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Wet Rams: The Etymology of *aries* in Virgil

Summary – In the Eclogues and Georgics rams are often said to be wet. The reason for this surprising frequency should evidently be sought in Virgil’s desire to draw attention to the etymology of *aries*. The old form of the word was *ares*, which simply means “you are dry”. The assumption of such an etymological intent resolves a number of difficulties in several Virgilian texts. The same premise also clarifies Varro’s treatment of *aries*.

The frequency with which Virgilian rams are associated with ‘wetness’ is remarkable. The phenomenon requires explanation. Varro states: *aries, quod eum dicebant ares veteres* (ling. 5, 98). Here *ares* has been variously emended to ἀρήν, ἄρρην, *aris* and *areis*.¹ Collart himself dismisses this Varronian etymology with an exclamation mark.² Similarly Maltby finds Varro’s statement a “locus obscurus”.³ It would seem however that the Varronian text is neither “obscure” nor in need of emendation. Varro is merely stating that the archaic form *ares* supplies the etymology: “you are dry”.⁴ Varro’s explanation of *aries* as denoting ‘dryness’⁵ would seem to be helpful for understanding a number of Virgilian passages.

Already in Eclogue 3, 94f. Virgil had made Menalcas say: *parcite, oves, nimium procedere: non bene ripae / creditur; ipse aries etiam nunc vellera siccatur*. On the first of these two lines de la Cerda comments aptly: “‘Procedere’: Pulcerrime, nam ... oves dicuntur πρόβατα ἀπὸ τοῦ προβαίνειν: ‘a proce-

¹ Cf. the apparatus criticus in J. Collart, Varron: De Lingua Latina, Livre 5, Paris 1954, 64.

² Collart (n. 1), 206: “*ares* ... comme étant la cause efficiente du mot!”

³ R. Maltby, A Lexicon of Ancient Latin Etymologies, Leeds 1991, 52. Cf. ThLL II 570, 56 (s. v.): “obscure”.

⁴ The difference in quantity between *āreo* and *ār(i)es* is immaterial; cf. J. J. O’Hara, True Names: Vergil and the Alexandrian Tradition of Etymological Wordplay, Ann Arbor 1996, 61f. For another instance of etymologizing from such a second-person singular cf. Isid., orig. 17, 7, 32: *abies dicta quod prae ceteris arboribus longe eat*. On *ies* as a future of *ire* cf. F. Neue-C. Wagener, Formenlehre der lateinischen Sprache, 3, Berlin ³1897, 326–329. This etymology of *abies* would seem to have been exploited by Virgil; cf. the present writer, Two Etymologies in Aeneid 2: Tenedos and the Trojan Horse (forthcoming).

⁵ Rams are presumably ‘dry’ because they lack the ewe’s *uber*, which was etymologized from *uidus*; cf. Maltby (n. 3), 631.

endo'".⁶ It would also seem that the second of these lines evinces a similarly etymological intent. Here Clausen notes that "the ram is singled out";⁷ he fails however to supply a reason for such salience.⁸ Instead of *vellera siccat* Virgil could simply have said "is wet". His choice of *siccat* is evidently meant to call attention to the etymology of *aries* as 'dry'.⁹

The next couplet would also appear to call for comment in the same connection. Here Damoetas says: *Tityre, pascentis a flumine reice capellas: / ipse, ubi tempus erit, omnis in fonte lavabo* (3, 96f.). This time Clausen observes that "only here does Damoetas take his cue from Menalcas": again he is unable to provide an explanation. It would seem however that Virgil's purpose is to engage in further etymological play on the subject of rams. 'Tityrus' is Laconian for 'ram'.¹⁰ It is therefore appropriate that the 'dry' Tityrus should keep the herd away from the river (*a flumine*; 96). The 'dryness' of this line then forms a piquant counterpoint to the 'wetness' of the next one: *ipse ... in fonte lavabo* (97).¹¹ The whole couplet is accordingly framed by 'dry' Tityrus and 'wet' *lavabo*. Similarly the antithetic verbs *lavabo* and *siccat* in the same *sedes* respectively conclude the two adjacent distichs.

The second passage to be considered in the present article occurs in the Georgics, where Virgil turns his attention to the production of wool. In this connection he issues the following prescription: *illum autem, quamvis aries sit candidus ipse, / nigra subest udo tantum cui lingua palato, / reice, ne maculis infuscet vellera pullis / nascentum* (3, 387–390). Here *aries* is really superfluous: it is highlighted further by transposition to the subordinate clause. *Udus* is similarly noteworthy. Since a palate is normally 'wet',¹² the adjective *udus* would seem to be pointless. Neither does any of the numerous parallels cited in

⁶ J. L. de la Cerda, P. Virgilii Maronis Bucolica et Georgica, Madrid 1608, 64.

⁷ W. Clausen, A Commentary on Virgil, Eclogues, Oxford 1994, 114.

⁸ The further point is made by (e. g.) J. Conington-H. Nettleship-F. Haverfield, The Works of Virgil, 1, London ⁵1898, 52 that l. 94 has been inspired by Theocritus 5, 100, where however there is no mention of a 'ram'.

⁹ The connection between the two words is underlined by their symmetrical arrangement at the end of the first and second hemistichs respectively. Identification of this particular Virgilian jeu étymologique would seem to be especially significant, since O'Hara (n. 4), 243 found "comparatively few" examples in the Eclogues. One of the possible reasons he adduces is that these poems "were written not so very long after the publication of Varro's De lingua latina in 45 or 44". It would seem however that the present instance of Virgilian etymologizing has in fact been directly inspired by Varro's book.

¹⁰ So Servius, ecl. prooem. p. 4.

¹¹ *Ipse* occupies the same initial *sedes* as *Tityre*.

¹² Cf. (e. g.) Pliny, nat. 28, 100, who states that once a hyena's palate has been 'dried' (*palato ... arefacto*), it can be used as a remedy.

connection with Virgil's precept mention 'wetness'.¹³ Again Virgil's addition of *udus* would seem to have been inspired by a jeu étymologique on *aries*: this time the play is antiphrastic. Once again the etymologizing is enhanced by verbal symmetry, which here involves an elegantly chiasmic arrangement of opposites: *aries ... candidus ... nigra ... udo*.

The last text to be examined in this connection occurs shortly afterwards. Here Virgil is dealing with the prevention of disease in sheep. He states: *dulcibus idcirco fluviis pecus omne magistri / perfundunt, udisque aries in gurgite villis / mersatur, missusque secundo defluit amni* (georg. 3, 445–447). This passage entails a number of difficulties. In the first place Mynors qualifies lines 446f. as "needless".¹⁴ Secondly it is shearing that should come before washing:¹⁵ why then does this drenched creature still have its *villi*?¹⁶ Thirdly Virgil's mention of 'fresh' water (445) is surprising.¹⁷ Fourthly the question again arises why the ram should have been singled out.¹⁸ Finally if the ram *mersatur*,¹⁹ it would appear pointless to stress that his *villi* are *udi*.²⁰ The solution to all these difficulties would seem to lie in the assumption that here too Virgil is etymologizing *aries*: significantly he again employs the same word for antiphrastic

¹³ Cf. (e. g.) G. Bianco, Ovini, Enc. Virg. III (1987), 911; R. A. B. Mynors, Virgil: Georgics, Oxford 1990, 238. In particular such a reference to 'wetness' is absent from Varro, rust. 2, 2, 4; cf. Bianco ("V[irgilio] qui attinge, con molta probabilità, alla fonte varroniana").

¹⁴ Mynors (n. 13), 247.

¹⁵ Cf. Servius, georg. 3, 446 (ad loc.): *nam oves semper tonsae lavantur*.

¹⁶ Servius (loc. cit.) is reduced to the desperate explanation that a '*musmo*' is involved: *huic autem partem aliquam lanæ pastores solent relinquere*. In the same connection R. F. Thomas, Virgil, Georgics, 2: Books 3/4, Cambridge 1988, 125 speaks of "perhaps a Virgilian lapse".

¹⁷ Cf. (e. g.) W. Richter, Vergil: Georgica, Munich 1957, 314f.: "*dulcibus ... fluviis* weicht von allen uns erhaltenen Vorschriften vor Verg. ab ... Weshalb Verg. sie abändert, ist nicht zu erkennen."

¹⁸ Such is especially the case in this passage, where *aries* is immediately preceded (445) by the all-embracing *pecus omne*. M. Erren, P. Vergilius Maro: Georgica, 2, Heidelberg 2003, 741 argues that both here and in ecl. 3, 95 "der Widder genannt [ist], weil ihm die Schafe willig ins Wasser folgen". This view would however appear to be open to criticism. On the one hand in the Eclogues the sheep do not follow the ram "willig ins Wasser": on the contrary he is a warning example to deter them from doing just this. On the other hand in the present passage Virgil has made a point of mentioning the ram after *pecus omne*. The implication is therefore that he was also washed after the rest: hence they again did not follow him "willig ins Wasser".

¹⁹ The word is an emphatic molossus in enjambment.

²⁰ Here commentators refer to the parallel at georg. 1, 272 (*balantumque gregem fluvio mersare salubri*), where however there is no mention of 'wetness'.

‘wet’,²¹ which this time is directly juxtaposed with *aries*. The striking picture of the ram floating down-river with wet hair is not therefore due to autopsy,²² but to an elaborate jeu étymologique.

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²¹ For his *udus* numerous synonyms were available; cf. (e. g.) *humectus, humens, humidus, madefactus, madens, madidus, uvidus*.

²² Cf. Mynors (n. 13), 247: “One would like to think that V[irgil] gave the scene two needless lines because he remembered it.”