

# Juvenal, Sat. 12, 32 : Catullus' shipwreck

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## Juvenal, Sat. 12, 32: Catullus' Shipwreck

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*cum plenus fluctu medius foret alveus et iam  
alternum puppis latus evertentibus undis  
arboris incertae nullam prudentia cani  
reitoris cum ferret opem decidere iactu  
coepit cum ventis ... [12, 30–34]*

In *Classical Philology* 66 (1971) 114–115, Ross Kilpatrick took a close look at Juvenal's description of his friend Catullus' shipwreck and determined that his new reading *arbori* <et> *incerta* improved upon those of Lachmann (*arboris incertae*), Jacobs (*aequoris incerti*) and Weidner (*arboris interitu*). Favoring the prevailing interpretation made by Lupus who deemed the phrase, *arboris incertae*, a genitive of quality modifying either *alveus* or *puppis* are Mayor, Duff and Courtney who are persuaded by Lupus' observation that *arbori*, accepted by Lachmann, created a hiatus unexampled in Juvenal. None of these approaches is however without difficulty and although the manuscripts are unanimous in reading *arboris*, the four variants in the second word of verse 32 (*incertae* PO; *incerta* F; *incerto* vulg.; and *incerti* A Vat. 2810) suggest that a closer inspection in terms of context is warranted.

If the reading *arboris incertae* is accepted, the sense of the passage is: "When the hull was filled half-way by the sea and the waves were turning over one side of the deck with its tottering mast and then the other, and when skill of the aged captain could afford no help, he began to compromise with the winds through jettison." But recalling that a bolt of lightning had struck the yards, but not the mast, *antemnas inpulit ignis* (19) and had left the sails burning, *velis ardentibus* (22), the perceptive reader might well wonder why the mast is tottering, *incertae* (32). As a matter of course lightning normally splinters any wood it may strike by causing an abrupt expansion of superheated moisture within the ligneous tissues. In the case of this square-rig, the type of merchant vessel commonly seen on the seas at this time, such a bolt would have resulted in the loss of its sheets and its yards, which are the long spars that extend a square sail horizontally across either side of the mast<sup>1</sup>. If the mast had suffered such a blow, one which would have left it waving around causing immediate mayhem on board as happened on Statius' ship, *puppemque insana*

<sup>1</sup> See Cecil Torr, *Ancient Ships* (Chicago 1964), "Rigging", pp. 78–98 and "Appendix on Types of Ships", pp. 105–124 as well as Lionel Casson, *Ships and Seamanship in the Ancient World* (Princeton 1971), "Merchant Galleys", pp. 157–168, "Sailing Ships", pp. 169–200, and "Rudder, Rigging, Miscellaneous Equipment", pp. 224–269.

*flagellat arbor* (Theb. 5, 373), why does the captain in his very last effort to keep his now cargo-less ship from foundering require an axe to take down what would have been a burnt, splintered and greatly weakened mast, *ut malum ferro submitteret ... discriminis ultima* (54–55)? Moreover Juvenal's use of the noun *arbor* in every instance but this has the meaning of a tree or forest, never mast as in *magna sacerdos arboris* (Sat. 6, 544–545), and in *arboribus Rutulis* which appears significantly fifty lines later in this same satire (105). Furthermore in this particular satire he has taken care to employ nautical terminology with precision, *antennis* (19), *velis* (22), *alveus* (30), *puppis* (31), *malus* (55), *prora* (69).

To this question I see a simple solution, one that maintains the general sense of the passage, avoids the problem of *arbor/malus*, and introduces an oxymoron into the satire based on the antithesis between the noun *robur* meaning 'strength' and the adjective *incertum* meaning 'uncertain' or 'shaky'. Juvenal uses a noun that can describe the physical material of a ship, namely *robur*, as found in Caesar, B.G. 3, 13, *naves totae factae ex robore*, Cicero, Arat. 33, *celsos defixo robore malos*, Ovid, Met. 14, 548–549 *rates pronas ... mergit robore mellito lignoque*, and Statius, Ach. 1, 427 *caeduntur robora classi*. I suggest that the text here has suffered a corruption due to inversion<sup>2</sup>. *Roboris* has been transposed to *arboris* and the difference in the gender of the two nouns accounts for the subsequent variations in the adjective *incertus* mentioned above. The phrase *roboris incerti* then stands in apposition to the immediately preceding *puppis*. One side and then the other of the deck of this untrustworthy oak [ship] was threatened with overturning waves and the lucky Catullus survived to tell of it.

<sup>2</sup> I am grateful to Archie Allen (Pennsylvania State University) for helpful advice and useful criticism concerning this passage.