

## Imagined Ignorance: Centurions in Persius' Satires

Persius' satires have received increased scholarly attention over the past decade (Bartsch, 2016; Braund and Osgood, 2012; Reckford, 2009). In this paper, I focus on the two imagined speeches of centurions in Persius' third and fifth satires: 3.77-87 and 5.189-91. Commentators are mostly in agreement that the centurion in Persius symbolizes "a perfect specimen of developed animalism," "an example of vulgar ignorance," "boorish ignorance," and "a primitive representative of the popular opinion" (Connington, 1874; Morford, 1984; Harvey, 1981; Kißel, 1990). These commentators, however, do not discuss why Persius chose the centurion to be the voice of ignorance.

Aside from their combat roles, centurions were integral members of communities, local patrons, and family men. In literature, however, centurions have a different reputation. As oafish brutes, violent killers, and smelly buffoons, centurions in literature are vehicles for elite stereotypes and classist tropes. Persius, however, depicts centurions as opponents to philosophy. In this paper, I discuss the role of the centurion in Persius' satires and examine Persius' intent behind the depictions of these seasoned soldiers. By closely reading the centurions' speeches, I argue that Persius intentionally manipulates cultural expectations and presents centurions in a different light.

Halfway through the third satire, the narrator conjures up a representative from the smelly clan of centurions to argue against his previous Stoic statements and lessons, *hic aliquis de gente hircosa centurionum / dicat* (3.77-8). The anonymity in *aliquis*, the subjunctive *dicat*, and the context of this speech as reactionary, represent the hypothetical nature of the counterargument to the narrator's Stoicism. The imagined interlocutor is specified as a centurion yet he uses epic language, Epicurean polyptoton, and ends his speech with a spondaic line.

If his speech is meant to showcase ignorance, as commentators suggest, his language and style create cognitive dissonance. If Persius had intended to make the anti-Stoic opponent sound foolish, why give him artfully crafted lines with erudite references? The centurion, moreover, is not just a regular soldier, but a recognizable man of authority. Persius' choice to make the centurion sound articulate intentionally subverts the expectation of an ignorant brute.

Persius also demonstrates this representation of centurions at the end of his fifth satire, where the narrator informs the reader that philosophical discussion would be met with cruel laughter from the centurions with bulging legs: *dixeris haec inter uaricosos centuriones, / continuo crassum ridet Pulfenius ingens / et centum Graecos curto centusse licetur* (5.189-91). The centurion Pulfenius literally gets the last laugh in this satire and his quip, his alliteration, and his size showcase both traditional physical stereotypes and Persius' display of the anti-philosophical centurion. Pulfenius may be large, *ingens*, but he is not the idiot he's expected to be.

When Persius' centurions are compared to other satire, the small dataset from Lucilius, Horace, and Juvenal help define a satirical "trope" of a centurion. Lucilius presents centurions as representative of *Romanitas*, Horace and Juvenal focus on the physical size, possible career opportunities, and occasional violence of the centurion, yet Persius is the only author to dramatically present the officer as anti-philosophical. Persius imagines the centurion as a man of mid-level intelligence and while he flubs his philosophical specifics, he is familiar enough to mock it effectively. The centurion acts as a foil for the narrator and is far more than just a primitive representation of popular thought.

By looking at how Persius presents centurions, this paper challenges the standard interpretation of the idiot soldier. The nuance in language and presentation of centurions in

Persius' satires suggest that the centurion is a more complicated cultural figure. This paper contributes to the wider question of the role of centurions within satire and literature.

#### Bibliography

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