

ON CATULLUS AND BRIXIA

Abstract: Melo, in Catullus 67, 33, denotes the Nile.
Key words: Catullus, Melo.

Resumen: Melo, en Catulo 67, 33, denota el Nilo.
Palabras-clave: Catulo, Melo.

At 67, line 31ff. the town of Brixia is mentioned together with the river Melo:

atqui non solum hoc se dicit cognitum habere
Brixia † Chinae suppositum speculae, †
flavus quam molli percurrit flumine Melo

line 32 Chinae: Cycnea Petreius specula V

The reading of the mss. *Mel(l)o* has hitherto caused difficulty, and the same is the case with the reading *percurrit*. The critics have seen themselves compelled to change *Melo* into *Mella*, and *percurrit* into *praecurrit*. In reality, the text is sound. Catullus calls the Nile the «golden-haired Melo» (*flavus*¹ ... *Melo*²). The Nile is said to traverse (*percurrit*)³ Brixia on account of the town's gentle stream (*molli* ... *flumine*), i.e. the river Mella⁴. The river Nile has been personified⁵ by the poet. The personified Nile is imagined to have traversed Brixia in pursuit of the nymph of the river Mella. River gods were notoriously amorous⁶. Thus Alpheus pursued Arethusa and the river Gyndes burnt with love on the Babylonian plains: cf. Tibullus 4, 1, 141 f. *ardet Aereaeis ... campis*. We should therefore translate as follows:

¹ Cf. Horace, *Odes* 4, 4, 4 *Ganymede flavo*.

² Cf. Lewis and Short, *A Latin Dictionary*, s.v. *Melo* (1): «old Latin name for the Nile» and Forcellini-Perin, *Onomasticon*, s.v. *Mello*. The words *Melonis alba filia* refer to the «paper-reed growing in the Nile».

³ Cf. Lewis and Short, *op.cit.*, s.v. *percurro* I,A.

⁴ At *Georgics* 4, 278 ff. Virgil mentions the river *Mella* (*flumina Mellae*) together with the Nile (cf. line 288 *flumine Nilum*).

⁵ For the personification of rivers, towns, etc. cf. *Habis* 30, 1999, page 112 (note 2) and my *Studies In The Text Of Propertius* (Athens 2002), pages 34 and 157. Cf. A.S. Murray, *Who's Who In Mythology*, London 1988: «Artemis ... was styled ... as a river goddess Potamia.

In this latter capacity she took under her protection the nymphs of the fountains, as, for example Arethusa, whose beauty had attracted the river-god Alpheios and made her the object of his constant pursuit» (Murray, *op.cit.*, page 113). «Alpheios ... loved Arethusa, and ... persistently followed her» (Murray, page 151).

⁶ River-gods were great *amatores*: the Sirens were called Acheloïdes because they were the daughters of a river-god Achelöos (Murray, page 149); Aegina was the daughter of the river-god Asopos (Murray, page 219) and Anchirroe was a daughter of the river-god Nile (cf. Murray, page 211; for other «Töchter» of the Nile cf. Roscher, s.v. *Neilos*, 94).

«And not only this does Brixia say it knows, Brixia which lies beneath the Cycnean height (*Cycnea*⁷ *supposita specula*), which the yellow-haired (*flavus*) Nile (*Melo*) traverses (*percurrit*) on account of the town's gentle stream (i.e. the river Mella; *molli flumine* is *ablativus causae*)».

Catullus does not mention the name of the river which was near to Brixia, since everybody would have understood that he was referring to the river Mella. Catullus has offered to the readers a typically Hellenistic «Überraschung» based on «Wortspielerei» concerning «Eigennamen»: they expect to find the name *Mella*, and find, in the emphatic position, the name *Melo*. The two readings *percurrit* and *Melo* corroborate each other, as I hope to have demonstrated.

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⁷ The reading *Cycnea* was preserved for us by Petreius. The Cycnean height is a hill near Brixia. Cf. Lewis and Short, *op.cit.*, s.v. *Cycnea*.