

The Yoke of Power: Melinno's Hymn to Rome and the Greek Response to Roman Empire

Stobaeus preserves our only poem by the Hellenistic poet Melinno (2nd century BC, perhaps from Magna Graecia), a hymn in Sapphic stanzas to a goddess named Ἔρωμη. Stobaeus seems to have believed that the selection praised “strength” (ῥώμη), whereas modern commentators (e.g. Oldfather 1931; Lisi 1933; Bowra 1958; Mellor 1975; Gauger 1984: 121-24; Giangrande 1991; Raimondi 1995-98; Torres Guerra 2003; Gutzwiller 2017) emphasize the apparent praise of the goddess of the city of Rome. Some scholars (e.g. Erskine 1995; Aleknienè 2006) combine the two readings to speculate that Melinno is tacitly etymologizing and identifies Rome with strength itself. All these readings I believe miss the full import of the ambiguous language. I propose to analyze this ambiguity of the word ῥώμη in two separate readings by treating the poem once as a hymn to Rome and again as a hymn to divinized Strength. The two readings suggest two different attitudes toward Roman power.

Stanzas 1 and 2 address Rome as the “daughter of Ares” (i.e. Mars) and attribute to her a privileged dispensation from fate to hold empire. Stanza 3 describes earth and sea falling under Rome's yoke, a symbol of complete domination—one that is traditional in the Roman military. Stanza 4 shifts focus from the spatial extent of Roman hegemony to its temporal endurance: time overturns all other things besides Rome. The 5th and final stanza identifies the reason of Rome's supremacy: the men of her army.

The picture changes if, in the tradition of encomia to divinized abstractions (see e.g. Stafford 2000: 12), we read the address to Ἔρωμη as a hymn to a capricious goddess Strength. Much of the above analysis still holds, but its significance changes from

privileging one city-state as exceptional to arguing instead that there are no earthly exceptions; e.g. in the 4th stanza the stability of Strength is praised since all other things change, including (presumably) Roman empire.

Both these readings are fully independent of one another. Both readings are also equally credible and self-consistent, and so we should take them to be deliberate.

Commentators then have been right to see both a reference to “strength” and to “Rome” in Melinno’s hymn, but they have been too quick to see in the ambiguity of the word an unqualified praise of Melinno’s Roman rulers. Reading Ῥώμη as “Rome” and as “Strength” does not produce one unified encomium, but rather two completely different and mutually undercutting poems. In the finest tradition of Hellenistic playfulness, Melinno has exploited an ambiguity in her language to create a double-layered literary piece, with each layer equally valid but irreconcilable to the other. It is quite wrong to dismiss this poem’s praise as “naive” (Lind 1972: 256).

The hymn captures with subtlety and economy an ambivalence within the Greek attitude toward Rome—an ambivalence that can also be detected in Melinno’s rough contemporary Polybius, with Romans depicted on the one hand as the guarantors of perpetual peace and stability but on the other hand as Strength’s momentary darlings. I conclude with reflections on the use of the Sapphic stanza to communicate this ambivalence; the form is unexpectedly appropriate because it extends from the erotic sphere into the historical-political sphere the Sapphic theme of the divided mind (e.g. Sappho fr. 51).

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