6) Bears are also mentioned in epigrams 11, 15, 21, and 21B. In 21 “Orpheus” also is mangled by a bear, contrary to the mythology, but it is unclear whether his death was intentional, as in epigrams 7 and 8, or accidental; cf. Carratello, above, note 3, 135 ff., A. E. Housman, Two Epigrams of Martial, CR 15 (1901), 154 ff., reprinted in Diggle and Goodyear, The Classical Papers of A. E. Housman (Cambridge 1972), 536 ff., and R. Fabri, Martial, Spect. 21B, AIV 138 (1979-1980), 591 ff.

7) See Ahl, above, note 1, 107 on the deliberate inappropriateness of comparing Laureolus with Prometheus, the benefactor of mankind.

SOME GEOGRAPHICAL ETYMOLOGISING IN CLAUDIAN (B.G. I 504-526)1)

At Claudian De Bello Gildonico I 504-526 the poet tells of the arrival in Sardinia of the Roman fleet from Italy led by Mascezel on its way to put down the rebellion of Gildo in north Africa (397/8 A.D.). At the end of this passage the whole fleet has put in at Caralis (mod. Cagliari, in southern Sardinia). Claudian has already described how they avoided the dangers of Corsica and the rocky northern half of Sardinia. A storm had caused the fleet to split in two, and the two halves had put in at different ports before converging on Caralis.

518 pars adit antiqua ductos Carthagine Sulcos;
partem litoreo complectitur Olbia muro.

Claudian has already introduced us to Sardinia as a whole in lines 507-515 and the first descriptive phrase used of it is dives ager frugum (509). It is therefore curious to note that the names of the two ports seem to reflect this concept. ‘Sulci’ (mod. S. Antioco in S. W. Sardinia, west of Caralis) means in Latin ‘furrows’: and ‘Olbia’ (in the N.E. of the island) means ‘blessed’ or ‘rich’, since the Greek adjective ὀλυμπικός from which it derives combines the idea of material wealth with connotations of happiness and blessedness2), as does the Latin ‘dives’. The combination of ‘Sulci’ (= ager frugum) and ‘Olbia’ (= dives) thus suggests prosperous fertility, the very quality already attributed by Claudian to Sardinia in line 5093).

Such a procedure is of course absolutely in keeping with everything we know about ancient poets’ use of etymologies, especially those of proper names4), and it raises a tantalising question. Could Claudian have deliberately chosen these ports in order to make the etymological point, and might therefore the historical value of his text be questionable? We know that elsewhere he is cavalier or ignorant about geography, even when dealing with recent events. Cameron5) observes that he makes a bad error concerning the distance from the Elbe to the Rhine at Stil. I 225 f., and

that he wrongly states that the Cherusci live by the former river, at IV Cons. Hon. 425. Loyen and Cameron⁶) say that in this latter case Claudian is misled by Tacitus. Creese⁷) observes that Claudian "follows in the track of older poets, and seeks...to display his learning by as many proper names as possible." In the case of Sardinia he seems to be mainly reliant for his geography on Pausanias, who speaks of the foundation of Sulci and Caralis by the Carthaginians⁸), a detail also mentioned by Claudian (518 and 520: urbs Libyam contra Tyrio fundata potent). Both Pausanias and Claudian also speak of rockiness, bad anchorage and pestilence⁹), as well as of the prosperity of the southern part of Sardinia¹⁰).

Claudian's general reliance on previous literary models, also exemplified in this case, may well therefore undermine his historical credibility here, especially since none of the other sources dealing with this event mentions either Olbia or Sulci¹¹). Although the point cannot be proved, the certain presence in Claudian's account of this example of a sophisticated literary device, namely an etymological link between the terrain of Sardinia and the names of the ports, must place his version of the fleet's manoeuvres under grave suspicion.

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1) I am indebted to Prof. F. Cairns and Prof. W. Liebeschuetz for their helpful advice on this paper.
3) For the association between prosperity and fertility, and more specifically between the soil and ὀλιβας, cf. the opening line of Hom. Ep. VII (Vit. Herod. 249):

4) J. M. Gesner Cl. Claudiani quae exstant (Hildesheim 1969) ad B.G. I 519) notes for Claudian's use of 'Olbia'. 'Ολβία, beata, ominis causa'.


7) J. H. E. Crees, Claudian as an historical authority (Cambridge 1908), 188 n. 1.
8) Paus. X 17.9.
