EARIUS: AN IMPERIAL EUNUCH IN THE LIGHT OF THE POEMS OF MARTIAL AND STATIUS

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In this paper, I will attempt a short sketch of the life of the eunuch Earius, favourite of the emperor Domitian, on the basis of the information given in the poems of Martial and Statius¹. The main focus will be on matters concerning his castration (a delicate one, as Domitian himself legislated against castration), hair-offering and manumission. His relation to the Pergamene Aesculapius, the recipient of the hair-offering, will be discussed, as well as some points regarding the interrelation of the poems of Martial and Statius and their reasons for writing them. Points of relevance to the single epigrams of Martial used in this paper will be fully discussed in my forthcoming dissertation on Book 9 of the Epigrams of Martial.

There are six epigrams in Martial’s Book 9 occasioned by a hair-offering by the eunuch Earius, Domitian’s favourite. The epigrams fall into three subdivisions: nos. 11-13 celebrate the name Earius and may be referred to as the ‘name-series’; nos. 16-17, ‘the offering-series’, consider the actual offering; and no. 36 is a humorous piece, in which Jupiter and Ganymede are contrasted with their earthly counterparts, Domitian and Earius. The first five were presumably written at the time of the offering, no. 36 probably somewhat later; the differences in its tone and approach to the subject indicate that it was not among the poems written primarily to celebrate the event, but rather as humorous offset to the others when incorporated into Book 9. Consequently, in the following pages, the main focus will be on nos. 9,11-13 and 16-17. On the same occasion, Statius wrote a long poem in hexameters on the locks of Earius, published as no. 4 in the third book of his Silvae.

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i. Biographical notes on Earinus: castration, hair-offering and manumission

The most important source of our knowledge of Earinus, Statius’ Silv. 3,4, is a poem of 106 hexameters, written at the explicit wish of Earinus himself, as appears from the preface to that book, in which the poet writes to Pollius: *Earinus praeterea, Germanici nostri liberatus scis quamdui desiderium eius moratus sim, cum petisset ut capillos suos quos cum gemmata pyxide et speculo ad Pergamenum Asclepium mittebat, versibus dedicarem*. The information provided by Martial does not make any substantial addition to our knowledge of Earinus. There is also a note in Dio Cassius (67,2,3), mentioning Earinus apropos of Domitian’s legislation against castration, but no additional information can be drawn from it.

The actual facts about Earinus that can be gathered from the poem of Statius and from those of Martial and the conclusions that, with more or less certainty, can be drawn from them may be summarised as follows.

Earinus was sent as a boy to Rome from Pergamum (Stat. Silv. 3,4,12 ff.; in vv. 81 f., the voyage of the tresses is said to go patrias ... ad oras). Statius has Venus finding him in the very temple of Aesculapius and bringing him thence to Rome, an instance of a truly Statian “quasi-aeliologic story”\(^2\); but certainly, Earinus had a specific relation to the god of medicine (see ii below).

Because of his beauty (Stat. Silv. 3,4,26 ff.), Earinus seems from the very beginning to have been destined for Domitian the emperor (Palatino famulus deberis amori, ibid. 38), and consequently he must have arrived in Rome after Domitian’s ascension to the throne, i.e. in late 81 at the earliest. On his arrival, he was castrated, no doubt to make his youthful beauty last as long as possible by eliminating the onset of puberty. According to Statius (ibid. 70), the castration was performed ‘without a wound’ (*haud ullo concussum vulnere corpus*), which Vollmer suggests means that he was made a *thlibias* (\(\Theta\lambda\varepsilon\iota\varepsilon\alpha\varsigma\), \(\Theta\lambda\alpha\delta\iota\alpha\varsigma\))\(^3\), i.e. was castrated without surgery as an infant\(^4\). If we

\(^3\) F. Vollmer, *P. Papinii Statii Silvarum libri* (Leipzig 1898), 426.
\(^4\) The *Thesaurus Graecae Linguae* (Paris 1831-1865) s.v. \(\Theta\lambda\alpha\delta\iota\alpha\varsigma\) 387 f. gives the following information on the way in which a *thlibias* was produced: “Pueri adhuc infantes in aquae calidae solium collocantur: deinde ubi eorum corpora eo solio fuerint relaxata, digitis testiculi comprimuntur, usquedum aboleantur et evanescent, ac dissoluti non amplius ad tactum sublabantur”. This is clearly an adaptation