VERGIL ON MALARIA

In *Aen.* 10.184 Vergil states that the Etruscan leader Astyr was followed to the war by three hundred men coming from Caere, Pyrgi and ‘intempestae . . . Graviscae’. The epithet ‘intempestae’, which is here applied in a metaphorical sense and generally rendered by commentators and translators with ‘unwholesome’ or ‘unhealthy’, not only is a telling description of this ancient Etruscan city but also has a bearing on an issue which commentators on Vergil apparently have failed to notice, viz. malaria.

Situated between the Marta and the Minio, on the swampy coast south of Cosae, Graviscae or the modern Porto Clementino was a port of the important Tarquinii lying north of it. Due to its unhealthy climate, here recalled by ‘intempestae’, Graviscae, however, remained throughout its history a small and unimportant city, though it was linked by a road to the *Via Aurelia*. Its notoriety for insalubrity is well attested by Livy’s account of a very unpleasant experience the Romans had there, as well as by other Roman writers.

Livy records that the Romans, probably to browbeat Tarquinii, founded a colony at Graviscae in 181 BC, an enterprise which very soon proved to be disastrous owing to the decimation of the new colonists by fevers. A contemporary of this abortive undertaking, the elder Cato, many years before Vergil, had already singled out its unhealthy climate by deriving Graviscae’s name from ‘gravis’ (‘heavy’, ‘offensive’, ‘unpleasant’) because, he maintains, the ground exhaled ‘gravem aerem’ (‘an unwholesome air’). Further, while praising the rest of Etruria for its salubrious climate, the younger Pliny calls its coastal part ‘gravis et pestilens’; and finally the poet Rutilius Namatianus informs us of a marshy smell pervading Graviscae’s ruins. In other words, Graviscae retained its reputation for insalubrity even as late as the fifth century AD.

On the basis of the information supplied by these writers and evidence advanced more recently, we may assume that Vergil here implies that Graviscae was infested with *malaria*, a disease whose chief symptoms, an enlarged spleen and periodic attacks of fever, were known to the ancients long before Vergil’s time. Moreover, its connection with swamps had already been observed by Hippocrates in the fifth century BC. Nevertheless, it is doubtful whether Vergil and, of course, the Romans at large, did know, as we now know, that malaria is caused by the *anopheles* mosquito. It is interesting, however, to compare in this regard a passage from Varro’s *Res rusticae*, which no doubt has a bearing on malaria. Elaborating on the location of a Roman farm, he observes through Scofra:

‘Advertendum etiam, siqua erunt loca palustria, et propter easdem causas, et quod crescent *animalia quaedam minuta, quae non possunt oculi consequi*, et per aera intus in corpus per os ac nares pervenient atque efficiunt difficiles morbos.’

From Varro’s statement it is evident that the Romans not only associated certain diseases with swampy areas but also attributed these diseases to organisms which
they considered too small to be visible. But they also argued that since diseases were caused by marshland they were spread by unseen creatures bred by the ground. On the other hand, it does not appear that Varro associates disease with any specific insect because he explicitly states that the creatures spreading disease cannot be seen ('quae non possunt oculi consequi'). Admittedly, however, he arrives close to guessing the cause, as Bertha Tilly aptly observes.

Turning now from Varro to Vergil, it is indeed noticeable that apart from hinting at Graviscae as being infested with malaria, Vergil also touches, be it only by implication, upon an issue the solution of which, due to lack of sufficient evidence, is still a complete mystery to modern scholars. It concerns the controversial question as to 'at what point in time malaria invaded Italy in general and this coastal area (i.e. of Etruria) in particular, and whether this may have accelerated the early decline of some of the Etruscan cities', as Scullard puts it.

It is not my intention, however, here to elaborate on this issue, except to point out that historians have put forward two views in this regard. While some, amongst others the supporters of the Lydian origin of the Etruscans, argue that it was brought to Etruria by the invaders from Lydia or that it was already there on their arrival, others believe that malaria first came to Italy with Hannibal's troops from North Africa. Until more solid evidence on this topic has been put forward, especially in the field of medical biology, neither side can be proved either right or wrong.

In conclusion, it is interesting to note that the term *malaria*, which is derived from the Italian *mal' aria*, 'bad air', and has been in use in medical circles only since the 19th century, bears witness to the persistent Roman belief that the disease is due to an unwholesome atmosphere caused by the exhalations of marshes.

**NOTES**


7. *De reditu* 1,282.

10. Rust. 1,12,2. The italics are mine.
13. See Kind, RE XIVA, 845 s. v. Malaria; Scullard 61f. and 293 n. 46; Heurgon 102.

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A NOTE ON THE TRANSLATION OF AEN. 10,655

Line 655 from the tenth Book of the Aeneid reads: ‘qua rex Clusinis adventus Osinius oris’. The reference is, of course, to a ship (‘ratis’, 653) in which king Osinius is said to have sailed to the war, and upon which (in the scene under discussion) Aeneas’ apparition, hotly pursued by Turnus, rushes into hiding. Apart from the puzzling question as to the identity of Osinius, which will not be considered here, this line, and more specifically the phrase ‘Ciusinis . . . oris’, appears to present one of the numerous pitfalls for which a modern commentator or translator of Vergil always has to watch out. Perhaps this explains why commentators have almost unanimously passed it over in silence.

Translators however, unlike commentators, are not at such liberty to assume a non-committal attitude in matters like this. And so we notice that English translators, from the previous century onwards, have rendered ‘Ciusinis . . . oris’ almost invariably with either ‘from Clusium’s coast(s) / from the coast(s) of Clusium’, or ‘from the shores of Clusium / from Clusium’s shore’. For example, C.R. Kennedy and H.R. Fairclough have translated it respectively with ‘from Clusium’s coast’ and ‘from the coast of Clusium’; J. Conington and C.J. Billson with ‘from Clusium’s shore’; C. Day Lewis and K. Guinagh with ‘from the shores of Clusium’; and finally W.F. Jackson Knight with ‘from the borders of Clusium’.

In order to decide whether the above-mentioned versions are acceptable a closer look should be had at the meaning ‘ora’ bears in the 62 passages in which it appears in the Vergilian corpus. However, before elaborating on the issue, attention should be drawn to two more translations of the Aeneid which have recently appeared, most happily both in Afrikaans, these being the prose version by J.T. Benade and the verse translation by N.A. Blanckenberg, corrected by Suretha Bruwer, who also wrote an introduction to it.

We shall first consider their versions of ‘Clusinis . . . oris’: while the former has translated it with ‘van die strande van Clusium’, the latter has rendered it by ‘van Clusiumstrand’. It is immediately evident that these translators have misconceived the meaning of ‘ora’ in this passage, obviously equating it with ‘litus’. Admittedly ‘litus’ is on occasion used in a sense which ‘ora’ may also have, but for an equation of ‘ora’ with ‘litus’ there is, as far as I can establish, neither ancient authority nor lexicographical evidence. The reason for this dissimilarity between
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