

The Aesthetics of Muscle and the Performance of Strength in Roman Culture

A. Vinnius Valens

<p>Vinnius Valens meruit in praetorio divi Augusti centurio, vehicula cum culleis onusta donec exinanirentur sustinere solitus, carpenta adprehensa una manu retinere obnixus contra nitentibus iumentis, et alia mirifica facere quae insculpta monumento eius spectantur. (Pliny, <i>NH</i> 7.82)</p>	<p>Vinnius Valens served as captain in the Imperial Guard of the late lamented Augustus; he was in the habit of holding carts laden with wine-sacks up in the air until they were emptied, and of catching hold of wagons with one hand and stopping them by throwing his weight against the efforts of the teams drawing them, and doing other marvellous exploits which can be seen carved on his monument.</p>
<p>Ut proficiscentem docui te saepe diuque, Augusto reddes signata volumina, Vinni, ... si te forte meae gravis uret sarcina chartae, abicito potius, quam quo perferre iuberis clitellas ferus impingas, Asinaeque paternum cognomen vertas in risum et fabula fias. Viribus uteris per clivos, flumina, lamas. victor propositi simul ac perveneris illuc, sic positum servabis onus, ne forte sub ala fasciculum portes librorum ut rusticus agnum, ... vade; vale; cave ne titubes mandataque frangas. (Horace, Ep. 1.13)</p>	<p>As I instructed you often and at length, when you set out, Vinnius, you will deliver these close-sealed rolls to Augustus.... If haply my book's burden gall you with its weight, fling it from you, rather than savagely dash down your pack where you are bidden to deliver it, and turn your father's name of Asina into a jest, and you become the talk of the town. Put forth your strength over hills, streams, and fens; when once you have achieved your purpose and reached your journey's end, you are to keep your burden so placed as not, for instance, to carry the little packet of books under your armpit, even as a bumpkin carries a lamb, ... Be off; fare well; take care you do not stumble and smash your precious charge.</p>
<p>...ab Augusto hac epistula: "Pertulit ad me Onysius [Onos Vinnius?] libellum tuum..." (Suet., <i>Vita Horati</i>)</p>	<p>...by Augustus in the following letter: "Onysius [the donkey Vinnius?] has brought me your little volume..."</p>

B. Roman strength performance

<p>Corpore vesco sed eximiis viribus Tritanum in gladiatorio ludo Samnitium armatura celebrem, filiumque eius militem Magni Pompei et rectos et transversos cancellatim toto corpore habuisse nervos, in brachiis etiam manibusque, auctor est Varro in prodigiosarum virium relatione, atque etiam hostem ab eo ex provocatione dimicantem inermi dextera superatum et postremo correptum uno digito in castra tralatum. at Vinnius Valens...[see above]...idem M. Varro: 'Rusticelius,' inquit, 'Hercules appellatus mulum suum tollebat, Fufius Salvius duo centenaria pondera pedibus, totidem manibus, et ducenaria duo umeris contra scalas ferebat.' nos quoque vidimus Athanatum nomine, prodigiosae ostentationis, quingenario thorace plumbeo indutum cothurnisque quingentum pondo calciatum <u>per scaenam</u> ingredi. Milonem athletam cum constitisset nemo vestigio educebat, malum tenenti nemo digitum corripiebat. (Pliny, <i>NH</i> 7.81-83)</p>	<p>Varro in his account of cases of remarkable strength records that one Tritanus, famous in the gladiatorial exercise with the Samnite equipment, was slightly built but of exceptional strength, and that his son, a soldier of Pompey the Great, had a chequered criss-cross of sinews all over his body, even in his arms and hands; and moreover that once he challenged one of the enemy to single combat, defeated him without a weapon in his hand, and finally took hold of him with a single finger and carried him off to the camp... Marcus Varro likewise states: 'Rusticelius, who was nicknamed Hercules, used to lift his mule; Fufius Salvius used to walk up a ladder with two hundred-pound weights fastened to his feet, the same weights in his hands and two two-hundred-pound weights on his shoulders.' We also saw a man named Athanatus, who was capable of a miraculous display: he walked <u>across the stage</u> wearing a leaden breast-plate weighing 500 pounds and shod in boots of 500 pounds' weight. When the athlete Milo took a firm stand, no one could make him shift his footing, and when he was holding an apple no one could make him straighten out a finger.</p>
<p>Quod nutantia fronte perticata gestat pondera Masclion superbus, aut grandis Ninus omnibus lacertis septem quod pueros levat vel octo. (Martial, 5.12.1-4)</p>	<p>Masclion proudly carries a nodding weight on his poletopped brow, big Ninus lifts seven or eight boys with all his strength.</p>

C. Tritanus

Corpore vesco sed eximiis viribus Tritanum in gladiatorio ludo Samnitium armatura celebrem, ... auctor est Varro in prodigiosarum virium relatione. (Pliny, <i>NH</i> 7.81)	Varro in his account of cases of remarkable strength records that one Tritanus, famous in the gladiatorial exercise with the Samnite equipment....
carne multa vescebatur, struthionem ad diem comedisse fertur. vini non multum bibit, aquae plurimum. mente firmissimus, nervis robustissimus, ita ut Tritanum vinceret, cuius Varro meminit. nam et incudem superpositam pectori constanter aliis tudentibus pertulit, cum ipse reclinis ac resupinus et curvatus in manus penderet potius quam iaceret. (<i>Hist. Aug., Quad. Tyr.</i> 4.2-3)	He would eat great amounts of meat and he even, so it is said, consumed an ostrich in a single day. He drank little wine but very much water. He was most resolute in spirit, and in sinews most strong, so that he surpassed even Tritanus, of whom Varro makes mention. For he would hold out resolutely when an anvil was placed on his chest and men struck it, while he, leaning backward face up, supporting his weight on his hands, seemed to be suspended rather than to be lying down.

D. The *draucus* = bodybuilder?

harpasto quoque subligata ludit et flavescit happe, gravesque draucis halteras facili rotat lacerto, (Martial, 7.67.4-6)	She also plays with the harpastum high-girt, gets yellow with sand, and with effortless arm rotates weights that would tax a <i>draucus</i> .
Haec rapit Antaei velox in pulvere draucus, grandia qui vano colla labore facit. (Martial, 14.48)	These [<i>harpasta</i> balls] the swift <i>draucus</i> , who makes his neck big by futile toil, snatches in Antaeus' dust.
rogabit unde suspicer virum mollem. una lavamur: aspicit nihil sursum, sed spectat oculis devorantibus draucos nec otiosis mentulas videt labris. (Martial, 1.96.10-13)	He will ask how I come to suspect the man of effeminacy. We bathe together. He never looks up, but watches the <i>drauci</i> with devouring eyes and his lips work as he gazes at their cocks.
Drauci Natta sui vorat pipinam, collatus cui gallus est Priapus. (Martial, 11.72)	Natta devours the willy of his young <i>draucus</i> , compared to whom Priapus is a eunuch.

E. vasculature and definition

Corpore vesco sed eximiis viribus Tritanum in gladiatorio ludo Samnitium armatura celebrem, filiumque eius militem Magni Pompei <u>et rectos et transversos cancellatim toto corpore habuisse nervos, in brachiis etiam manibusque</u> (Pliny, <i>NH</i> 7.81)	one Tritanus, famous in the gladiatorial exercise with the Samnite equipment, was slightly built but of exceptional strength, and that his son, a soldier of Pompey the Great, <u>had a chequered criss-cross of sinews all over his body, even in his arms and hands</u>
huc pertinent peregrinae exercitationes et volutatio in caeno ac <u>pectorosa cervicis repandae ostentatio</u> . per omnia haec praedicatur sitis quaeri. (Pliny, <i>NH</i> 14.140)	This is the object of the exercises that have been introduced from foreign countries, and of rolling in the mud and <u>throwing the neck back to show off the muscles of the chest</u> . It is declared that the object of all these exercises is merely to raise a thirst!

F. aesthetic appreciation of male muscle

<u>Pulcher aspectu sit athleta cuius lacertos exercitatio expressit</u> , idem certamini paratior. (Quint. 8.3.10)	<u>An athlete whose muscles have been developed by exercise may be good to look at</u> ; he is also more ready for the fray.
Licet tamen nobis in digressionibus uti vel historico nonnumquam <u>nitore</u> , dum in iis de quibus erit quaestio meminerimus <u>non athletarum toris</u> sed militum lacertis opus esse (Quint. 10.1.33)	Nevertheless, we can sometimes use even the <u>elegance</u> of the historian in Digressions, so long as we remember that, in passages where a Question is involved, it is not <u>the athlete's bulging muscles</u> that we need but the soldier's strong arm
quantus ad spectaculum non fidele et lusorium fiat concursus, quanta sit circa artes bonas solitudo; <u>quam inbecilli animo sint, quorum lacertos umerosque miramur</u> . (Sen., <i>Ep.</i> 80.2)	What crowds flock to the games,—spurious as they are and arranged merely for pastime,—and what a solitude reigns where the good arts are taught! <u>How feather-brained are the athletes whose muscles and shoulders we admire!</u>

<p>Bene Pericles, cum haberet collegam in praetura Sophoclem poetam iique de communi officio convenissent et casu formosus puer praeteriret dixissetque Sophocles: “O puerum pulchrum, Pericle!” “At enim praetorem, Sophocle, decet non solum manus, sed etiam oculos abstinentes habere.” <u>Atque hoc idem Sophocles si in athletarum probatione dixisset, iusta reprehensione caruisset.</u> (Cic., <i>De Off.</i> 1.144)</p>	<p>When Pericles was associated with the poet Sophocles as his colleague in command and they had met to confer about official business that concerned them both, a handsome boy chanced to pass and Sophocles said: “Look, Pericles; what a pretty boy!” How pertinent was Pericles’s reply: “Hush, Sophocles, a general should keep not only his hands but his eyes under control.” <u>And yet, if Sophocles had made this same remark at a trial of athletes, he would have incurred no just reprimand.</u></p>
<p>Athletarum vero spectaculo muliebri secus omne adeo summovit, ut pontificalibus ludis pugilum par postulatum distulerit in insequentis diei matutinum tempus edixeritque mulieres ante horam quintam venire in theatrum non placere. (Suet., <i>Aug.</i> 44)</p>	<p>As for the contests of the athletes, he excluded women from them so strictly, that when a contest between a pair of boxers had been called for at the games in honour of his appointment as pontifex maximus, he postponed it until early the following day, making proclamation that it was his desire that women should not come to the theatre before the fifth hour.</p>
<p>et longum invalidi collum cervicibus aequat Herculis Antaeum procul a tellure tenentis (Juv., <i>Sat.</i> 3.88-89)</p>	<p>They [the race of foreign flatterers] can liken a weakling’s scrawny neck to the muscles of Hercules when he’s holding Antaeus far above the earth.</p>

G. not everyone loved musclemen?

<p>Adhuc quidam nullam esse naturalem putant eloquentiam nisi quae sit cotidiano sermoni simillima, quo cum amicis coniugibus liberis servis loquamur, contento promere animi voluntatem nihilque arcessiti et elaborati requirente: quidquid huc sit adiectum, id esse adfectionis et ambitiosae in loquendo iactantiae, remotum a veritate fictumque ipsorum gratia verborum, quibus solum natura sit officium attributum servire sensibus: <u>sicut athletarum corpora, etiam si validiora fiant exercitatione et lege quadam ciborum, non tamen esse naturalia atque ab illa specie quae sit concessa hominibus abhorre.</u> (Quint. 12.10.40-41)</p>	<p>Again, there are some who say that no eloquence is natural unless it is exactly like the everyday speech which we use to talk to our friends, wives, children, and slaves, and which is content to express our purpose without seeking anything studied or elaborate. Anything over and above this, they maintain, is a mark of affectation and pretentious linguistic ostentation, remote from reality and contrived solely for the sake of the words, whose sole natural function (they say) is to be the servants of thought. <u>In the same way (they argue) athletes’ bodies, though strengthened by exercise and certain dietary rules, are unnatural and abnormal by the standards of physical appearance granted to the human species.</u></p>
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H. erotic longing in Horace (cf. Prop. 1.20)

<p>Lydia, dic, per omnis te deos oro, Sybarin cur properes amando perdere, cur apricum oderit Campus, patiens pulveris atque solis. cur neque militaris inter aequalis equitat, Gallica nec lupatis temperat ora frenis? cur timet flavum Tiberim tangere? cur olivum sanguine viperino cautius vitat neque iam livida gestat armis bracchia, saepe disco, saepe trans finem iaculo nobilis expedito? (Horace, <i>Odes</i> 1.8.1-12)</p>	<p>Tell me, Lydia, for god’s sake, I beg you, why you are in such a hurry to destroy Sybaris by your love; why he shuns the sunny Campus, though well able to put up with the dust and sun. Why does he no longer take part in cavalry exercises with his friends, or train the mouth of a Gallic steed with a jagged bit? Why is he afraid to dip his toe in the yellow Tiber? Why does he shy away from olive oil more nervously than if it were viper’s blood? Why does he no longer have arms that are black and blue from weapons— he who has often won fame by throwing the discus or the javelin beyond the mark?</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">at tibi</p> <p>ne vicinus Enipeus plus iusto placeat cave; quamvis non alius flectere equum sciens aeque conspicitur gramine Martio, nec quisquam citus aequae Tusco denatat alveo. (Horace, <i>Odes</i> 3.7.22-28)</p>	<p>But you—make sure that your neighbour Enipeus does not please you more than he ought, even though no one else on the grass of Mars is seen to be so skilful at maneuvering his horse, and nobody can swim so swiftly down the Tuscan river.</p>

<p>tibi qualum Cythereae puer ales, tibi telas operosaeque Minervae studium aufert, Neobule, Liparaei nitor Hebri, simul unctos Tiberinis umeros lavit in undis, eques ipso melior Bellerophonte, neque pugno neque segni pede victus: catus idem per apertum fugientis agitato grege cervos iaculari et celer arto latitantem fruticeto excipere aprum. (Horace, <i>Odes</i> 3.12.4-12)</p>	<p>The Cytherean's winged brat steals your wool basket; your web and your interest in the crafts of Minerva, Neobule, are stolen by the brilliant beauty of Hebrus from Lipara, as soon as he bathes his oiled shoulders in the waters of the Tiber—a better horseman than Bellerophon himself, and unbeatable for the speed of his boxing and sprinting; he is also clever at hitting stags with a javelin as they run across open ground in a stampeding herd; he is quick, too, at receiving the charge of a boar that has been lurking in a dense thicket.</p>
<p>sed cur heu, Ligurine, cur manat rara meas lacrima per genas? cur facunda parum decoro inter verba cadit lingua silentio? nocturnis ego somniis iam captum teneo, iam volucrem sequor te per gramina Martii Campi, te per aquas, dure, volubilis. (Horace, <i>Odes</i> 4.1.33-40)</p>	<p>But why, Ligurinus, ah why does a tear every now and then roll down my cheek? Why does my ready tongue falter in mid-sentence in an all too undignified silence? At night in my dreams I sometimes hold you tight, sometimes chase you as you fly across the grass of the Campus Martius, or, hardhearted as you are, through the river's rolling waters.</p>

(all translations from the Loeb Classical Library except where noted)

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