

T. P. WISEMAN

CATULLUS & HIS WORLD

A REAPPRAISAL



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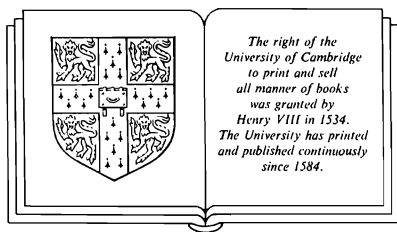
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T. P. WISEMAN

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FOR CHRIS
hoc tibi quod potui

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PREFACE

The first three chapters of this book do not concern Catullus himself directly. After an introduction to warn the reader that the world of the first century B.C. is more alien than we sometimes think, the high society and political life of the Rome of that time are illustrated through the personalities of Clodia Metelli and M. Caelius Rufus. Traditionally (since 1862), those two individuals have been treated as part of Catullus' own story. I have quite deliberately kept them separate, preferring to emphasise the limits of our knowledge, which those who believe in the traditional view have not always recognised. But I hope that any reader who really *must* identify Clodia Metelli as Catullus' 'Lesbia', and Caelius Rufus as his successful rival for her favours, will be able, without too much mental effort, to make his own synthesis of chapters II, III and V. As the final chapter shows, he will be in good company.

I am very grateful to the University of Exeter for the study leave in 1983–4 during which most of this book was written, and to the British School at Rome for appointing me to the Balsdon Senior Fellowship for 1984 – not least because I hope it is the sort of book Dacre Balsdon himself might have enjoyed. The only part of it that was written earlier is chapter II, a version of which was given at the Classical Association Conference in Exeter in 1981.

Friends in both Rome and Exeter – Nicholas Horsfall, Andrew Lintott, my colleagues Susan and David Braund – have been kind enough to read some or all of the book in typescript. Their comments, and those made at various meetings and seminars in England and Italy where my heresies were tried out, have been very helpful to me. For particular points, besides those debts

PREFACE

acknowledged in the notes, I owe thanks also to Nicholas Purcell (on the *carnifices*) and Roland Mayer (on Catullus in the 1930s); if I have used anybody else's ideas without acknowledgement, I apologise for the inadvertence.

I must also express my particular gratitude to Professor G. P. Goold, who has generously allowed me to use his splendid translation (Duckworth 1983); all the English versions of Catullus are his, with adaptations, signalled in the footnotes, only where his text differs from the one I have used. (All other unattributed translations are mine.) Finally, I thank those authors and publishers who have allowed me to quote copyright material *in extenso* in chapter VII: William Hull ('In memoriam I: Catullus'); Jack Lindsay (dedication poem to *The Complete Poetry of Gaius Catullus*); David W. T. Vessey ('Lesbia in Orco'); the Thornton Wilder Estate (extracts from *The Ides of March*); Duckworth & Co. Ltd and Viking Penguin Inc. ('From a Letter to Lesbia' in *The Portable Dorothy Parker*, 1973); and Macmillan, London and Basingstoke ('To a Roman' in J. C. Squire, *Collected Poems*, 1959). The illustrations are reproduced by permission of the Deutsches archäologisches Institut, Rome (Plates 1 and 3); Bildarchiv Foto Marburg (Plate 2); and the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris (Plate 4).

Forty-four is probably a good age to stop writing about Catullus, if not already a bit late. Thirty years ago at Manchester Grammar School, we read selections from Catullus, followed by the *pro Caelio*, under the sternly benevolent eye of R. T. Moore (a splendid teacher, whom all his ex-pupils must remember with affection); the imagination of one callow youth was caught, and that is what made me a classicist. I have been thinking about Catullus, on and off, ever since, and having now managed to do what I wanted to do even then, I feel I have paid a debt.

Exeter
May 1984

T.P.W.

A WORLD NOT OURS

I wondered, and I still wonder, what it was like to be there.

KEITH HOPKINS, *Death and Renewal* (1983) 203

I. EVIDENCE AND PRECONCEPTIONS

Of all the Latin poets, Catullus is the one who seems to speak most directly to us. And of all the periods of Roman history, the late Republic, in which he lived, is the one for which we have the best contemporary evidence. So Catullus and his world should be well known and unproblematical, hardly in need of substantial reinterpretation. But that is not the case: the familiar story of the poet's love for the wife of Metellus Celer, and his jealousy of Caelius Rufus, depends on a nineteenth-century reconstruction, learned and ingenious but essentially hypothetical,¹ while matters of more central interest, such as the poet's own background and the nature and circumstances of his literary output, have not been given the attention they deserve. I think we have been too easily satisfied with an illusory Catullus; to get to grips with the real one, we need to look hard at the evidence, and not take anything on trust.

It is true that we are comparatively well informed about the late Republic – but only comparatively. The information we have is very limited, very patchy, and needs careful interpretation. In particular, three common pitfalls in the use of evidence need to be recognised and avoided.

First, the tacit assumption that 'conspicuous' source material is somehow privileged. The works of Cicero and Catullus himself are of fundamental importance for understanding late-Republic-

¹ Schwabe 1862; see p. 217 below for the context.

can Rome, but what they tell us is not the only source of information. There is also what may be inferred from what they do *not* tell us, or allude to only in passing; and there is the humbler and more haphazard testimony of artefacts – coins, inscriptions, works of art – and of the ‘fragments’ of literary works now lost except for quotations in later authors. All that is just as important, if we can interpret it properly.

For instance, the identification of Piso in Catullus 28 and 47 is hindered rather than helped by concentrating on Cicero’s brilliantly malicious portrait of L. Piso Caesoninus in the *in Pisonem*. That Piso was proconsul in Macedonia, Catullus’ Piso evidently in Spain. But the glamour of the ‘conspicuous source’ seems to force the identification of the two, as if there were no other Pisones in Rome. In fact, a coin inscription allows us to infer the existence of a L. Piso Frugi of about the right age, who could well be the proconsul of Spain to whom Catullus refers.² Similarly, ‘Lesbia’ herself is commonly identified with Clodia Metelli rather than either of her sisters (despite the chronological problems involved) because her notoriety is more conspicuous for us than that of Clodia Luculli; but if, instead of Cicero’s speech in defence of Caelius, we happened to possess the text of L. Lentulus’ speech prosecuting Clodius in 61 B.C., precisely the reverse would be the case.³

This fallacy also has its effect on a grander scale. Much of what we know about the late Republic is about politics. That is inevitable, given the nature of our main sources. Politics was a subject of absorbing interest, at one particular social level. But it was not the only one, and for most of the population of Rome probably not the most interesting. What mainly obsessed the populace at large was *ludi*, entertainments – plays and shows in the theatre, chariot-racing and wild-beast hunts in the Circus, gladiators in the Forum. These things did not interest Cicero,

² Wiseman 1969, 38–40, *JRS* 69 (1979) 162f; Crawford 1974, 435 (C. Piso L. f. Frugi, implying an elder brother L.).

³ *Cic. Mil.* 73, *Plut. Caes.* 10.5, *Cic.* 29.3f; Wiseman 1969, 52–5. Lentulus: *Cic. har. resp.* 37, *Val. Max.* iv 2.5, *Schol. Bob.* 85 and 89 St.

who mentions them only dismissively,⁴ and for that reason, among others, the picture of late-Republican society that we see through his eyes is an untypical one. Suppose that instead of Caesar's *Commentaries* and the letters of Cicero, what had survived was Varro's *Menippean Satires* and the plays of Laberius.⁵ We should have a very different picture in that case – and perhaps one which would be more helpful for understanding Catullus and the literary life of his time. We shall find, in fact, that theatrical shows and performances are relevant to Catullus and his world in various unexpected ways.

The second pitfall to be avoided is a chronological one – the assumption that everything changed with the end of the Republic. In political terms, of course, the existence of the *princeps* made a fundamental difference; for social history, however, the transition from Republic to Principate is much less significant. From the late second century B.C. to the late first century A.D. – that is, in the last two generations of the Republic and the first two of the Principate – there is a recognisable continuity in the *mores* of the Roman élite. The 'Julio-Claudians' were actually Iulii Caesares and Claudii Neronēs, wealthy aristocrats who behaved as such; the only difference their 'imperial' status made was in the scale of resources they could deploy on what wealthy aristocrats liked to do. Their lifestyle was formed by the hellenisation of Roman society in the second century B.C., the results of which could be seen equally in the luxury and sophistication of their pleasures and in the respect – whether genuine or assumed – they paid to literary culture and the arts.⁶

⁴ E.g. Cic. *Mur.* 38–40 ('populum ac vulgus imperitorum ludis magno opere delectari'), *fam.* II 8.1 (Cicero doesn't want to hear about *gladiatorum compositiones*); of the two passages where he discusses *ludi* at length, *Sest.* 115–27 is forensic special pleading (cf. the apology to the *iudices* at 115), and *fam.* VII 1 the response to a request by his correspondent.

⁵ For the importance of drama (of various types) in Varro's *Satires*, see fr. 304B ('hic modus scaenatis'), 348–69B ('Ὅνοϛ λῦραϛ'), and references passim to comedy, tragedy, music and dance.

⁶ See now A. Wallace-Hadrill, *Suetonius* (London 1983) 186–8, cf. 156, 169, 178f, 181f. On the tastes and pleasures of the hellenised élite, see for instance Griffin 1976; A. F. Stewart, *JRS* 67 (1977) 76–90, esp. 78f; Lyne 1980, 8–17 and 192–8.

Here too we may be misled by the accident of what evidence survives. The 'Ciceronian' age would look very different through the eyes of Petronius or Martial. And just as Juvenal's sneer about bread and circuses would apply in much the same way to the Roman populace of the first century B.C., so too the glimpses we get from Suetonius of the tastes and habits of the early emperors can be used, with due caution, to illustrate the tastes and habits of the late-Republican aristocracy.⁷ We learn an enormous amount from Cicero, but it is no use asking him for an authentic insight into the pleasures of the patrician Claudii. Yet that is what we need, if we are to understand an important part of Catullus' experience.

The third pitfall is the most important, and the most insidious. Because we find some parts of the late-Republican scene immediately intelligible and accessible (notably Cicero in his letters, Catullus in his love poems), it is easy to treat their world as if it were in general familiar to us, and to assume that their values were essentially similar to our own. I think we shall get closer to understanding the ancient world if we make the opposite assumption, always looking for, and trying to come to terms with, the alien and the unfamiliar. That is particularly important for Catullus: if his sentiments are indeed easily recognisable to us, that in itself may be something striking and unusual.

Studying ancient Rome should be like visiting some teeming capital in a dangerous and ill-governed foreign country; nothing can be relied on, most of what you see is squalid, sinister or unintelligible, and you are disproportionately grateful when you find something you can recognise as familiar.⁸ Two particular examples of alien values are worth looking at in detail; and since they involve (in the clichés of our time) gratuitous

⁷ As a crude example, compare Suet. *Gaius* 24.1 with Cic. *Sest.* 16, *har. resp.* 59, etc.: whether the allegations of incest were true or slanderous (and I see no reason to disbelieve them *a priori*), P. Clodius Pulcher and C. Caesar Augustus Germanicus were two of a kind – arrogant young patricians who did what they fancied.

⁸ It was, after all, a city where a dog might pick up a human hand in the street (Suet. *Vesp.* 5.4).

violence and explicit sex, the rest of this chapter is not for the squeamish.

2. CRUELTY

Catullus was a good hater. Those who offended him would suffer for it – and the imagery of their suffering is vivid and brutal. Aurelius will have radishes and mullets forced into his fundament; Thallus will be branded with the stripes of the lash, and writhe like a small boat in a rough sea; Cominius will be lynched by the mob, his tongue and eyes torn out as food for carrion birds.⁹ What lies behind these sadistic imaginings is the Roman idea of punishment, for that is what Catullus wants to exact.¹⁰

It is striking that throughout Roman literature, from Plautus to Prudentius, we find instruments of torture referred to as something familiar.

Verbera carnifices robur pix lammina taedae . . .

Scourgings, executioners, the rack, pitch, the metal plate, torches . . .

Lucretius' list of the punishments of crime – which make men think they will be tortured in the afterlife – can be paralleled in many other authors, referring either to slaves or to condemned prisoners or to the victims of tyranny.¹¹ From these passages a grim typology may be drawn up, of floggings, rackings and burnings.

The lash (*flagellum*) was more than just a whip; it was designed to make deep wounds, so the thongs were armed with metal, like

⁹ Cat. 15.18f, 25.10–14, 108; also 37.10, branding (cf. Sen. *de ira* III 3.6, Macr. *Sat.* 111.19, Quint. VII 4.12); 97.10, put to the mill (cf. Cic. *de or.* 1.46, Plaut. *Bacch.* 781, *Epid.* 121).

¹⁰ Cat. 40.8 *longa poena* (cf. Plaut. *Mil.* 502f, Cyprian *de lapsis* 13), 116.8 *supplicium* (cf. pp. 198f below: crucifixion?). For all this section, see also the first chapter of Hopkins 1983, on the 'murderous games'.

¹¹ Lucr. III 1017 (trans. C. Bailey), cf. Ovid *Ibis* 183–8 for the Furies in Hades; Plaut. *Asin.* 548f, Cic. *Verr.* V 14, 163, Sen. *contr.* II 5.5–6, Val. Max. VI 8.1, Sen. *de ira* III 3.6, 19.1, ep. 14.5, 78.19, Cyprian *de lapsis* 13, Prudent. *Perist.* 5.61f, etc.

a goad or spur.¹² The victim could be hung up to receive it, his feet weighted, or made to stand with his outstretched arms fastened to a beam across his shoulders.¹³ The 'little horse' (*eculeus*) and the 'lyre-strings' (*fidiculae*) were forms of rack, apparently vertical rather than horizontal but with the same purpose of disjuncting the limbs;¹⁴ painful distortion could also be achieved by confining the victim in a yoke for neck and feet (that was probably what Catullus had in mind for Aurelius).¹⁵ As for burning, Lucretius' *pix lammina taedae* sums it up: boiling pitch, plates of red-hot metal, or simply flaming torches applied directly to the body.¹⁶

It is important to remember that all these things happened in public. The horrors that modern police states practise in secret cells were carried out openly, as an exemplary warning or a public entertainment. Rome was a city with a huge slave population; 'only by fear can you keep such scum under control'. So slaves were punished with the maximum publicity – flogged through the streets, or in the public *atrium* of the house, with the

¹² Hor. *Sat.* 1 3.119 (distinguishing it from the *scutica*, a simple thong), Juv. vi 479; Plaut. *Most.* 56f, *Men.* 951, *Curc.* 131 (*fodere* or *forare stimulis*); Prudent. *Perist.* 10, 116f, 122 (loaded); Eusebius *HE* III 8.9, IV 15.4, VIII 6.3 etc (to the bone).

¹³ *Pendens*: Plaut. *Asin.* 301–5 (weights), *Men.* 951, *Most.* 1167 etc.; Prop. IV 7.45 (by the hair); cf. Eusebius *HE* VIII 6.2, 10.5. *Patibulum*: Plaut. *Most.* 56f, *Mil.* 360, Dion. Hal. VII 69.2 (Val. Max. 1 7.4 *sub furca*).

¹⁴ *Eculeus*: Cic. *Mil.* 57, *Deiot.* 3; *de fin.* v 84, Sen. *contr.* IX 6.18, Sen. *ep.* 67.3, etc.; Prudent. *Perist.* 10.109f (*pendere*). *Fidiculae*: Quint. *decl.* 19.12, Isid. *Orig.* v 27.20, etc.; Sen. *Cons. Marc.* 20.3 (aggravated form of crucifixion?). *Talaria* (Sen. *ep.* 53.6, *de ira* III 19.1) were probably another variant.

¹⁵ Non. 210L (*numellae*, wooden); Festus 162L, Plaut. *Curc.* 689f (*nervus*, metal); Cat. 15.18 ('attractis pedibus patente porta'); cf. also Festus (Paulus) 32L, Plaut. *Asin.* 549, Isid. *Orig.* v 27.12 (*boiae*, wooden or metal, details unknown). Eusebius refers to extendable stocks, similarly on the borderline between restraint and torture (*HE* v 1.27, VI 39.5, VIII 10.8).

¹⁶ Cic. *Verr.* v 163, Val. Max. VI 8.1, Sen. *ep.* 78.19, Eusebius *HE* VI 1.21, etc. Variations: Prop. IV 7.38 (hot brick), *AE* 1971 88.II.12 (wax, candles), Prudent. *Perist.* 229f (hot fat), Eusebius *HE* VIII 12.6 (boiling lead). For the torch used in conjunction with flogging and pincers (cf. the *ungulae* so prominent in the Christian martyr-stories), see the Beldame Painter's playful satyrs: C. H. E. Haspels, *Attic Black-Figured Lekythoi* (Paris 1936) 170, plates 49–51.

doors open.¹⁷ Judicial torture was also done in public: at the entrance to the Subura the bloody scourges hung ready for use, and any passer-by in the Forum might see, and hear, the dreadful *carnifices* in their red caps (to mark them out as men beyond the pale) inflicting agony on some criminal before his execution.¹⁸ It was a spectacle to enjoy: the populace could ‘feast their eyes and satisfy their souls’ at the torture and death of a notorious malefactor. The fate of Vitellius gives us an idea of the scene:¹⁹

. . . having his hands pinioned fast at his back, a halter cast about his neck, and his apparel torn from his body, he was haled half-naked into the Forum. Among many scornful indignities offered unto him both in deed and word throughout the spacious street Sacra Via from one end to the other, whiles they drew his head backward by the bush of his hair (as condemned malefactors are wont to be served) and set a sword’s point under his chin, and all to the end he might show his face and not hold it down, whiles some pelted him with dung and dirty mire, others called him with open mouth incendiary and patinarium [glutton], and some of the common sort twitted him also with faults and deformities of his body . . . At the last upon the stairs Gemoniae with many a small stroke all to-mangled he was and killed in the end, and so from thence drawn with a drag into the river Tiber.

The corpse might be maltreated (as Catullus imagines for Cominius) before the executioner’s hook dragged it off amid the applause of the crowd.²⁰

The main work of the *carnifices* was ‘outside the gate’, for they were employed by funeral contractors for the burial or cremation of the dead. Just to the left as you emerged from the Esquiline Gate on the road to Tibur there was a noisome area, part

¹⁷ Plaut. *Most.* 56 (*per vias*), Suet. *Aug.* 45.4 (*atrium*, also *per trina theatra*); Livy II 36.1, Dion. Hal. VII 69.1, Val. Max. I 7.4 (*medio circo*, Forum etc.). Quotation from Tac. *Ann.* XIV 44.5 (C. Cassius’ speech).

¹⁸ Mart. II 17.2 (Subura); *AE* 1971 88.11.3–14 (*carnifices*); Cic. *Verr.* V 163 (*in foro*, Messana), Prudent. *Perist.* 10.709 (*corona plebium*, Antioch). Public torture for evidence or a confession was normal in the late Empire (*JRS* 72 (1982) 105, an everyday sight for a schoolboy), but probably not in the first century B.C. (Cic. *Mil.* 60, slaves evidently not tortured in public).

¹⁹ Suet. *Vit.* 17 (translation by Philemon Holland, 1606); quotation from Cic. *Verr.* V 65.

²⁰ E.g. Dio LVIII 11.5 (Sejanus); Ovid *Ibis* 165 (*populo plaudente*); Cat. 108 (*populi arbitrio*).

cemetery, part rubbish tip, where official notices vainly tried to limit the dumping of dung and carrion.²¹ There they plied both parts of their trade; it was where the stake was unfastened from the shoulders of the beaten slave to be set upright for his crucifixion – or even more horribly, for his impalement – and where they flogged him at a charge to his master of 4 sesterces for the whole operation.²²

Naturally, free citizens could not be treated in this way; but how strong was the protection of the law? The Roman citizen who witnessed the agony of slaves or criminals could imagine it inflicted on himself, and sometimes his fears came true. The emperors could torture whomever they liked ('let him feel he's dying', said Caligula), for there was no one who could invoke the law against them. In the Republic, the same applied in the provinces under a brutal governor, or anywhere, if one fell into the hands of a sufficiently powerful enemy.²³

The law connived at summary vengeance exacted by the injured party (most notoriously on adulterers, who if caught in the act might be flogged, raped or even castrated), and this concession could all too easily be extended to the indulgence of private pique. A passing rustic makes an untimely joke? A humble neighbour's dog keeps you awake? Out with the whips, and have the culprit beaten – if he dies, too bad.²⁴ In a city without a police force, where self-help was basic to the operation of the law, the humble citizen needed a powerful friend for his

²¹ *CIL* VI 31577, 31615 (cf. also 31614 from outside the Porta Viminalis); Varro *LL* v 25, Festus 240–1L (rotting corpses), Hor. *Sat.* I 8.8–13 (whitened bones); R. Lanciani, *Ancient Rome in the Light of Recent Discoveries* (London 1888) 64–7; M. Albertoni, in *L'archeologia in Roma capitale tra sterro e scavo* (Venice 1983) 148f. *Extra portam*: Plaut. *Mil.* 359f (slave punishment), *Cas.* 354 (cremation), Festus 240L (*puticuli*).

²² *AE* 1971 88 and 89 (88. II. 10 for the 4 HS). Impalement: Sen. *ep.* 101.11f, *Cons. Marc.* 20.3, Dio XLIX 12.5, etc.

²³ Emperors: e.g. Suet. *Gaius* 27–33 (quotation from 30.1); P. A. Brunt, *ZSS* 97 (1980) 259f. Provincial governors: e.g. Cic. *Verr.* v 163f, *fam.* x 32.3. Private *inimicitiae*: Sall. *Hist.* I 44M, whence Val. Max. IX 2.1, Sen. *de ira* III 18.1 etc. (Sulla and M. Marius); Cic. *Phil.* XI 5–7 (Dolabella and Trebonius); Plut. *Cic.* 49.2 (Pomponia and Q. Tullius Philologus).

²⁴ C. Gracchus *ap.* Gell. *NA* x 3.5, Juv. VI 413–18. *Deprensus adulter*: Ter. *Eun.* 955–7, Hor. *Sat.* I 2.41–6, Val. Max. VI 1.13, Juv. X 316f.

protection, and the great men of the time went about with armed escorts as a matter of course.²⁵ When Clodius and his men attacked him on the Sacra Via in November 57, Cicero was well equipped to resist; his escort, he says, could have killed Clodius, which clearly implies that the cudgels and swords were not all on one side.²⁶

These violent scenes were the result of a value system that regarded honour (*fama, dignitas, existimatio*) as the supreme good, and pursued it competitively in feuds that could be savagely brutal. The inscription on Sulla's tomb in the Campus Martius boasted that no friend excelled him in doing good, no enemy in doing harm – and that harm included the most horrific physical torture.²⁷ If your enemy's honour required your total humiliation, you had better keep out of his way. The danger was real: Cicero would not risk going to Octavian to beg for mercy in 43, in case he should be tortured. When an Augustan rhetorician imagined a client of Clodius carrying out the triumvirs' sentence by torturing Cicero to death, that reflected a real situation; long after his enemy was dead, Cicero would not use the Via Aurelia that led past Clodius' estates.²⁸

No doubt it was not yet as bad in the late Republic as it was for Seneca, who dwelt on the awful apparatus of the *carnifex* as one of the hazards of public life.²⁹ The political change had made that difference. But the novelty was not the cruelty itself, only the emperors' total freedom to indulge it.³⁰ The state of mind that

²⁵ Cic. *Mil.* 10 ('quid comitatus nostri, quid gladii volunt?'); late-Republican examples collected in Lintott 1968, 83–5. Self-help: Kelly 1966, esp. the first three chapters; Lintott 1968, 22–34. The *locus classicus* for the poor man's defencelessness is Juv. III 278–301.

²⁶ Cic. *Att.* IV 3.3: 'clamor, lapides, fustes, gladii . . . Qui erant mecum facile operas aditu prohibuerunt. Ipse occidi potuit.'

²⁷ Plut. *Sulla* 38.4; see n. 23 above for his treatment of M. Marius Gratidianus.

²⁸ Plut. *Cic.* 47.4, Sen. *contr.* VII 2.13 (Varius Geminus), Cic. *Phil.* XII 23f. L. Cestius Pius evidently dwelt with pleasure on the 'contumeliae insultantium Ciceroni et verbera et tormenta' (Sen. *suas.* 6.10, cf. 7.12f for his grudge).

²⁹ E.g. Sen. *ep.* 14.4–6, *de ira* III 19f.

³⁰ The invention of *tormenta* and other punishments was attributed to the archetypal tyrant Tarquinius Superbus: see Mommsen *Chronica Minora* I 145 (the 'Chronographer of A.D. 354'), Eusebius *Chron.* II 96 Schoene (ann. Abr. 1470), Isid. *Orig.* V 27.23,