

FHS Poem of the Day: Martial *Epigrams* 7.19

Today I'd like to share my favourite poem by one of my favourite poets, Martial. You can find the poem Latin on the left and with my own English translation on the right.

<i>fragmentum quod vile putas et inutile lignum,</i>	A fragment which you would think a cheap and useless plank,
<i>haec fuit ignoti prima carina maris.</i>	This was the first keel on the unknown sea.
<i>quam nec Cyaneae quondam potuere ruinae</i>	What neither the Cyanean ruin [the Clashing Rocks] nor the more sullen
<i>frangere nec Scythici tristior ira freti.</i>	Wrath of the Scythian sea could shatter long ago,
<i>saecula vicerunt: sed quamvis cesserit annis,</i>	The ages have conquered: yet, although it has fallen to the years,
<i>sanctior est salva parva tabella rate.</i>	The small tablet is more hallowed than the ship unharmed.

Marcus Valerius Martialis wrote over 1,500 epigrams (short, sharp and often witty poems) at the end of the first century AD. Originally from Bilbilis (near modern Catalyud) in Spain, Martial travelled to Rome in his youth to practice his poetry, which frequently scrutinised, insulted and/or flattered his contemporary Romans. He is widely considered to be the inventor of the modern epigram.

Amongst other things, Martial was a mover and shaker in ancient Rome – he writes poems to several notable individuals including the emperors Titus, Vespasian and Trajan and the letter-writer Pliny the Younger (who recorded the events of the eruption of Mt Vesuvius in AD 79). Thus he was very well-connected to the authors of his own age, which is particularly relevant for today's poem.

In epigram 7.19 (the nineteenth poem of his seventh book of the *Epigrams*) Martial describes a tiny broken plank that supposedly came from a much larger (and very famous) ship – the Argo. The Argo was the boat in which Jason set out to win the Golden Fleece. (If you haven't watched it, I thoroughly recommend Ray Harryhausen's 1963 classic film [Jason and the Argonauts](#), complete with terrifying stop-motion monsters). The overall motto of the poem comes across in the final line – this tiny plank of wood "is more hallowed than the ship unharmed". In short, people adored this small, fragile object because it made them think of the greater object of which it used to be a part. This always brings to my mind visiting a museum and trying to imagine how ancient objects looked and functioned in their original day and age.

Interestingly, this poem (as was brilliantly argued in a recent PhD thesis) also stands as a reference to one of Martial's contemporaries, the poet Valerius Flaccus. Valerius Flaccus had recently composed a fantastic new Latin version of the Argonautica myth, but he died before completing it. The literary allusions here can be detected in the Latin words used to describe this plank – *fragmentum* (a fragment) and *tabella* (tablet) in particular describe writing materials, or lost pieces of work. The word *carina* (keel) is a very poetic word, and was used by Valerius Flaccus himself to refer to the Argo in his poem. What Martial is doing here is writing a poem describing how it feels to love and adore something, partly because of what has been lost to time. He is also writing a poem commemorating another poet's poetry about the Argo within a poem about the Argo. Rather clever, really.

To me, though, this poem always speaks of loss and mourning, a wish to relive the past and a realisation that we can never have what never happened (Valerius Flaccus never managed to complete Jason's return journey in his *Argonautica*, for instance). I think about this epigram a lot in our current circumstances; it makes me consider what we have lost and may never regain, what we enjoy in a broken or fragmented state. But like this tiny *fragmentum* we too can overcome the challenges of time. We won't be the same at the end, perhaps, but we will look back and have something to be proud of. Or, as Virgil (another Roman poet) put it in the *Aeneid*: *forsan et haec olim meminisse iuvabit*.

Dr Hayes, June 2020