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ON DOCTORS AND FINGERS: AUCTOR AD HERENNIUM 3.20.33-34

As the classical world became more and more literate it developed more and more tools to improve memory [1]. One of these tools, vivid imagery, has often been neglected by scholars who focus instead on the system of the *topoi* and *loci*. Here I examine one of the crucial texts from the Auctor ad Herennium in the first century B. C. and emend its common modern interpretation by reviving a reading of Albertus Magnus (1193/1206 - 1280).

The Auctor recommends using mental imagery to help one remember the elements in a legal argument:

> Often we encompass the memory of an entire act [*rei*] by one notation and a single image. For example, the prosecutor has said that the defendant killed a man by poison, has charged that the motive for the crime was an inheritance, and declared that there are many witnesses and accessories to this act. If in order to facilitate our defence we wish to remember this first point, we shall in the first place form an image of the entire act. We shall make the one about whom the case is being pled a sick man lying in bed, if we know what he looks like. If we do not know him, we shall yet take someone else to be our invalid, but not from the lowest class, so that he may come to mind at once. And we shall place the defendant at the bedside, with a cup in his right hand and writing tablets in his left, and a doctor holding ram's testicles. In this way we can record the man who was poisoned, the inheritance, and the witnesses. Likewise then we shall put the other charges in sequence in the places [*locis*], and whenever we want to remember a fact,

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[1] With great pleasure I offer this contribution to Maria Helena Monteiro da Rocha Pereira. I am working on an extended study of the role of memory in classical antiquity. For this particular essay I gratefully acknowledge the comments and assistance of A. A. Donohue, Deborah Goldstein, and James Tatum. All translations are from the *Loeb Classical Library* unless otherwise noted.

> if we use a proper arrangement of the forms and a careful notation of the images, we shall easily follow what we want in memory. [2]

The facts of the case suggest the images. For the most part, the Auctor's image of the scene of the crime is easy to follow. Albertus Magnus explains the cup and the tablets, as representing respectively «the memory of the poison which he [the sick man] drank, and ... the memory of the will which he signed». [3]

A series of full scenes is pictured with each stage of the argument of the case having its own scene, which includes all of its elements. Together these scenes resemble a continuous narrative much like a cartoon strip today or the late Roman Republican wall paintings of the Odyssey landscapes, dating some thirty years after the Auctor [4]. While the figures in the paintings are subordinated to the setting and not emphasized, as the Auctor has done for his description of a crime, the way the viewer sees each scene through pilasters painted over the landscape gives an idea of how the Auctor meant his system to work. For the Auctor (3.16.29 and 3.17.31) also recommends putting things to be remembered between intercolumniations. In both his scene of the crime and the Odyssey landscapes, the things in question are an ordered series of what we would call episodes or scenes. By demarcating where one ends and the next begins, the pilasters in the painting make the scenes easier to «read» and hence easier to remember by dividing the larger whole into more manageable-sized chunks. Hence both the Auctor and the painters are following similar principles, which in a certain sense is entirely to be expected, since they had the same audience. The Auctor has to give advice that is understandable; the painter has to produce art that is comprehensible.

Now let us turn to the text itself. I begin with the ram's testicles, an image which qualifies as bizarre in today's world. Learning more about them may not dispel their oddity, but their presence can be plausibly explained. References to them in Latin sources are few and

2 Auctor ad Herennium, 3.20.33-34. The translation is adapted from that of Harry Caplan in the *Loeb Classical Library* (Cambridge, MA and London 1954).

3 *Objection* 16. Translation adapted from Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory* (Cambridge 1990) 139 and 321 n. 22 for the Latin text. Hereafter cited as Carruthers.

4 From Rome, Esquiline, now in the Vatican. H. Speier, editor, *W. Helbig-Führer durch die öffentlichen Sammlungen klassischer Altertümer in Rom,* 4th edition volume 1 (Tübingen 1963) 355-360. Roger Ling, *Roman Painting* (Cambridge 1991) 107-111 and 229 n. 4 for bibliography.

far between. Pliny lists among the remedies for epilepsy, «the testicles of a ram dried and pounded, half a denarius by weight being taken in a hemina of water or ass's milk.» [5] Pliny's prescription does not apply to the Auctor's scene unless the victim was suffering from epilepsy and was given the wrong medicine. The only other reference appears in Festus, a late second century A. D. epitomizer of *On the Significance of Words* by the Augustan freedman Verrius Flaccus: «*Suffiscus* [ram's scrotum] is said to be the skin of a ram's testicles which are used instead of a pouch, so called from its resemblance to a purse.» [6] Modern commentators have assumed that the ram's testicles are the purse that contains money for bribing witnesses. At the same time the Latin, «*testiculi*», makes a punning reference to the Latin word for witnesses, «*testes*», which also means «*testicles*» and forms the basis for English words like «*testify*» and, obviously, «*testicles*». Albertus Magnus, in his commentary on this passage, either did not know of the use of a ram's scrotum as a purse or thought it did not apply in this situation, because he said the Auctor meant «by the testicles the witnesses and accessories, and by the ram the defense against [the] matter being adjudicated.» [7] Carruthers explains that because rams «are noted for their territorial defensiveness, the ram can signify the proceeding against the defendant.» [8] Albertus Magnus adds that «if we wish to record what is brought against us in a law-suit, we should imagine some ram, with huge horns and testicles, coming towards us in the darkness. The horns will bring to memory our adversaries and testicles the dispositions [*sic*] of the witnesses.» [9]

Den Boer suggests that the term refers to the section where Aries appears in the Zodiac, which could be used instead of intercolumniations as the *loci* [10]. Cicero mentions Metrodorus of Scepsis as a contemporary and someone notable for his memory, about whom Quintilian:

> wonder[s] all the more, how Metrodorus should have found three hundred and sixty different localities in the twelve signs of the Zodiac through which

5 Pliny, *Natural History,* 30.87.

6 Festus, Lindsay 403, s.v. «*Suffiscus*». My translation.

7 *Objection* 16. Translation adapted from Carruthers, 139 and 321 n. 22 for the Latin text.

8 Carruthers, 139.

9 Translation from Frances A. Yates, *The Art of Memory* (Chicago 1966) 68.

10 W. Den Boer, *The Art of Memory and Its Mnemotechnical Traditions* (Amsterdam, Oxford, and New York 1986) 97. Yates (note 9 above, 79) also made reference, but in less detail, to the idea of the Zodiac.

> the sun passes. It was doubtless due to the vanity and boastfulness of a man who was inclined to vaunt his memory as being the result of art rather than of natural gifts [11].

Whether or not one is skeptical of the Skeptic like Quintilian, the Auctor makes no mention of either Metrodorus or the Zodiac in his entire discussion on memory. Hence I doubt that the ram's testicles signify a *locus*. They may refer to bribery; they certainly imply witnesses. Thus all three major elements of the scene are accounted for in the summary given in the next sentence of the Auctor, «In this way we can record the man who was poisoned, the inheritance, and the witnesses.»

Modern discussions of the passage from the Auctor do not put a doctor in the scene, as I have done, but assume that the ram's testicles alone suffice to represent the witnesses. Albertus Magnus, whom I am following in the translation, paraphrased the Auctor: «a physician standing upright holding the testicles of a ram.» [12] Harry Caplan translates instead: «And we shall place the defendant at the bedside, holding in his right hand a cup, and in his left tablets, and on the fourth finger a ram's testicles.» [13] The Latin is necessary to understand the problem: «*Et reum ad lectum eius adstituemus, dextera poculum, sinistra tabulas, medico testiculos arietinos tenentem.*» Caplan considers the «*tenentem*» (holding) at the end of the sentence to modify «*reum*» (the defendant) at the beginning. The things held by the defendant are in the accusative case, because they are the object of «*tenentem*» and the ablative case is then used to tell where they are held. I have made a minor alteration in the text by changing the ending of «*medico*» from an ablative and the place where the ram's testicles are, to an accusative («*medicum*») governing the final «*tenentem.*»

There are a number of explanations for such an error. First, as anonyne who has ever copied substantial portions of texts knows, minor errors have a habit of creeping in. In this case, the ablatives for the left and right hands followed by the accusative for the objects may have led the scribe to form a similar construction for the «doctor» and the «ram's testicles.» Second, medieval manuscripts abounded

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11 Quintilian 11.2.22. The reference to Cicero occurs in *de Oratore*, 2.360.

12 Carruthers, 139. Scholars have wrongly considered the presence of the doctor an error on the part of Albertus. For example, see Wolfgang Kemp, «Visual Narratives, Memory, and the Medieval *Esprit du System*», in Susanne Küchler and Walter Melion, editors, *Images of Memory. On Remembering and Representation* (Washington and London 1991) 102-103.

13 See note 2 above.

in abbreviations, of which there were over 14,000. «*Medic*» and no more may have appeared in one of the manuscriptes; or the ending «*um*», which was represented by a «*u*» with a line over it, could have, if quickly written, looked like an «*o.*» [14]

I realize that bizarre images are a part of mnemotechnics, but there are limits to the degree of bizarreness in this particular form of mnemotechnics. Picture the situation. In one hand a man is holding a cup, which would roughly correspond in size to a coffee cup or even a mug today, since it has to hold the poison, presumably disguised in some masking liquid; and in the other hand he has writing tablets, which range in size from rather small and capable of being held in the fist to fairly substantial [15]. Since the tablets represent the will of the deceased, they are probably mid-range in size. The same hand that holds them has to have ram's testicles on the fourth finger. How? Caplan implies that they are worn like a ring on the fourth finger. Yet if they are draped like saddle-bags around the finger, given their substantial bulk, surely they would get in the way of the tablets [16]. If the scrotum was used as the purse, as the Festus passage describes, then the method of securing it, presumably by some kind of suspension using an implied drawstring, on the fourth finger is still problematic given its bulk and its heft, since it is supposed to contain sufficient money for the bribe. If they were being held by the defendant, then

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14 In general, see L. D. Reynolds and N. G. Wilson, *Scribes & Scholars. A Guide to the Transmission of Greek & Latin Literature*, Third Edition (Oxford 1991) 222-233; specifically for scribal errors, 230-231 section F; 291-292 for references on abbreviations. I have not been able to examine any of the manuscripts to see if modern editors have misread the text. For medieval abbreviations of «*medic*» and its relatives, see Adriano Cappelli, *Dizionario di abbreviature latine ed italiane* (Milan 1954) 216. I thank Elizabeth MacLachlan for this reference.

15 C. H. Roberts and T. C. Skeat, *The Birth of the Codex* (London 1987) caption to Plate 1, which illustrates tablets that are 9.1 × 5.7 cm. Eric G. Turner, *Greek Manuscripts of the Ancient World*, 2nd edition, revised and enlarged by P. J. Parsons (London 1987) caption to pl. 4 illustrates tablets that are 26 × 17.8 cm. The smaller tablets were called «*pugillares*» in Latin, because they fit in the fist «*pugillus*».

16 Each testicle would be approximately 3 × 1.5 — 2 inches according to the veterinarian on call at the Large Animal Hospital, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia. She suggested, without knowing the Festus passage quoted above, that the scrotum would be a more likely container as a purse and, while clearly wondering at the question, thought it possible. The overall dimensions would be approximately 3 × 2 × 4 inches, and comparable in size, except for thickness, to a man's wallet today.

they should have appeared in the Auctor's list immediately after the «tablets». At the same time, this reading removes the sole live witness and leaves merely the symbol of one. I find the image not bizarre, but absurd, especially since the rest of the description is entirely reasonable and reasonably captures the elements of the scene of the crime.

The recreation of the scene of the crime depends not on bizarre imagery (Auctor 3.20.33), like memory for words, but on vivid description. Consider Quintilian's description of a similar crime:

> There are certain experiences which the Greeks call *Φαντασίας*, and the Romans *visions*, whereby images of things absent are represented in our mind with such extreme vividness that they seem actually to be before our very eyes ... I am complaining that a man has been murdered. Shall I not bring before my eyes all the circumstances which it is reasonable to imagine must have occurred in such a connexion? Shall I not see the assassin burst suddenly from his hiding-place, the victim tremble, cry for help, beg for mercy, or turn to run? Shall I not see the fatal blow delivered and the stricken body fall? Will not the blood, the deathly pallor, the groan of agony, the death-rattle, be indelibly impressed upon my mind?
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> From such impressions arises that *εναργεία* which Cicero calls *illumination* and *actuality*, which makes us seem not so much to narrate as to exhibit the actual scene, while our emotions will be no less actively stirred than if we were present at the actual occurrence. [17]

While Quintilian's description may remind you of Gothic romances or television soap operas, it depends on heightened, but not outrageous, imagery.

One other argument favors my reading. The Auctor uses the word «*medicus*», which is either an adjective or a noun, depending on the context. As a noun, it means «doctor» or «medical finger», referring to the fourth finger, and, as an adjective, «medical» or «medicinal». Albertus Magnus understood «*medicus*» as a doctor holding ram's testicles, which led him to see «in the physician ... the accusor» and the addition of a third figure, the doctor, to the cast of characters [18]. This interpretation at least has consistency. The modern view, as in Caplan's

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[17] Quintilian 6.2.29, 31-32. The use of enargeia is of concern to literary critics, but beyond the current discussion. Recently, see Eleanor Winsor Leach, *The Rhetoric of Space. Literary and Artistic Representations of Landscape in Republican and Augustan Rome* (Princeton 1988) 10-18.

[18] Carruthers, 139. She believes that Albertus has misinterpreted the Auctor through «his editorial efforts to understand the Latin of a culture far outside his experience.»

translation, assumes that «*digitus*», the Latin word for finger, is implied by the «*medicus*» with the result that his translation uses «fourth finger». A brief consideration of fingers and doctors is necessary.

In the early third century A. D., Porphyrion glossed the word «*index*», used to refer to the finger in question by Horace (*Satires*, 2.8.26). Porphyrion said that «the individual fingers are called by certain names. And these names are: thumb [*pollex*], index [*index*], famous [*famosus*], medical [*medicus*], little [*minimus*].» I find it noteworthy that any commentator would go to the trouble to give the names of the fingers, because it is the kind of information that is considered common knowledge today. If I were doing a critical edition of some modern author, I would not discuss their use of the word «index» in the phrase «he would point with his index finger», which is what Horace said. I believe that Porphyrion in doing so indicates that the names for fingers were not fixed or common knowledge even by the third century A. D. The Latin sources bear him out. *Pollex* and *minimus* appear to have been established fairly early as the thumb and the little (in Latin literally «littlest») finger [19]. *Pollex*, like our word thumb, was also used for the big toe with the context determing which limb was involved, because it broadly means stump or protuberance. Our term for the first finger obviously goes back to the Latin and still means the same thing: the finger which indicates or points.

The middle two fingers had a variety of names and perhaps because of the unsettled nature of the nomenclature were often referred to by number, as they are today: the third and fourth fingers. The third was also known as the «*medius*» or middle finger and as the «*summus*» or longest [20]. Martial (6.70.5) refers to the finger as «*impudicus*» or

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[19] In the United States «the little finger» is frequently called the «pinky»; the latter is of recent Scottish origin (1808 is its earliest citation) and basically means «little». My information for pinky comes from the J. A. Simpson and E. S. C. Weiner, *The Oxford English Dictionary*, second edition (Oxford 1989). All the other references to English words, unless otherwise noted, are also from the *OED*[2]. Similarly, all definitions of the Latin words are from: P. G. W. Glare, editor, *Oxford Latin Dictionary* (Oxford 1982). Hereafter cited as *OLD*. R. B. Onians (*The Origins of European Thought about the Body, the Mind, the Soul, the World, Time, and Fate* [Cambridge 1951, reprinted 1988]) discusses each of the fingers in more detail than I can go into here, but unfortunately his discussions are scattered in footnotes. Here I note only the lengthier discussions, for the rest see his index, 555 s.v. «finger»: 139 n. 4 (thumbs, including «thumbs up»); 198 n. 1 and 233 n. 5 (middle finger); and 448-449 n. 6 (ring finger and wedding bands).

[20] *OLD*, s.v. «*digitus*».

obscene. Porphyrion uses the word «*famosus*» which has the straightforward meaning of our «famous», but also the less favorable connotation of notorious and of ill fame. Hence it would seem that «*famosus*» was applied to the third finger as a euphemism, because it appears that our own usage of «giving the third finger», which is how Martial used the word «*impudicus*», is an old, old custom [21].

More often, instead of a specific name, Latin referred to fingers by their location. Aulus Gellius in the second century A. D. writes about the «medical finger» in that way, when he explains its importance:

> I have heard that the ancient Greeks wore a ring on the finger of the left hand which is next to the little finger. They say, too, that the Roman men commonly wore their rings in that way. Apion in his *Egyptian History* says that the reason for this practice is, that upon cutting into and opening human bodies, a custom in Egypt which the Greeks call *ανατομαι*, or «dissection», it was found that a very fine nerve proceeded from that finger alone of which we have spoken, and made its way to the human heart; that it therefore seemed quite reasonable that this finger in particular should be honoured with such an ornament, since it seems to be joined, and as it were united, with that supreme organ, the heart. [22]

As a result, even today many wear wedding bands on the fourth finger of the left hand. Apion was a Greek historian who lived in the first century A. D. and came, not unexpectedly, from Alexandria in Egypt, since Herophilus, the first Greek known to have dissected a human, did so there ca. 300 B. C. Pliny the Elder describes Apion as «a scholar,

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21 This usage goes back to at least as early as the fifth century B.C. and Aristophanes who used the Greek equivalent, «*σκιμαλιζω*», in the *Pax* (549). «*καταπυγων*», from the same period, is defined in Photius as «the middle finger». See Jeffrey Henderson, *The Maculate Muse*, 2nd edition (New York 1991) 213 no. 470. On how words, especially with sexual connotations, change, see Geoffrey Hughes, *Words in Time. A Social History of the English Vocabulary* (Oxford 1988) 11-12, and 14-15 for euphemisms. The *OED*² gives the additional information that this finger was once called the «fool's finger».

22 Aulus Gellius, *Attic Nights*, 10.10. Caplan in his translation of the Auctor (see note 2 above), 214 note b, cites the fifth century A.D. author, Macrobius (*Satires*, 7.13.7-8) to explain the term, possibly because Gellius used the circumlocution and therefore Caplan was unaware of this passage. In the second century A.D. Latin had no word for «dissection», but by ca. 400 A.D., the time of Macrobius, the Greek word with its variants had become totally Latinized as «*anatomia*», «*anatomica*», and «*anatomicus*.» For these words, see Charlon T. Lewis and Charles Short, *A Latin Dictionary* (Oxford 1879), On ancient dissection, see G. E. R. Lloyd, *Greek Science after Aristotle* (New York 1973) 75-90 and 143-147.

whom Tiberius Caesar used to call the cymbal of the world, but who could rather be seen as the drum of his own fame, [who] wrote that persons to whom he dedicated his compositions were granted inmortality.» [23]

Apion may have been the source for Pliny's own use of the «medical finger», the earliest unambiguous reference in either Latin or Greek to the medical finger, because it uses both «*medicus*» and «*digitus*» together [24]. He says: «Boils are said to be cured ... by an odd number of flies rubbed on with the medical finger.» [25] It may be significant that the earliest extant use of «medical finger» refers not to the heart line described by Gellius, but to its use as an applicator of ointments. Celsus, writing around the time of Tiberius (14-37 A. D.), that is after the Auctor, but before Pliny, did not once use the term «medical finger» in his writings on medicine. This information, combined with the problems in the Auctor's text, when it is read as «medical finger», make it unlikely that the Auctor was referring to the fourth finger. [26]

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23 Pliny, *Natural History*, preface 25. Translation adapted from *Loeb Classical Library*.

24 The Greek is «*ιατρικος δακτύλος*». The first use in Greek, from a search of the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae*, is by Alexander, a doctor who lived in the sixth century A.D. in Tralles, in his *Therapeutica*, 2.475.23 and 2.585.8. Other earlier Greek sources may have used a circumlocution, similar to that of Gellius. Note that the definition in H. G. Liddell, R. Scott, H. S. Jones, and R. McKenzie, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 9th edition (Oxford 1968) mistakenly says that «*ιατρικος* (sc. *δακτυλος*)» means «forefinger». Not only does its source not say that, but, as I have argued in the text, both words need to appear together for a secure interpretation. Its source is: H. I. Bell and W. E. Crum, «A Greek-Coptic Glossary», *Aegyptus* 6 (1925) 213, s.v. «300».

25 Pliny, *Natural History*, 30.108. Pliny (*ibid.*, 33.24) in a discussion of rings uses the circumlocution: «It had originally been the custom to wear rings on one finger only, the one next the little finger.»

26 Both major Latin/English dictionaries (notes 19 and 22 above) refer to the Auctor as their only example for the use of «medical finger», which dates this interpretation of the text to at least as early as the nineteenth century, the time of the original edition of Lewis and Short (note 22 above).