 1.4–5 and 15 on the related Quin(c)tius/a and Quintus/a and variations. On Quinctio itself, see Kajanto (n. 1), 51–2, who cites his own study *Latin Cognomina* (Helsinki, 1965), at 113, 120–3 on its pejorative associations.

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Then there is the information about another important place connected with our Sabinus. It is referred to in the poem as the *insula Ceryli* (lines 6–8):

> et hoc negat Tryphonis aemuli domum
> negare nobilem insulamve Ceryli,
> ubi iste, post Sabinus, ante Quinctio…

In some translations, this *insula* is still taken to be a physical locale, an island. But in no atlas, no gazetteer, or in any set of ancient geographical sources extant is an island of Cerylus anywhere attested.[13] An alternative has logically suggested itself. This is not an imposing and well-known physical locale, not a literal island of Cerylus, but rather a lowly tenement or apartment block, an *insula* that was owned by one Cerylus.[14] If this meaning of the word is accepted, the effect of the parody is heightened, since it is lower-class buildings and not grand and noble islands, like Rhodes and the Cyclades of Catullus 4, that are involved. If so, this also makes good sense of the obvious parallel between the *domus* of Sabinus' rival, Trypho, in the line immediately preceding. Since these are two 'houses' that cannot reject Sabinus' claim to be the fastest of all mule-drivers, there must be some presumption that both Trypho and Cerylus were also involved in the same mule-driving business. Both men also seem to bear the names of freedmen, probably like Sabinus himself.[15] As the poem itself suggests, therefore, Trypho and Cerylus were peers and rivals whom Sabinus had outdone. Not only that, it suggests that Cerylus must have been reasonably well-off, since he owned an *insula* or apartment block. These muleteers are not the poor or modest owners of just one or two mules, but men who were operating on a rather larger scale.

This is where the ivory seat on which our Sabinus found himself seated at the end of his life (lines 23–5) comes into play:

> sed haec prius fuere: nunc eburnea
> sedetque sede, seque dedicat tibi
> gemelle Castor, et gemelle Castoris

What is this *eburnea sedes*? Most commentators, thinking high rather than low, have seen in it the seat of a Roman magistrate, either municipal or (more often) the seat of a high-ranking magistrate of the central Roman state itself. Once again, however, there is an alternative. If one thinks low rather than high, surely more in accord with the feel of this parody, then this 'ivoried seat' could well be the ivoried chair on which a local municipal magistrate or even, more lowly, a *sevir Augustalis*, a local priest of the imperial cult, would sit.[16] As for the low-level servile 'aristocracy' of municipal freedmen who served as local priests of the imperial cult, the ivoried seat was one of

[13] There is no such island attested in R. J. A. Talbert, *Barrington Atlas of the Greek and Roman World* (Princeton, 2000), or in his online search-engine for toponyms; nothing in William Smith, *A Dictionary of Greek and Roman Geography*, 2 vols. (London, 1878). Nor is there any reference to an island named Cerylus in *RE*; the only reference there, significantly for our purpose, is to the wealthy freedman of Vespasian's.

[14] So Westendorp Boerma (n. 2), 7–8.

[15] Solin (n. 12), 1.429–30 on Trypho; 2.505, on Cerylus, sometimes spelled Ceryllus in the inscriptions; cf. the *dispensator Augusti* (*CIL* 6.3966, cf. 3967, Rome).

[16] T. Schäfer, 'Munizipale Magistrate mit *Sella Curulis*', ch. 2.B.2 in *Imperii Insignia: Sella Curulis und Fasces. Zur Repräsentation römischer Magistrate* (Mainz, 1999), 52–6, has compiled the evidence; amongst 'municipal magistrates' he includes both 'regular office holders' and 'seviri and seviri Augustales'. Both are significant for our purposes.

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the manifest public accoutrements of office that marked out their superior status amongst their peers in the community of freedpersons. Numerous examples exist from northern Italy, if that is the origin or main base of operations of our man. There are also monuments from the region from the Augustan to the Flavian periods on which the municipal *quattuorvir* or the *sevir* is portrayed either seated on the *sella* or where the seat is portrayed in relief as one of the symbols of the status of the office-holder.[17] And, notably, just as in our parody, these are funerary monuments, not infrequently prepared *se vivo*, that proclaimed the elevated status of the man. So far as the *seviri Augustales* were concerned, the boast about being able to sit on the *sella curulis* was connected less with their office as such than with the duties, including the staging of games, that were connected with their priestly functions.[18] Our Sabinus could have been either: a freedman who was one of the *seviri*—a former slave who was boasting, like Trimalchio, of his high and official status as a *sevir Augustalis*.[19] Or he could have been the son of a freedman who had risen to hold a formal municipal post. In either case (though probably the former) he ended his life with a higher rank that was worth advertisement. The parody is complete. The man was in fact some low-life who had experienced a modest, but rather laughable, elevation in status in his retirement from his long occupation.

But if our man was involved in mule-driving, was a Sabinus, and was also a rival of the household of a Cerylus, then are there any other clues? The name Sabinus, evoking actual Sabine origins or connections, might suggest an imperial possibility: someone sufficiently well known to merit a parody. The family of the emperor Vespasian had worked very hard to earn its way to the top. And Sabinus was a favourite cognomen in the family.[20] Furthermore, in these economic exertions, the Flavii had connections with the Po Valley. Vespasian's great-grandfather, who was himself derived from the Transpadane region in the Po Valley, was a contractor of day-labourers from Umbria who went every summer to work in Sabine lands in bringing in the harvest. It was a profitable enterprise.[21] The later-to-be emperor himself, however, had an even closer connection with our affairs. After returning from what was apparently a rather unprofitable governorship of Africa in the early 60s, he

[17] The seat concerned is sometimes that of a magistrate of the Roman state, but examples are also commonly attested for local municipal magistrates (*seviri* and *quattuorviri* in northern Italy), and also for *Augustales*, certainly in Italy, and in some provinces: see Schäfer (n. 16), 54–5 for discussion, and his catalogue, pp. 321–46 for the cases attested from Regiones IX–XI in the Po Valley and northern Italy (a considerable proportion of them from Verona, with other concentrations at Augusta Bagiennorum and at Vicetia).

[18] Schäfer (n. 16), 54–5 collates the evidence.

[19] The arguments of Kajanto (n. 1), 52–3, against Sabinus being a freedman are two. First that his father—given the reference to the *paterna lora* in line 22—was already a mule-driver. But this hardly precludes his father being a slave. Slaves could perfectly well be used as mule-drivers. And second, the fact that Sabinus would not ordinarily have been a cognomen assumed by a former slave. But as Kajanto points out against his own argument, there are certainly cases of freedmen effacing signs of their former servile status by consciously suppressing their former slave name as cognomen and assuming a good Roman one instead (he provides the references).

[20] B. Levick, *Vespasian* (London–New York, 1999), stemma, p. xxii: among known persons in the family it was born by males mainly on Vespasian's mother's side of the family: by Vespasian's maternal uncle, by his own brother, by the son and daughter of that brother, and by the latter's son.

[21] Suet. *Vesp.* 1.4: *Non negaverim iactatum a quibusdam Petronis patrem e regione Transpadana fuisse mancipem operarum, quae ex Umbria in Sabinos ad culturam agrorum quotannis commeare soleant* . . . The cognomen Petro is a name of Gallic derivation, which further hints at possible connections with Gauls to the north.

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found himself in troubled financial circumstances.[22] Vespasian had to mortgage all of his lands to his brother. Having to look for a new source of income, and given that the family had its origins and base at Reate, Vespasian logically turned to a business that was well known in his home region. Reate was renowned for its mules; the local breed was famed far and wide.[23] So Vespasian went into the mule-driving, supply and transport business. As in the case of Ventidius Bassus and the other rapidly rising men of the late Republic to whom Syme rightly drew attention, the new occupation was very profitable. The mule-driving and transport business was large and important enough to produce the big money returns needed to sustain a high-end political career. The connection naturally resulted in the identification of Vespasian with mule-driving, sticking him with the nickname 'the Mule Driver'.[24]

One of the typically humorous stories told about Vespasian involves a discussion between the emperor and a professional muleteer, in which Vespasian was able to use his own technical knowledge of the trade to get the better of his lower-class opponent on the latter's own ground.[25] In this same passage of the emperor's biography, there is another story that is perhaps more interesting for our purposes. In a devious attempt to avoid paying certain imposts into the imperial fiscus, a very rich freedman of Vespasian's named Cerylus changed his name to Laches and announced that he had been freeborn. Vespasian then used some lines from now-lost plays of Menander to cut back at the man: 'O Laches, Laches, when your life is over, / from your origins, you will be Cerylus once more.'[26] Finding any character in Latin literature named Cerylus, much less an island, is difficult. The single other attested notice is found in a poem of Martial's (*Epigram*. 1.67), and Friedländer, correctly I think, identified Martial's

[22] For the governorship and its consequences, see B. E. Thomasson, *Fasti Africani: Senatorische und ritterliche Amtsträger in den römischen Provinzen Nordafrikas von Augustus bis Diokletian* (Stockholm, 1996), no. 42, p. 40, sometime in the period between A.D. 60–3.

[23] Strabo, 5.3.1 (C 228): *σπουδαία δὲ καὶ βοσκήμασι τοῖς τε ἄλλοις, καὶ δὴ τὸ τῶν ἡμιόνων γένος τῶν Ῥεατίνων διωνόμασται θαυμαστῶς*.

[24] Suet. *Vesp.* 4.3: *Rediit* [sc. from Africa] *certe nihilo opulentior, ut qui, prope labefactata iam fide, omnia praedia fratri obligaret necessarioque ad mangonicos quaestus sustinendae dignitatis causa descenderit; propter quod vulgo 'mulio' vocabatur.* Did the *mangonicos quaestus* mentioned here result from involvement in the slave trade? In his commentary and translation, G. W. Mooney, *C. Suetoni Tranquilli de Vita Caesarum* (New York–Dublin, 1930), 199, surely understands this, correctly, as 'He was driven by necessity to stoop to trafficking in mules to support his position.' For an argument that involvement in the slave trade is meant, however, see A. B. Bosworth, 'Vespasian and the slave trade', *CQ* 52 (2002), 350–7. The argument hinges (351) on the claim that, 'There is no real alternative to the regular meaning of the word [sc. 'mangonicus']' (i.e. as necessarily meaning something to do with slaves for sale). But there are other meanings and ones that surely make better sense of the *propter quod* in the Suetonius passage—i.e. Vespasian was called a *mulio* (as in all other known cases) *because* he was involved with the mule trade. See *TLL*, 8, col. 300, s.v. 'mango'' ss. 2: *iumenta: negotiator equorum vel mulorum*; and *mangonicus –a –um*, citing, amongst other texts, Plin. *HN* 21.170 and Philoxenus, *MA* 69, where it is used not just of a trade in odd items for sale, but specifically in draft animals. Since there is literally no evidence other than the phrase *mangonicos quaestus* to connect Vespasian to the slave trade, it seems best to take the 'wheeling-and-dealing profits' in context as having a direct connection with his nickname.

[25] Suet. *Vesp.* 23.2: *Mulionem in itinere quodam suspicatus ad calicandas mulas desiluisse, ut adeunti litigatori spatium moramque praeberet, interrogavit quanti calciasset <et> pactus est lucri partem*.

[26] Suet. *Vesp.* 23.1: . . . *et de Cerylo liberto, qui dives admodum ob subterfugiendum quandoque ius fisci ingenuum se et Lachetem mutato nomine coeperat ferre*: *ὦ Λάχης, Λάχης / ἐπὰν ἀποθάνῃς, αὖθις ἐξ ἀρχῆς ἔσει / σὺ Κηρύλος*. The first part of the line is from Menander fr. 921 (Kock) and the latter from Menander fr. 223.2 (Kock), with the 'you Cerylus' added by Vespasian himself.

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Cerylus as none other than our Cerylus, who was probably (he thinks) a freedman of Vespasian's.[27]

> Liber homo es nimium, dicis mihi, Ceryle, semper.
> In te qui dicit, Ceryle, liber homo est.

This Cerylus was certainly a freedman, and if, more specifically than that, he was a freedman of Vespasian's, it would be quite in order for him to be involved in the large-scale business of his *patronus*, namely in the mule trade and transport enterprises that produced considerable profits for Vespasian and his brother (who was a Sabinus). Cerylus would then be a true rival for our Sabinus, perhaps an in-house rival who was also part of this same big business. Given his new name, our Sabinus probably served Vespasian's brother, Titus Flavius Sabinus, in a situation where we know that these self-same business dealings had led to serious frictions and on-going resentments between the two brothers.[28] In that case, the house of Cerylus and the house of Trypho were indeed rivals to our Sabinus, surely another freedman in the same business.[29]

Is it merely a coincidence that a Sabinus, important connections with mule-driving, the significance of a name change, and a Cerylus, all appear in both the parody and also in the life of the emperor Vespasian and his background? I think not. The parodist somehow meant to select a subject that connected our Sabinus, other better-known Sabines, the profession of mule-driving and transport, and a reference to the wealthy freedman Cerylus, to produce a wonderful take-off on Catullus' fourth *carmen*. The poem must therefore be of Flavian date.[30]

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[27] L. Friedländer, *M. Valerii Martialis Epigrammaton libri*, 2 vols. (Leipzig, 1886), 1.208. This Cerylus is the *only* such named thing or person having an entry in Pauly-Wissowa: R. Stein, 'Cerulus', *RE* 3.2 (1899), 1994; and cf. Westendorp Boerma (n. 2), 40–1 on the identity.

[28] The fact is twice intimated, in his usual fashion, by Tacitus—first in a passage on Sabinus' position as urban prefect in the events of 69 (*Hist*. 3.65) and then again in his *exitus* notice for Sabinus' death (*Hist*. 3.75). The first is the most detailed. In it, Tacitus asserts that some men claimed that Sabinus was impeding his brother's ascendancy because of his envy and jealousy of Vespasian's achievements. Since he was the older brother and the one with greater social standing and wealth, these same persons suggested that this need not be so. Specific reference is then made to the economic dealings, the loans, and mortgages of the mid-60s, out of which, it was rumoured, bad feelings had developed between the two men.

[29] Given the identity and the period, and the attention that is drawn to certain places, especially Cremona, one is tempted to press the issue and to identify our Sabinus more closely with the great Sabine himself. There may indeed be a sly reference to Cremona in the dedication to Castor in the last line of the parody: no less than two imperial writers on the battle of Bedriacum note that the place was sacred to Castor (see Westendorp Boerma [n. 2], 48, referring to Tac. *Hist*. 2.24 and Suet. *Oth*. 9; he also cites Oros. *Hist. adv. Pagan.* 7.8.6). But I desist. The references to Sabines and deliberate echoes of place names connected with them are surely meant to be indirect and only suggestive in nature.

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