

An Herbed-Lamb Pun in Horace?

Horace spends the first three stanzas of *C.* 4.11 telling Phyllis the preparations for Maecenas' birthday party, which will include a blood sacrifice (5-8):¹

ara castis
vincta verbenis avet immolato
spargier agno.

R. F. Thomas on this passage (note on '6-8 *verbenis*') and Nisbet-Hubbard on *C.* 1.19.14 agree that Latin *verbena* covers a much broader range of plants than the modern genus *Verbena* ('vervain'): "the twigs and leaves of a variety of plants used to garland altars" (Thomas), it "should not be thought of as restricted to vervain" (N-H). Indeed, Celsus (2.33.3, quoted by N-H) lists eleven very miscellaneous possibilities, including olive, myrtle, rose, laurel, and ivy.

It seems to me that we can be a bit more specific here. Though it is not on Celsus' list, these *verbenae* are surely twigs of the 'chaste tree' or 'chasteberry', *Vitex agnus-castus*. Pliny has a long description (*NH* XXIV.xxxviii.59-63) of the *vitex*, in which he says that the Greek name is *λύγος* or *ἄγνος*, hence Linnaeus' macaronic binomial, or in this case trinomial. The Greek herb *λύγος* is mentioned as early as the *Iliad* (11.105) and *Odyssey* (9.427, 10.166), *ἄγνος* first in the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes* (410), where the latest Loeb's translate 'willow shoots', 'withes', 'osiers', and 'osiers', respectively.

Why should we believe that the *verbenae* in *C.* 4.11 are *Vitex agnus-castus*?

1. Horace's adjective *castis* (6) fits very well with Pliny's account (*loc. cit.*) in which the second sentence explains the connection of *vitex* and chastity: *Graeci lygon vocant, alias agnon, quoniam matronae Thesmophoriis Atheniensium castitatem custodientes his foliis cubitus sibi sternunt.* (*Verbena*-lore is unlikely to have changed much in the ninety or so years between *Odes* IV and Pliny's *Natural History*.) The

¹ My text is the modern vulgate. There are no variants in Klingner or Shackleton Bailey and no conjectures in the Oslo repertory (<http://www.tekstlab.uio.no/horace/repertories/>) except someone's proposal to delete the whole stanza.

anaphrodisiac quality of the herb fits well with Horace's parenthetical almost-farewell to love in the last stanza, (*non enim posthac alia calebo / femina*) (33-34).

2. Horace's participle *vincta* (7) fits very well with the fact that the plant "was also considered ideal for creating fetters" (A. Vergados on *HHerm* 410). All of the Homeric and Hymnic references to *λύγος* or *ἄγνος* are to its use to bind living creatures: captured sons of Priam in the *Iliad*, Polyphemos' sheep and the stag shot on Circe's island in the *Odyssey*, and Hermes or the stolen cows (not quite clear) in the Homeric hymn. Horace's 'bound' is a strong metaphor for garlands draping an altar: is the word-choice meant in some way to imply the binding of the lamb before it is killed? That would certainly fit the epic background.

3. Best of all, *agno* at the end of the stanza makes a nice bilingual triple pun: this particular variety of *verbena* (*ἄγνος*) is the most appropriate for binding a chaste (*ἀγνός*) altar for the sacrifice of a lamb (*agnus*). Of course, only the last of the three is named as such, so we have something of a poetic riddle. Have I found the answer?