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Sown Men and Rome's Civil Wars

Rethinking the End of Melinno's Hymn to Rome

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Abstract

Melinno's so-called *Hymn to Rome* was composed sometime between the third century BCE and the third century CE. Nearly all scholars judge the poem to be a relatively straightforward panegyric of Rome's power. The final stanza compares the Romans to the Sown Men. This article argues that the appearance of Theban or Colchian Spartoi could have evoked a more complex response from many probable readers of Melinno's poem in antiquity, especially those who were well versed in Latin literature and Rome's harrowing histories of civil war. It proposes that the closing comparison underscores the Romans' fatal flaw: their inborn compulsion to engage in internecine strife. By concluding the hymn with a destabilizing reference, Melinno's linking of Rome and Thebes points to a more nuanced evaluation of Roman power than scholars have yet to recognize.

Keywords

Melinno – Rome – Thebes – Sown Men – civil war – reception – Vergil

Preserved by Stobaeus (3.7.12) among works *περὶ ἀνδρείας* ('on valor'), Melinno's so-called *Hymn to Rome* (εἰς ῥώμην) is a perplexing poem. Consisting of five Sapphic stanzas, the Greek work addresses Rome the city, the divine personification, the etymological allegory for strength, and the abstract military

empire.¹ Composed at some point between the third century BCE and the third century CE, the current scholarly consensus is marginally in favor of an imperial date for the work, perhaps Hadrianic, although there is little in the poem's use of diction, dialect, structure, or content (e.g. lack of reference to the emperor) to serve as definitive evidence.² The Sapphic stanza appears nowhere else in extant Hellenistic and imperial Greek poetic texts, and the poem's somewhat disjointed flow is a specific result of an end-stopped variety, a style that may first appear as late as Statius' *Silvae*. In contrast to the obscure date of composition, the poem's attribution to a female poet is widely accepted by scholars. This factor more than any other has attracted renewed attention from those working on a largely male poetic corpus.³ In this article, I offer little by way of explicit comment on these central matters, but the implications of my reading may reshape interpretation of the entire work. I argue that the poem's closing reference to the Spartoi, the Sown Men, does more than highlight the martial pedigree of the Romans. It activates Rome's history of internecine conflict, something commentators have yet to consider fully. The dating of the poem complicates any reading grounded in reception studies: one must concede that in the second century BCE, for instance, the ambivalent themes I highlight might not have been quite as readily accessible, at least not to the same degree found during the empire.⁴ However, throughout most of the cen-

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- 1 For Roma the divinity, see Mellor 1975, especially 120-124. The poem's conflation of Rome/ῥώμη is widely acknowledged. Earlier scholars considered Stobaeus' inclusion of the poem a sign of his misunderstanding of the work's addressee. Cf. Oldfather 1931, 51; Lisi 1933, 221; Mellor 1975, 120. For reconsideration, Aleknienė 2006. Erskine 1995, 368: "Maurice Bowra is quite blunt about it: Stobaeus 'blunders'. But is it quite such a blunder?" He continues (370): "in the second and first centuries BC and even in the early Empire it must have seemed quite different. Here was this new power, a city actually called Strength, taking over more and more of the Greek world".
 - 2 A first or second century CE date is accepted by Lloyd-Jones and Parsons 1983 (*Supplementum Hellenisticum* 541) and in recent work, including e.g. Augoustakis 2010, 246-248. Hornblower 2018, 144 n. 31, 187 proposes a Hadrianic date. Oldfather 1931 and Bowra 1957 both argue for Hellenistic dates (Bowra's cavalier approach to dating can be found at 1957, 28). See also Mellor 1975, 121; Erskine 1995, 368. Earlier scholarship did occasionally place the work between Horace and Statius based on metrical and historical criteria (Birt 1887, xii, which is supported by additional metrical points in Usener 1900, 290). Studies of the poem that are not discussed below but remain relevant include Schubart 1948; Gauger 1984; Raimondi 1995-1998.
 - 3 For gender and the poem, see Plant 2004, 99-100; Augoustakis 2010, 246-248; Joyce 2014-2015, 12-13 (who reads the poem as a positive Greek vision of Rome that displays a "fusion of the martial and the maternal"). For a taste of what used to pass for assessment, cf. Lisi 1933, 223 ("una tempra virile che assai male si addice al carattere di una donna").
 - 4 Even if Melinno wrote in the second century BCE, attested Roman dramas of the Republic and several extant fragments indicate familiarity with the Theban cycle. Earlier Greek

turies that Melinno's hymn could have circulated, Thebes' seminal foundation and its subsequent wars were synonymous at Rome with civil war. That fact deserves consideration.

Before turning to the final lines, I begin with a summary of the poem. In the first stanza, Melinno calls out to Roma as Ares' daughter, naming her a warrior goddess (ἄνασσα, 2), an Amazonian figure.⁵ Her Olympus is on earth, an eternal and invincible realm.⁶ This vision of cosmos and imperium provides some of the rationale for dating the work no earlier than the era of the Pyrrhic War and almost certainty after Ennius' *Annales*.⁷ The second stanza singles out Roma (σοὶ μόνῃ, 5), now called πρέσβιστα, as Fate's (Μοῖρα) vehicle for the glory of continuous rule, sovereignty over all (κῦδος ἀρρήκτω βασιλῆιον ἀρχᾶς, 6). The third stanza sees Roma yoking earth and sea together, metaphorically steering the cities of the world. This is an undeniably imperial vision of Rome's control of the Mediterranean.⁸ The fourth stanza pivots like a Pindaric ode, with the speaker sliding into a universal and moralizing tone. Time (ὁ μέγιστος αἰών, 13) changes and overcomes all, but Rome alone stands firm in the face of this eternal force (once again, σοὶ μόνῃ at line 15).

Melinno turns in the fifth and final stanza to the reason for Rome's exceptional status: her manpower.

ἦ γὰρ ἐκ πάντων σὺ μόνῃ κρατίστους
 ἄνδρας αἰχματὰς μεγάλους λοχεύεις,
 εὔσταχυν Δάματρος ὅπως ἀνεῖσα
 καρπὸν τ' ἀπ' ἀνδρῶν.⁹

literature also shores up my proposals (see discussion below). There is no real evidence that the poem was composed "for use within the context of the celebration of the cult of Roma" (Erskine 1995, 377 with Bowra 1957, 22).

5 Text is Lloyd-Jones and Parsons 1983. Translations of Melinno's hymn are by the author.

6 The grounding of Olympus somewhere between abstraction and Roman earthly reality is something new, perhaps a point of potential ambivalence worthy of reconsideration in light of this article's arguments. On that score, I also note the yoking later in the poem and the problematic resonance of the imagery of domination when viewed through the eyes of the dominated. So too, a Rome that is not delimited by time/eternity (ὁ μέγιστος αἰών, 13) is perhaps an overwhelming, nearly sublime imperial entity for Melinno's readers.

7 For the potential links between Ennius, Lykophron, Melinno, and other authors grappling with the rise of Rome in the republic, see McNelis 2018, 4-5.

8 Oldfather 1931, 522.45-57 and Bowra 1957 note the expression's similarity to the famous collocation *terra marique*. Erskine 1995, 373 discusses the phrase's parallel in Lykophron (noted already by Birt 1887, xii).

9 *SH* 541.17-20.

For only you bring forth the strongest warriors of all, great spearmen, making them spring up like the wheat-rich crop of Demeter, a crop of warriors.

Textual matters demand attention before interpretation. While the transmitted *καρπὸν ἀπ' ἀνδρῶν* in line 20 is seemingly transparent in meaning, the proposal that it is an intrusive explanatory gloss cannot be discounted. Many scholars have found it “very difficult”, especially “because it yields a feeble sense”.¹⁰ Bergk's *ἀπ' ἀγρῶν* provides superficial clarity; Bücheler's *ἄρουρα* also satisfies; *ἐν ὄπλοις*, offered recently by Gutzwiller with reference to Lollius Bassus 6.5 *GP* (= *AP* 9.236), is perfect for shaping a pointed reference to the Sown Men. Giangrande has defended *καρπὸν ἀπ' ἀνδρῶν*, comparing the expression to *A. Th.* 412-413, (*σπαρτῶν ... ἀπ' ἀνδρῶν ... ῥίζωμι' ἀνείτται*), an unprovable but plausible line of intertextual reasoning in support of his reading of Melinno as “*elegante e dottissima*”.¹¹

Despite uncertainty concerning the text, the reference to the Sown Men in the final stanza remains a stable feature in all current proposals. Interpretation of the reference is equally set, having fixed on one aspect of the comparison's force. Rome's men, like the Spartoi, are presented as great warriors sprung from fertile soil. Nearly all scholars see the comparison to the Sown Men as a positive gesture.¹² Rome's violent presence in the poem is thus explicable: “However strong Rome may be it is not, here at least [in Melinno], menacingly

10 Bowra 1957, 21 n. 5. One of the anonymous readers of this article judiciously supports the need for emendation, particularly because, in contrast to its use in the *Septem*, the preposition is otiose in this instance.

11 For links between Melinno's *εὐστάχυν* and the use of words with *σταχ-* roots for the Spartoi in Greek poetry, Giangrande 1991, 243-244 adduces *AP* 6.36.3, 7.589.6, and 7.275.8, as well as *Epigr.* 266.2 in Kaibel 1878 (*τέκνων καλλιγόνους σταχύας*). Other passages he discusses (although he is not unique in this regard) include *E. Ba.* 263-265, where Cadmus is described as the one who sowed the earth-born crop (*τὸν σπεύραντα γηγενῆ στάχυν*). See also Tiresias' account at *E. Ph.* 930-959, where he speaks to Kreon as the ‘sole survivor of the sown race’ (*λοιπὸς εἶ σπαρτῶν γένους*, 942) and of the Theban land as the place ‘that once to us sent up a golden-helmeted crop of Sown Men’ (*ἢ ποθ' ἡμῖν χρυσοπήληκα στάχυν | σπαρτῶν ἀνήκεν*, 939-940). We can also consider Amphitryon's opening words at *E. HF* 1-25, where he refers to Thebes as the place (4-5) *ἔνθ' ὁ γηγενῆς | σπαρτῶν στάχυν ἔβλασταν* (‘where an earth-born crop of Sown Men grew’). Cf. *A.R.* 3.1354-1358, esp. *ἀνασταχύεσκον* at 1354. For *γῆς καρπὸν ἀνήσειν* used of Demeter after Persephone's abduction, see *h.Cer.* 332.

12 The exception is Barchiesi 2001 (English translation of Barchiesi 1997), which is discussed below. He sees the allusive framework of the hymn as evocative of ambivalent moments of violence in the Theban and Argonautic myths but stops short of considering readers of the hymn with knowledge of Latin texts or Rome's histories of civil war.

aggressive. That would be the view of an enemy, who, although no doubt perceiving Rome's name as ominous, would have been reluctant to voice such fears".¹³ The durability of this type of assessment surprises, especially because it is found in arguments that date Melinno's poem beyond Augustus and even as late as Hadrian. After all, it is no secret that Thebes in particular is widely used in Latin literature to recall harrowing days in Rome's past.

Various works composed after the near century of civil conflict that precipitated the emergence of the principate treat Thebes as a symbol of civil war capable of reflecting upon local concerns. After 69 CE, this specific aspect of Thebes' symbolic power only continued to grow. Although many pages could be devoted to elucidating and unpacking key examples, I note here only a few rather striking engagements. Cicero, the earliest extant Roman author to articulate explicitly "the Theban brothers as a match for warring Romans", uses Euripides' *Phoenissae* (see below) to compare Caesar to Eteocles (*Att.* 7.11.1; *Ph.* 524-525). Rebggiani sums up the comparison's wider valence: "The notion of citizens as brothers, and therefore of civil war as fraternal war, makes it easy to translate the Theban fratricide to Roman reflections of civil war".¹⁴ And translate it does: subtly and sporadically in the *Aeneid* (cf. e.g. *A.* 7.335, 'unanimous brothers' with Hardie 1990, 230); and to a greater extent throughout Ovid's Roman Thebes in *Metamorphoses* 3-4, wherein Cadmus founds his new city only to watch its citizens' initial act become fratricidal slaughter (*ciuilibus ... bellis*, 3.117; *terrigenis ... fratribus*, 3.118; *suoque | Marte cadunt subiti per mutua uulnera fratres*, 3.122-123). Thebes' origins form a story of violence and foundation akin to Rome's own Romulus and Remus as refashioned by Augustan authors. Yet it is in Lucan's Neronian epic on Rome's civil war—not to mention the contemporary Theban tragedies of Seneca¹⁵—that the analogy's troubling associations become unavoidable for subsequent readers. Consider only the

13 Erskine 1995, 374. He engages with some complications at 1995, 375 and 379. Bowra 1957, 27 considers only one level of meaning: "There is an implicit note of praise in the suggestion that the Romans are like the Σπαρτοί". Cf. Raylor 1991, 194-195; Torres Guerra 2003, 770. In a reading of the Ara Pacis relief panels, Spaeth 1994, 86 (reprinted at 1996, 144-145) links the monument to Melinno's hymn. For her, the hymn offers a positive vision of Roman peace. She does not consider the Theban aspects of the poem's reference.

14 Rebggiani 2018, 32-33 (also the source of my quotation in the previous sentence). For discussion of this passage and other Ciceronian uses of Thebes to critique Caesar and Pompey, see also Beneker 2011, 77-82. Earlier Roman tragedies may have already offered Thebes as a lens for local civil strife, although the tradition is largely lost. My discussion of Roman literary engagement with Thebes is especially indebted to, among others, Hardie 1990; Braund 2006; Keith 2011; Criado 2015; Rebggiani 2018.

15 See Gervais 2017 on *Theb.* 2.133 for *proelia fratrem* and its application to the Theban Spartoi at Seneca *Oed.* 750. Cf. Sen. *Phoen.* 354-355, where Oedipus declares a desire

bonfire at the *Feriae Latinae* in Book 1 of the epic that presages the coming war between Caesar and Pompey, the great *nefas* and *crimen* (Luc. 1.549-552):¹⁶

Vestali raptus ab ara
ignis, et ostendens confectas flamma Latinas
scinditur in partes gemoque cacumine surgit
Thebanos imitata rogos.

The fire was snatched from the altar of Vesta, and the flame that indicates the completion of the Latin Festival splits into two parts and rises up with a twin tip, imitating the Theban pyres [i.e. those for Polyneices and Eteocles].

There is no missing the comparison to Thebes in these lines.

For scholars who date Melinno to the Hadrianic period, squarely after Statius, the *Thebaid* also sits alongside Lucan's epic as a major interpretive challenge to subsequent readers of the hymn. Is Statius' poem a meditation on Rome's histories of civil violence, especially the most recent outbreak in 68-69 CE, or a work less interested in socio-political commentary through its mythological narrative? A definitive answer may always elude us, but the potential to read Statius as a continuator of Ovidian, Senecan, and Lucanian visions of a problematic Rome/Thebes has been well established in previous studies¹⁷ and is attested for his contemporaries.¹⁸ A similar, though ultimately false binary

for fratricidal civil war (*non satis est adhuc | ciuile bellum: frater in fratrem ruat*). Criado 2015, 139.

- 16 Text of Lucan is Housman 1927. Translation by the author. One must also look to 4.549-551, a scene of suicide that prompts the poet to compare it explicitly with the Spartoi's impious internecine slaughter (with reference to Theban and Colchian dimensions). See Boyle 2011, 285 for the Spartoi in Lucan and Theban fratricide in Seneca's *Oedipus*. For more, Rebeggiani 2018, 35.
- 17 McNelis 2007. See also McGuire 1997; the contributions by Ahl, Marinis, Augoustakis, and Roche, with references, in Dominik, Newlands, and Gervais 2015.
- 18 Civil war appears throughout Valerius Flaccus' *Argonautica*. It is used as a point of comparison in a simile (6.402-409) that helps readers visualize on Roman terms conflict set in the heroic past (see McNelis 2007, 3). A powerful example occurs when Medea causes the Sown Men to perceive each other as Jason and to engage in 'civil war' at 7.638 (*miseros agit in sua proelia fratres*). For this line and its civil dimensions (citing Ov. *Met.* 3.115-123 and Luc. 4.549-556), see Davis 2020, 255-263; Bernstein 2014, 165-166, where he also treats the recurrent motif of civil conflict from Iolcus to Lemnos and Colchis. This passage from Book 7 and others are also discussed in Keith 2018, included in Ginsberg and Krasne 2018, a collection with several relevant chapters (especially contributions by Penwill, Stover, Landrey, and Krasne).

plagues understanding of Melinno's poem. The work clearly trades in seemingly unambiguous praise and employs the symbolic economy of distant myth. One might ask: how polyvalent can it be? Is it shot through with misdirection and multiple meaning, defined by diffusion and what Ahl famously discussed under the rubric of figured speech?¹⁹ The answer, I submit, is yes.

At this point, some readers of the present article may object that Latin poems and their interpretation have little bearing on our understanding of Melinno. Essentially every scholar to date has accepted that there is no visible Latin poetic influence on the hymn, a conclusion that may very well be true.²⁰ But what does this assessment prove? Policing interpretation cannot keep the poem's readers, those likely found over centuries of reception during the Roman empire, within a hermetic, solely Hellenic space.²¹ This is especially so since bilingualism was not uncommon among the empire's elite, and works from throughout the period carved out for Melinno's reception suggest authorial awareness of multiple reading publics.²² As Dickey summarizes, "a substantial number of Greek speakers evidently made some effort to read Latin literature, and at least a few of these progressed to an advanced level."²³ Ferreting out Greek readers of Latin works from the textual record confirms her claims: we could adduce Polybius' editorializing of his translation into Greek of early Latin inscriptions (3.22.3); Plu. *Dem.* 2, where he notes that he

19 Ahl 1984. Cf. Bartsch 1994.

20 Carey 2016: "Despite some similarities in images and ideas, there is no reason to suppose that she was influenced by Latin poetry". Cf. Bowra 1957, 27.

21 Melinno's poem, like Aelius Aristides' famous panegyric, explicitly 'lauds' the conqueror, but she also harkens back to Sapphic verse through the poem's formal features and thereby to a deep Hellenic cultural authority that predates Roman discourses. As Hutton 2008, 622 puts it, "Recent scholarship has emphasized the problematic nature of pitting 'Greek' against 'Roman' in this period [i.e. the Second Sophistic]". For the nuances and problems of the category 'Roman' in the second century CE, see the excellent treatment in Lavan 2020. For (Greek) culture, identity, and the Roman world, Woolf 1994; Whitmarsh 2001. For Greek literature in the high empire and a different view of "Kollaboration oder Opposition", see now Ursin 2019 with Kuin 2020. For Dionysius and Augustan Rome, see Hunter and de Jonge 2019, 15-16. For Dionysius' subtle critique of a culturally Greek Rome in danger of 'barbarization', see Peirano 2010, which parallels my reading in some ways. Spawforth 2012 treats Roman constructions of Greekness in the empire and 'Hellenization' as 'Romanization', a complicated dynamic.

22 Roman bi- and multilingualism begins at the beginnings. Greek speakers had been involved with the production and reading of Latin literature since the third century BCE (see now Feeney 2016). For bi- and multilingualism, see Adams, Janse, and Swain 2002; Adams 2003; Rochette 2010; Mullen and James 2012.

23 Dickey 2015, 43. More specifically, Dickey notes that "Latin literary texts with Greek translations, glosses, or annotations were clearly read by Greek speakers". See 2015, 43 n. 17 for the papyrological evidence.

learned Latin and now appreciates stylistics in the language; or the epics of Nonnus of Panopolis and Quintus of Smyrna, which several scholars believe show an awareness of Latin epic poetry, especially Vergil and Ovid.²⁴ Despite these facts, even if we concede the priority of a model of reading completely free from Latin literary influence, a wholly positive view of Melinno's concluding stanza is far from unassailable. Let's dwell on this for a moment before returning to a 'Latin' perspective.

Thebes already carried ambivalent symbolic weight on the Athenian stage in the fifth century, where it and its internecine feuds, as Zeitlin famously put it, served as "the obverse side of Athens", as the "other' city always under siege, a counterpoint to Troy, the city always sacked", in Barker and Christensen's words.²⁵ Consider how the Sown Men help anchor Thebes' guilty past at *E. Ph.* 670-675, lines from the choral song that follows on the heels of Polyneices' expulsion by Eteocles and his firm declaration that civil war is on the way (cf. ἐρρέτω πρόπας δόμος, 624):

ἔνθεν ἐξανήκε γὰ
 πάνοπλον ὄψιν ὑπὲρ ἄκρων ὄρων χθονός·
 σιδαρόφρων δέ νιν φόνος
 φίλα ξυνήψε γὰ πάλιν.
 αἵματος δ' ἔδευσε γαῖαν,
 ἅ νιν εὐάλιοισι
 δεῖξεν αἰθέρος πνοαῖς.²⁶

Then earth sent up armed terror over its surface.
 Iron-hearted slaughter sent them back again,
 and their blood bedewed the land which had briefly showed them
 to the shining winds of heaven.

24 For Nonnus and Latin poetry, see Miguélez-Cavero 2008, 23. Cameron 2004, 258 recants his earlier view that Quintus read Vergil and Nonnus Ovid (following Knox 1988's negative assessment). For Quintus and Vergil, see Gärtner 2005 (ambivalent but somewhat in favor of direct influence) with Maciver 2009; Maciver 2012, 191-192; Scheijnen 2018, 262-263. Jolowicz 2018 and 2021 explore Rome and Latin poetry in the Greek novel. For a learned reading of Ovid and Nonnus that sidesteps the issue of direct influence, see Paschalis 2014.

25 Zeitlin 1990, 144. Barker and Christensen 2019 (<https://chs.harvard.edu/chapter/introduction-why-thebes/>). See also Zeitlin 1993; Berman 2015.

26 *E. Ph.* 670-675. Text is Kovacs 2002. Translation is Wyckoff [1959] 2013.

As Lamari notes in a recent interpretation of the lines, “[t]he violent atmosphere of the antistrophe, dominated by the killing of the dragon and the bloody self-destruction of the Spartoi, brings into focus the threatening presence of Ares”.²⁷ Indeed, the ode zeroes in on Ares, the dragon (cf. ἔνθα φόνιος ἦν δράκων | Ἄρεος, 657-658), the abundance of the Theban soil, and even mentions Demeter (683-697). Euripides’ chorus evokes these figures and concepts in the aftermath of the outbreak of hostilities between the Theban brothers. All figure prominently in Melinno’s hymn, especially in the concluding stanza. If, by means of Theban analogy, Melinno’s Romans conclude her poem starkly characterized as descendants of the threatening and violent Ares, a people born from the earth and destined to be defined by bloody self/civil-destruction, there is, I submit, good reason for readers to pause and reflect on where the poem has left them. Perhaps there are further voices in the final lines. Perhaps a reader is shown a power (Rome) worthy of encomium—a personification (Roma) deserving of kletic address and adoration. But Melinno’s Rome also comes with an insatiable compulsion to self-slaughter.

Long before Euripides, Greek epic had internalized the internecine dimensions of Theban plotlines. In the archaic *Thebais*, at least according to what the meager fragmentary remains indicate, strife and civil conflict are what Thebes was all about. In lines 9-10 of F 2, Oedipus curses his sons to lack friendship in the distribution of their inheritance and to be always at war with each other (ἀμφοτέροισι δ’ αἰεὶ πόλεμοί τε μάχαι τε).²⁸ In F 3, his wish is that each son be sent to Hades by the blows of his brother (χερσὶν ὑπ’ ἀλλήλων), a legacy that ultimately derives from the Spartoi. With reference to Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex*, Detienne frames the matter in terms of impurity and autochthony:²⁹

The Theban evil is ineradicable. The race of the Spartoi, doubly impure autochthons, appears like a “splendid disgrace” (*oneidos*), a superb insult, says the chorus of *Oedipus Rex*, made by Cadmus to the land of Thebes. Here is, therefore, a beautiful original impurity that is transmitted across

27 Lamari 2010, 73.

28 Text of the *Thebais* is West 2003.

29 Detienne 2009. See <https://chs.harvard.edu/CHS/article/display/3931.part-i-murderous-identity-2-being-born-impure-in-the-city-of-cadmus-and-oedipus>. Cf. Criado 2015, esp. 157-158 n. 47 for a survey of views in support of the Spartoi as denotative “of a genetic predisposition to incest, fratricidal confrontation and civil war”. I follow that interpretation, although Criado and others hold reasonable reservations. With the Spartoi, we find the seeds of discontent; “*Semina* are of course at the heart of the Theban Spartoi myth” (Schiesaro 2020, 195 n. 5.).

Cadmus' entire lineage, polluting Cadmus himself, Laius, Oedipus, Oedipus' children, and the descendants of Creon.

Regardless of where a poem makes its incision into the Theban past, the drive to violence against the self, which is to say the drive to civil war, becomes at that moment inescapable. Melinno's Romans, presented as descendants of Ares and akin, if not kin, to the Spartoi, must harbor within themselves this "beautiful original impurity".

Alongside the use of Thebes, the formal features of Melinno's poem contribute to its complexity and potential ambivalence. The very act of writing in a Sapphic mode and using Greek mythological comparison points to the persistence of Hellenic cultural forms, a cultivation of the past that activates a discourse at once constitutive and destabilizing. It is the result of creative *mimēsis*. For Whitmarsh, Greeks of the Roman empire who wrote in established forms and genres were engaged in the act of becoming Greek by "constructing one's own self-representation through and against the canonical past".³⁰ By using the Sapphic and, say, the Pindaric or the Alcaic, and by perpetuating the power of Theban myth to characterize the present, Melinno's hymn, to appropriate Whitmarsh's summation for the literature of the imperial Greek world, "does not simply reflect a set of views on Rome; rather, it engages dynamically with inherited images, tropes, and identities, actively constructing new ways of looking at the world".³¹ It can accordingly be considered a work that charts a course between direct praise of Rome, a retreat into the self-actualizing move of mimetic, Hellenic cultural production, and, in the final lines, a form of figured resistance realized through an image that remains hard to shake despite the preceding stanzas. Melinno's vacillation between these modes of lyric engagement enacts a hybrid poetics that includes, indeed generates, the various positions that might be taken in response to a Greek song of Roman imperial supremacy.³² In addition, if the Sapphic form itself had truly fallen out of popular use in Greek literature by Melinno's date of composition, as the evidence suggests, but had become a core part of the Latin poetic landscape after its prominent use by Catullus, Horace, and later Statius, we might wonder if her reappropriation of the form is part of a multilayered cultural statement. Yes, the song still sings Rome, but it does so in a Greek poetic now, once again, actively continuing a Hellenic literary legacy.

30 Whitmarsh 2001, 26-27.

31 Whitmarsh 2001, 32. Cf. p. 2: "Literature is an ever incomplete, ever unstable process of self-making".

32 The more recent words by Whitmarsh 2013, 62 on discursive engagement are helpful here.

Of Greek poems already connected to Melinno's hymn by scholars, those of Apollonius of Rhodes and Pindar highlight unique challenges to interpretation. Each offers an intertextual presence that pulls the reader in a different direction. Pindar is an active model for Melinno, especially in terms of epideixis and panegyric. His occasional use of the Spartoi cautions that not all Greek works take a negative view of Thebes' Sown Men. Note especially *P.* 9.82 and *I.* 1.30, 7.10.³³ Yet these references consist of brief genealogical notices that are notably set within large and intricate structures of praise. They offer little more than momentary civic framing in works addressed to contemporary Theban victors (i.e. the songs' patrons). Thebes' origins are in these instances not promoted as the point. At the start of Pindar's first hymn (see *Hymn.* 1, frs. 29-35c), a song linked to Thebes and Zeus, the speaker lists Cadmus and the holy race of the Spartoi in a priamel (ἢ Κάδμῳ ἢ Σπαρτῶν ἱερὸν γένος ἀνδρῶν): they are fodder for *recusatio*. Even within this positive take on Theban prehistory, scholars remain unsure how Pindar would have dealt with Thebes' collective guilt concerning the "awkward fact" that they "owed their origins to acts of blood guilt, to the slaying of the dragon, and the fraternal strife of the *Spartoi*".³⁴ The hymn may elevate Thebes by tying it to Zeus' cosmic rule, but Theban origins, especially the Spartoi, remain disruptive.

Pindaric poetry admittedly informs some panegyric dimensions of Melinno's work. Dissonance prevails, however, after considering the poem's clear intertextual links to Apollonius' *Argonautica*, specifically to Jason's confrontation with the Spartoi of Colchis. While the Colchian Sown Men are different from those found in Thebes, they were born from the teeth of the same dragon. Both are introduced to recall internecine strife. Roman authors often conflate the two and use them interchangeably.³⁵ At A.R. 3.1326, Jason has yoked the bulls and initiates the plowing and sowing. The din of the process is terrible. The clods of earth are called βῶλακες ... ἀνδραχθῆες, which Hunter renders "fragments of earth as big as a man could carry", a phrase Gerber tellingly

33 Cf. Schachter 2016, 31-34. Criado 2015 surveys the Archaic and Attic evidence and finds fewer reasons to read the Spartoi in Pindar and tragedy as symbols of civil war and fratricide. Some of the examples she works around are addressed above, which I find more suggestive of an occasionally negative valence linked to Theban origins.

34 Hardie 2000, 21.

35 Vergil may have innovated in this regard, but Ovid is considered pivotal for charging these myths with civil war undertones at Rome (cf. Criado 2015, 146-147 and Criado 2018). Lucan continues to employ and conflate them. Statius utilizes imagery and intertextual scenes built on both Spartoi in his Thebes *qua* Rome (McNelis 2007). With reference to Ovid and Valerius Flaccus, Keith 2014, 353 n. 2 notes that the "conflation of the two is standard". She cites Perutelli 1997 *ad loc.*; cf. now discussion in Davis 2020.

translates “heavy/pregnant with men”.³⁶ At A.R. 3.1354, the Spartoi burst forth in a violent and terrifying fashion. Jason’s calm, confident response is not an indication of the opposite, since he is now firmly reliant on Medea’s magical aid. Across the entire field (κατὰ πάσαν ... ἄρουραν) the earthborn Spartoi (γγγενέες) ‘crop up’ (ἀνασταχύεσκον), the same key word found in Melinno’s last stanza.³⁷ Their weaponry appears first, a sign of the inborn drive to violence: the *temenos* of man-destroying Ares bristles (φρίξεν ... Ἄρης τέμενος φθισιμβρότου) with ‘strong shields, double-edged spears, and shining helmets’ (στιβαροῖς σακέεσσιν | δούρασί τ’ ἀμφιγύοις κορύθεσσί τε λαμπομένησιν, 1355-1356). The gleam of the weaponry, Gigantic in its thrust (recall γγγενέες), heads toward Olympus; perhaps a synonym for ‘skyward’, there may also be a hint of hubristic theomachy in the choice (νειόθεν Οὐλυμπόν δε, 1358). After Jason tosses in the stone, as he was instructed, the Spartoi attack each other and then turn on their mother (earth) (1374-1375): οἱ δ’ ὡς τε θοοὶ κύνες ἀμφιθορόντες | ἀλλήλους βρυχηδὸν ἐδήϊον (‘the earthborn men rushed like fierce dogs around it and with a clamor went about killing one another’).

In a nuanced discussion, Barchiesi has linked this troubling scene at the close of Book 3 to Melinno’s poem. He suggests that, while Melinno’s work could be considered another voice in the imperial Greek chorus of Roman praise, it nonetheless remains

a ‘Greek’ voice. It is possible that the allusion [to Apollonius] would lead its Greek audience into problematic reflections, an audience with a collective memory readier than the Romans’ to recall Jason, and Cadmus himself for that matter. After all, Jason and Cadmus, both archetypal Greek heroes, had been paralysed and horrified by the spectacle of a ploughed field bringing forth armed soldiers rather than grain. These menacing fruits of the earth had then engaged in fratricidal warfare. The fertile harvest of Demeter balances the initial image of a city sacred to Ares, whose name is the Greek word for ‘Force’. Melinno has combined in a single image the ideas of peaceful fertility and inexhaustible violence.³⁸

36 Hunter 1989, 246, also my source for Gerber 1975-1977, 177-179. Text is Race 2009.

37 It is even possible that the diction here constitutes an intertext with Eumelus’ archaic *Corinthiaca*. Cf. Σ A.R. 3.1354-1356a: οὗτος καὶ οἱ ἐξῆς στίχοι εἰλημμένοι εἰσι παρ’ Εὐμήλου, παρ’ ᾧ φησι Μήδεια πρὸς Ἴδμονα.

38 Barchiesi 2001, 149.

Simply put, we do not *need* Latin poetry to show how a reader could find the hymn's final lines disquieting.³⁹

It is necessary, however, to widen our understanding of Melinno's audience if we hope to sketch the contours of the hymn's potential at the point of reception. To appreciate readers of Melinno who were steeped in Latin literary depictions of Rome/Thebes—an audience not yet taken into account by scholarship—interpretation must wade deeper into the “problematic reflections” this depiction of “inexhaustible violence” can evoke, to employ Barchiesi's words. The sublime shock and awe of Rome/Thebes' regenerative martial force has been viewed through Greek eyes, but Romans or (those identifying as) Greeks attuned to Latin literature could see even more in this final image of power marred by civil war. Apollonius' Colchian Spartoi offer Melinno's Theban imagery an alarming undercurrent, as we have just noted, but these very lines have their own reception in Latin literature. Most influentially, they had already been reworked by Vergil in the *Aeneid*. Note first that the *Georgics*' so-called *Laudes Italiae* (see G. 2.140-142) claim that Italy lacks soil sown by the teeth of a dragon (*immanis dentibus hydri*) and soldiers that bristle with spears as they crop up from the earth (*densisque uirum seges horruit hastis*). These boasts appear misleading, especially given how inconsistent many points of praise are in the *Georgics* and how common similar depictions of Roman soldiers are in Latin texts (cf. Ennius *Ann.* 384 Skutsch). In a striking passage of *Odes* 4.4, Horace's Hannibal ‘corrects’ the claims about Italy in *Georgics* 2, offering a critical Carthaginian vision of Rome that underlines the one already intimated by the pessimistic strands of Vergil's poem.⁴⁰ Hannibal actually depicts Rome itself as a regenerative *monstrum* that surpasses the hydra and the sown men of Colchis and Thebes (C. 4.4. 61-64). For a reader familiar with this poem, Melinno's apparent panegyric must sound unsettlingly similar to Hannibal's ambivalent admission of defeat. Moreover, the key Apollonian lines are redeployed in the *Aeneid* to depict the outbreak of war in Italy (see *A.* 7.525-530 with Hardie 1990 and Nelis 2001), a conflict defined by its status as Roman civil war *avant la lettre*. One eyes especially the close verbal links in Vergil's *atraque late | horrescit strictis seges ensibus* at 7.525-526 (‘and a dark crop of drawn swords bristled broadly’), lines

39 Barchiesi's focus on the allusive texture of the work and its potential importation of fratricidal violence from Theban myth is illuminating. His brief reading stops short of proposing that Melinno's closing imagery actively destabilizes the hymn's construction of Roman power. His reading also remains focused on Greek texts and perspectives. For him, “It may be the case that her hymn is not merely an act of cult devotion to Rome, but also a contribution to the Greek image of the ruling power” (Barchiesi 2001, 149).

40 Thomas 2011, 147.

which refer to Apollonius' φριξεν ... Ἄρης τέμενος and his στιβαροῖς σακέεσσιν | δούρασι τ' ἀμφιγύοις κορύθεσσι τε λαμπομένησιν.⁴¹ Apollonius' *temenos* of Ares, when recalled through Vergil's Latin, may even gesture at the traditional space of Roman military muster, the Campus Martius, which is the zone for the rise of Rome's terrible spearmen: cf. *A.* 7.540, *Atque ea per campos aequo dum Marte geruntur* ('and while these things are done throughout the fields in even warfare'). Indeed, Valerius Flaccus' rendering of the Ἄρης τέμενος in his Latin *Argonautica* makes the setting for the Spartoi's civil slaughter at Colchis sound just like Rome: *Martius ante urbem longis iacet horridus annis | campus* ('before the city lies the Campus Martius, overgrown from long years of neglect').⁴²

In sum, Post-Vergilian readers of Melinno are part of a denser internecine intertextual matrix. For them, there is much more at work in Melinno's final stanza. Despite the potentially irreconcilable textual problems in the hymn's closing line, the final reference is clear. Its meaning is not. Scholars are therefore obliged to consider Thebes' role as a catalyst for reading against the grain (so too the echoes of Jason in Colchis). I propose that the cultural legacy of a Thebes symbolic of its own civil strife was likely a factor for many readings of the hymn that took place between ca. 31 BCE and 131 CE, a range that almost certainly captures Melinno's *floruit*. A poem that trades in praise of Rome concludes with an image that, if not by design, could certainly carry a troubling resonance in reception. Perhaps Gutzwiller's recent take on the hymn gains traction if we read the final stanza as I have in this article. The hymn, she suggests, "has the hollow sound of praise uttered by the vanquished" and features a harsh focus on Roman power "without mention of the benefits of Roman peace and civilization".⁴³ Rome's warriors may be the fearsome descendants of Ares, troops who rise from the Campus Martius. They come, however, with a

41 See Nelis 2001, 296-299, my source for this point. Cf. *A.* 7.511-518 and *A.R.* 4.129-138. On the Vergilian language, see Horsfall 2006, 75 (*ad* 46); Criado 2015, 150-151; with focus on the agricultural dimensions, Armstrong 2019, 229-232.

42 Slaney 2009, 10: "Colchian civil war mirrors Rome's own eternal return to internal conflict, even occurring on Colchis' very own Campus Martius". Cf. Davis 2020, *ad* 7.62-63. This *urbs* 'Field of Mars' is described with Vergilian language used for Rome (cf. e.g. *A.* 8.347-350) while also recalling Ovid's depiction of Jason's trials at Colchis (*Met.* 7.101): *conueniunt populi sacrum Mauortis in aruum* ('people assemble in the field sacred to Mars'). Keith 2014, 352-354. Valerius also uses *Mauortis in agris* at 7.544.

43 Gutzwiller 2017, 40. Other readers note the gravity and stiffness of the poem and its formal features but view them differently. Plant 2004, 100, largely following Bowra, notes that these features "suit the image of power and authority which Melinno seeks to create". To consider how readers come to such divergent views, it may help to recall Kennedy 1992, 41: "[t]he degree to which a voice is heard as conflicting or supportive is a function of

fatal flaw: their inborn compulsion to engage in internecine strife. The poem's Theban discourse functions as part of an established Hellenic cultural tradition, one that can contribute to a form of hymnic praise, but this is far from the final word. With a subtle closing gesture, Melinno may also prompt readers to recall Latin (and Greek) literature's use of the Spartoi and to rethink the ideology of domination the hymn appears to laud in its previous stanzas.⁴⁴

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the audience's—or critic's—ideology, a function, therefore, of *reception*". Cf. Whitmarsh 2001, 3.

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