

Daria Kohler

ON BOOKROLLS, PINTS, AND SOMEWHAT  
FLAT JOKES: SUET. *DE POETIS* 3. 3. 9\*

*The possession of a sense of humor...  
is a dangerous thing for a philologist.<sup>1</sup>*

Augustus was famous for his love of witty remarks, many of which have been preserved in various sources, including Suetonius, Quintilian, Plutarch, and Macrobius.<sup>2</sup> This note will focus on one such joke, retold in the biography of Horace (Suet. *De poetis* 3. 3. 9). There, Suetonius comments on Horace's appearance in the following way:

habitu corporis fuit brevis atque obesus, qualis et a semet ipso in saturis describitur et ab Augusto hac epistula: “pertulit ad me Onysius libellum tuum, quem ego ut excusantem, quantuluscumque est, boni consulo. vereri autem mihi videris ne maiores libelli tui sint quam ipse es. sed tibi statura deest, corpusculum non deest. itaque licebit in sextariolo scribas, quo circuitus voluminis tui sit ὀγκωδέστατος, sicut est ventriculi tui”.<sup>3</sup>

Regarding the bodily appearance, he was short and overweight, as he is described by himself in his hexametres, and by Augustus in the following letter: “Onysius brought to me your little volume, which I find good as an apology, however little there is of it. It seems to me, though, that you are afraid your books might become bigger than yourself. But you lack in height, not in the body. Thus, you could even write in *sextariolo*, so that the girth of your volume is all puffed up, like that of your belly”.<sup>4</sup>

---

\* This paper originated from a note in my doctoral thesis (Kondakova 2022) and was first put together as a contribution to a *Festschrift* for Vsevolod Zelchenko in 2022. This article is an update of my views on the matter of *sextariolus*, and benefitted from the generous help of many readers and listeners.

<sup>1</sup> Rolfe 1925, 273.

<sup>2</sup> A series of jokes by Augustus in Macrobius: *Macr. Sat.* 2. 14–31.

<sup>3</sup> Text according to Stachon 2021, who accepts Reifferscheid's *ut excusantem* instead of the transmitted *ut accusantem*. It is difficult to reconcile *ut accusantem* and *boni consulo*, which the conjecture remedies.

<sup>4</sup> Translation is my own.

The general sense of the letter, and the rather unflattering joke therein, is clear even without the preceding commentary. The emperor expresses his dissatisfaction with the length of the book sent to him; a roll of small length can be easily recognised by its diameter.<sup>5</sup> However, Horace should not worry about writing more, because it is hard to create a bookroll with a circumference exceeding that of the poet's waist.

The basis for the joke is thus the comparison of two dimensions, the height and the circumference, of the poet and of a bookroll. Augustus attributes the length of the book to Horace's fear that it "would turn out to be bigger than himself", which is easy to remedy if the other dimension is taken into account: a short roll with a lot of text will resemble the poet's figure.

The switch from one dimension to the other would be even easier to understand if the length of the papyrus roll were close to Horace's height:

1. Your text is quite short.
2. Perhaps you are afraid of making a book *longer* than yourself?
3. You are mistaken: the book may be *longer* than you, since you are short, but even so it will never be *fatter*.

How long would the bookroll in question be? The two candidates suggested for Horace's *volumen* are *Epist.* 2. 1 (270 lines) and the *signata volumina* of *Epist.* 1. 13; in the latter case, the discrepancy in number impedes this interpretation.<sup>6</sup> *Epist.* 2. 1 is also indirectly indicated by the reference to the length of the work at its beginning: *in publica commoda peccem, si longo sermone morer tua tempora, Caesar* (3–4).<sup>7</sup> Due to the lacking knowledge of the formatting of Latin papyri of hexametric poetry, it is impossible to say how many lines a column would usually have. Therefore, the following calculation should be seen as nothing more than a series of not implausible conjectures. The first assumption is to take the only existing example of a Latin hexametric column, *P. Narm.* inv. 66.362 (10 lines per column), to be an exception and adhere rather

---

<sup>5</sup> For example, Martial jokes about a book not thicker than an *umbilicus* (*Epigr.* 2. 6. 10–11: *tam macer libellus, nullo crassior ut sit umbilico*).

<sup>6</sup> E.g. Johnson 1940. T. Frank tries to explain the discrepancy by suggesting that Augustus wrote his answer before opening the gift, a theory far-fetched at best (Frank 1925, 30).

<sup>7</sup> Gelsomino 1958, 332. H. Ohst finds additional parallels between this letter and the text of 2. 1: Ohst 2020, 83–86.

to the more ‘standard’ measures of ca. 20–25 lines per column which are documented in Greek bookrolls.<sup>8</sup> Calculated in such a way, the text of *Epist.* 2. 1 would take between 10 and 13 columns. The next unknown is the width of the column. Columns of *P.Narm.* inv. 66.362 are 16 cm wide; of *P. Herc.* 817, 16–18 cm; of the Gallus papyrus (*P. Qasr Ibrīm* inv. 78-3-11/1), 13.5 cm.<sup>9</sup> To this, at least 1 cm of an intercolumnium should be added. If the 10-line-per-column layout is considered an outlier, the book Augustus writes about *could* be a roll of 10–13 columns, with a length falling anywhere between ca. 145 cm and 275 cm. If we take the lower estimate, it is possible to compare it to the height of a relatively short person.

The main difficulty lies in the interpretation of the expression *licebit in sextariolo scribas*, which will be the focus of the rest of this paper. This passage is the only secure attestation of the word *sextariolus* in Latin literature, and it is reasonable to assume that Augustus coined it *ad hoc*, given the number of diminutives in the letter.<sup>10</sup> For a regular diminutive formation, the expected base word is *sextarius*, a term denoting a common Roman measure of liquids or grain. Its volume, according to various estimates, was just over 0.5 l, that is, about a pint.<sup>11</sup> It seems that *sextarius* was the basic unit for measuring the volume of wine. In Herculaneum, a dipinto on the wall of a tavern depicts wine vessels and the price per sextarius: it is assumed that different vessels corresponded to wines of different quality.<sup>12</sup> When Horace describes what one could spend a little money on, his modest “shopping list” looks like this: *panis ematur*,

---

<sup>8</sup> *P. Narm.* inv. 66.362 has the text of Verg. *Ecl.* 8. 53–62 and carries 10 lines per column. G. Macedo cautions against taking this roll as a standard due to the lack of comparative material: “we cannot say whether or not short columns were a typical feature of the layout of Latin poetry. The number is considerably higher in bookrolls of Latin prose, whose columns seem to have at least twenty lines” (Macedo 2021, 54–55). As for Greek bookrolls, both of poetry and prose, one can expect between 25 and 50 lines per column (Johnson 2004, 125–126).

<sup>9</sup> All numbers are taken from Macedo 2021.

<sup>10</sup> Stachon also quotes a passage from *Epistula Alexandri ad Aristotelem* (p. 193, 16 Kuebler): *multa gemmea et crystallina, quae potaria fuerunt et sextariola, multa aurea invenimus et rara argentea*. However, the reading *sextariola* is doubtful.

<sup>11</sup> 0,546 ml. Apart from the regular *sextarius*, we know of a *sextarius Italicus* (⅓ of a *congius*) and a *sextarius castrensis* (1½ of the s. *Italicus*, or ¼ of a *congius*): Swift 2017, 217.

<sup>12</sup> In Herculaneum (VI.14), a shop sign was found with an inscription “*Ad cucumas*” and four wine jugs below, each labelled with a price. An illustration can be found in Pagano 1988, Tab. 4.

*holus, vini sextarius* (*Sat.* 1. 1. 74), implying, perhaps, that buyers usually purchased wine in larger quantities.<sup>13</sup>

The word *sextarius* could also be used to denote a vessel of the appropriate volume.<sup>14</sup> This seems to be the reference in the passage under consideration, as it is difficult to imagine any other combination with the preposition *in*. Even so, the connection between the joke on the length of the text and *in sextariolo scribas* is somewhat enigmatic. Several scholars have followed the line of reasoning which implies transferring the text from the roll onto the vessel's surface. E. Fraenkel comes to the conclusion that Horace is invited to write on a potsherd.<sup>15</sup> R. Gelsomino understands the passage even more literally: the rolls of Horace are so short that their texts could fit on a small bottle.<sup>16</sup> A variant of this interpretation has been recently suggested by H. Ohst, who finds in Augustus' joke an additional reference to the fact that Aristotle calls hexametric verse ὀγκώδης.<sup>17</sup> The logical chain he suggests is as follows: "You apologise for the brevity of the book, but it is actually quite ὀγκώδης, since it is written in hexameters. So, if you want to correct that, write the same text on a small chubby vase". M. Stachon, who has recently edited *De poetis*, understands it similarly; however, he does not mention the reference to Aristotle but only points out the figurative use of ὀγκώδης in Philodemus (in conjecture: only ογκω- is preserved on the papyrus).<sup>18</sup> S. A. Frampton goes further in the search for intertextual connections with Aristotle and the vocabulary of literary criticism, and in doing so renders the link between the sextarius and the physical book merely a loose association.<sup>19</sup>

There are, however, issues with seeing an act of writing on a sextarius in the expression used by Augustus. A literal understanding is not supported by known ancient practices: the only example of a complete literary text written on a vessel can be found in the *SHA* (Treb. *Trig. tyr.* 14. 5): *patera in circuitum omnem historiam Alexandri contineret*. In this case, fitting a long text on a bowl is shown as something extraordinary.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Vopisc. *Tacit.* 11. 1: *ipse fuit vitae parcissimae, ita ut sextarium vini tota die numquam potaverit, saepe intr<a h>eminam*.

<sup>14</sup> Varr. *De vit. pop. Rom. ap. Non.* p. 545: *item erant vasa vinaria: sini, cymbia, culignae, paterae, guti, sextarii, simpvium*.

<sup>15</sup> Fraenkel 1957, 20–21.

<sup>16</sup> Gelsomino 1958, 334.

<sup>17</sup> Aristot. *Poet.* 1459 b 34–35. Ohst 2020, 86.

<sup>18</sup> Philod. *De poemat.* 5. l. 15 (Jensen). "Allein auf diese Weise, also wenn man sie auf ein bauchiges Gefäß schreibt, so schlussfolgert Augustus, könne man ein Werk des Horaz zu einem 'umfangreichen' machen" (Stachon 2021, 232).

<sup>19</sup> Frampton 2019, 131–133.

Fraenkel's potsherd breaks the association between the shapes of the vase, the bookroll, and the poet. Moreover, both the literal and the metaphorical interpretations relying on the writing of the text on the surface of a small pot are hindered by the following *circuitus voluminis tui*, which (1) clearly refers to the volume of a bookroll, not a pot or a vase, and (2) can only be understood literally.

In contrast, some scholars proposed an alternative version, according to which *sextarius* should mean a roll of a particular format. T. Frank and A. Rostagni believe that Augustus is talking about a roll of small height,  $\frac{1}{6}$  of the "normal size".<sup>20</sup> A. Tovar sees *sextariolus* as a reference to the well-known format of the papyrus sheet, called *charta emporitica* by Pliny, on the grounds that it was six fingers wide.<sup>21</sup> However, the format of the sheets that make up the papyrus roll has no bearing on the ratio of its height to its diameter, which forms the basis of Augustus' joke. The use of wider sheets results in the roll having fewer joins (κολλήσεις), but does not affect either its length or its thickness (see Fig. 1).

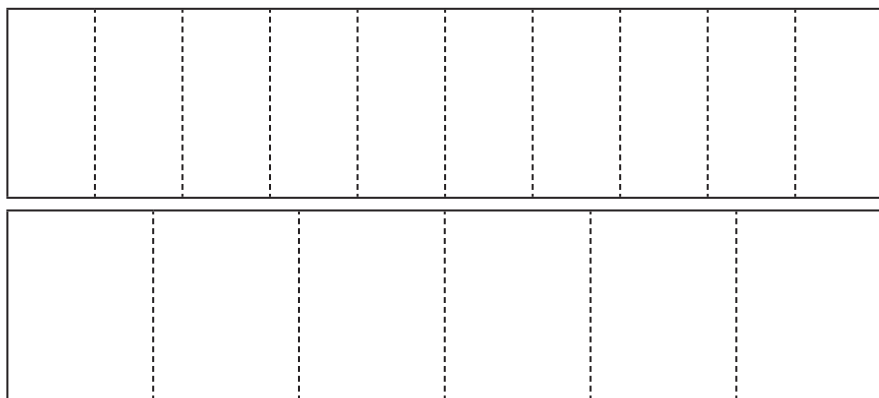


Fig. 1. Schematic comparison of rolls of the same length made of sheets of different formats.

The assumption that postulates some sort of *terminus technicus* for a small book not only finds no parallel among the discussions of ancient roll formats known to us but also undermines the joke. Moreover, such an explanation neglects the fact that the word *sextarius* was part of everyday Roman usage, and it is what the reader – and Horace – should have thought of first. Let us return to *sextarius*, the vessel.

<sup>20</sup> Frank 1925, 29–30; Rostagni 1944, 119.

<sup>21</sup> Tovar 1968.

While the volume of a sextarius is well-documented, it is difficult to establish whether such a vessel had a recognisable shape. I managed to find two vessels of different shapes carrying inscriptions which may indicate that they contained one sextarius. One of them is dated to the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD, the other, tentatively, to the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD. Both are made of bronze. The first one has the form of a little vase, the diameter of which increases in the middle and narrows again towards the neck, and has the letters SEXTAR in silver.<sup>22</sup> The second one is a cylinder, the diameter of which exceeds the height, with the inscription ]XTARIVMEXSACIATVMLEGI along the upper edge.<sup>23</sup> In addition, rectangular glass bottles of a volume of about a *sextarius*, which could perhaps also have been used for measuring or transporting wine, are attested.<sup>24</sup> Of the three shapes I was able to find, the first one is the closest to the time and context of the passage in question. Gelsomino also notes, without a reference to a particular artefact, that he encountered vessels of a similar shape “in museums”.<sup>25</sup>

If writing on the surface of a sextarius is not a satisfactory understanding of the passage, what is? In my opinion, the right interpretation lies between the two avenues suggested so far. What Augustus wants to say is “you could have written more”. As a consequence, *in sextariolo scribere* should lead to the bookroll becoming larger in diameter. It seems as if Augustus is suggesting that Horace could have chosen a different roll size to make his work look more voluminous.<sup>26</sup> This is not an unlikely scenario: in the case of copies intended to be sent to friends or literary patrons, authors may have made decisions about the quality of the papyrus and, presumably, other elements of the future book. For example, Cicero in *Att.* 13. 25. 3 says that he splurged on expensive papyrus for a copy of the *Academica* intended for Varro: *sed tamen ego non despero probatum iri Varroni et id, quoniam impensam fecimus in macrocolla, facile patior teneri.*<sup>27</sup> While we

---

<sup>22</sup> Held in the British Museum, registration number 1918,0101.2. Height: 17.3 cm, diameter: 11.6 cm, volume: 0.99 l. An image can be consulted on the website of the BM: <https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/image/1041705001>.

<sup>23</sup> Height: 7.6 cm, diameter: 12.4–12.6 cm (Rothenhöfer 2016, with image).

<sup>24</sup> E.g. a glass bottle with a square bottom, late 1<sup>st</sup>–3<sup>rd</sup> century AD, in the collection of Metropolitan Museum (New York), accession number 81.10.22. Height 13 cm, base width 7.9 cm. See also Charlesworth 1966; Swift 2017, 211–227.

<sup>25</sup> Gelsomino 1958, 334.

<sup>26</sup> A modern analogy would be something like “you could even print it in duodecimo”, or, in Germany, “you could even publish it in Reclam”.

<sup>27</sup> See on this Johnson 2004, 156.

do not have any evidence of a *format* defined by the height of the roll, the existence of a variety of options could mean that there were multiple sizes to choose from when ordering the production of a copy.

Our knowledge of early Latin books and their sizes is sketchy due to the number and the state of preservation of extant Latin literary papyri. Some data can be obtained from the analysis of contemporary papyri from Egypt, especially those of Oxyrhynchus, but Greek and Roman books did not necessarily follow the same principles, especially in matters of *mise en page*.<sup>28</sup> One can only cautiously say that Latin books are characterised by wider margins and greater line spacing. As regards the average size of a Latin roll containing poetic works, most of the fragments of more than one column at our disposal contain texts not otherwise extant, rendering an accurate reconstruction of page heights impossible. For *P.Herc. 817* (*De bello Aegyptiaco*), Gabriele Macedo estimates the minimum height of a column at 20 cm, and of the whole bookroll at 24–25 cm.<sup>29</sup> Before him, Guillelmo Cavallo named 19–24 cm as the standard height of rolls from Herculaneum.<sup>30</sup> The *sextarius* from the British Museum, 17.3 cm high, is thus a little smaller than the average Latin book.

It seems to me that we should not see literary criticism as the basis of Augustus' not very elaborate joke.<sup>31</sup> It is also certainly unnecessary to calculate how many lines could fit on a sextarius. *In sextariolo* should refer to the shape of sextarius the vessel, but denote a bookroll. Among different possible connotations, diminutives are known to have the potential of a metaphoric usage, whereby they denote something that has a likeness to the base word (e.g. *apriculus*, 'a fish similar to a boar').<sup>32</sup> A voluminous roll about 17–18 cm high would be similar to a sextarius in height, and the pot-bellied shape explains the joke at the expense of the figure of Horace. *In sextariolo* could then mean "on a roll roughly like a sextarius" or "in the shape of a sextarius".

Daria Kohler  
KU Leuven

daria.kohler@kuleuven.be

---

<sup>28</sup> Hutchinson 2008, 20–25.

<sup>29</sup> Macedo 2021, 39.

<sup>30</sup> Cavallo 1983, 14–16.

<sup>31</sup> Pace Frampton and others.

<sup>32</sup> Hakamies 1951, 15; Fruyt 1989, 128. I am grateful to Denis Keyer for pointing this out to me.

## Bibliography

- F. H. Bothe (ed.), *Q. Horatii Flacci Eclogae cum selectis scholiastarum veterum et Guilielmi Baxteri, Io. Matthiae Gesneri et Io. Car. Zeunii annotationibus* (Lipsiae 1822).
- G. Cavallo, *Libri scritte scribi a Ercolano* (Naples 1983).
- D. Charlesworth, "Roman Square Bottles", *Journal of Glass Studies* 8 (1966) 26–40.
- E. Fraenkel, *Horace* (Oxford 1957).
- S. A. Frampton, *Empire of Letters: Writing in Roman Literature and Thought from Lucretius to Ovid* (Oxford 2019).
- T. Frank, "On Augustus' Reference to Horace", *CP* 20: 1 (1925) 26–30.
- M. Fruyt, "Étude sémantique des diminutifs latins -ulus, -culus, -ellus, -illus... dé-substantivaux et dé-adjectivaux", in: M. Lavency, D. Longrée (éds.), *Actes du Vème colloque de linguistique latine* (Louvain-la-Neuve 1989) 127–138.
- R. Gelsomino, "Augusti epistula ad Horatium commentario instructa", *RhM NF* 101: 4 (1958) 328–335.
- R. Hakamies, *Étude sur l'origine et l'évolution du diminutif latin et sa survie dans les langues romanes* (Helsinki 1951).
- G. O. Hutchinson, *Talking Books: Readings in Hellenistic and Roman Books of Poetry* (Oxford 2008).
- V. Johnson, "Ninnius, Vinus, and Onysius", *CP* 35: 4 (1940) 420–422.
- W. A. Johnson, "Pliny the Elder and Standardized Roll Heights in the Manufacture of Papyrus", *CP* 88: 1 (1993) 46–50.
- W. A. Johnson, *Bookrolls and Scribes in Oxyrhynchus* (Toronto 2004).
- D. Kondakova, 'Publication', *Papyri, and Literary Texts: Process and Presentation*. DPhil thesis (Oxford 2022).
- G. N. Macedo, *Ancient Latin Poetry Books: Materiality and Context* (Ann Arbor 2021).
- H. Ohst, "'Irasci me tibi scito'. Augustus und sein Verhältnis zu Horaz im Spiegel der Fragmente seiner Privatkorrespondenz", in: J. Bartz, M. Müller, R. F. Sporleder (eds.), *Augustus immortalis. Aktuelle Forschungen zum Princeps im interdisziplinären Diskurs, Beiträge des interdisziplinären Symposions an der Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, 25.–27. Oktober 2019* (Berlin 2020) 81–88.
- M. Pagano. "Semo Sancus in una insegna di bottega a Ercolano", *CronErc* 18 (1988) 209–214.
- J. C. Rolfe, "The Sextariolus", *CP* 20: 3 (1925) 273–274.
- A. Rostagni (ed.), *Suetonio. De poetis e biografii minori* (Torino 1944).
- P. Rothenhöfer, "Ein bronzenes römisches Hohlmaß (sextarium) mit militärischer Inschrift und Bemerkungen zu gleichartigen Inschriften", *Gephyra* 13 (2016) 119–125.
- M. Stachon, *Sueton, De poetis. Text, Übersetzung und Kommentar zu den erhaltenen Viten nebst begründeten Mutmaßungen zu den verlorenen Kapiteln* (Heidelberg 2021).

- E. Swift, *Roman Artefacts and Society: Design, Behaviour, and Experience* (Oxford 2017).
- A. Tovar, “Augustus Ridicules Horace’s Shortness: A Comment on the Word *Sextariolus*”, *AJP* 89: 3 (1968) 334–341.

This article explores a passage of a letter from Augustus to Horace, quoted in the *vita Horatii* by Suetonius as evidence of him being short and overweight (Suet. *De poetis* 3. 3. 9). In the letter, the emperor jokingly connects the brevity of the work he received with the physical appearance of the poet. He then suggests that Horace could even write ‘in sextariolo’, an expression that commentators have been struggling to interpret. I argue both against the literal understanding of the expression ‘in sextariolo’ as ‘on a small vase’ and the alternative suggestions seeing it as a technical term for a specific kind of bookroll. Instead, I put forward an interpretation based on the similarity between a papyrus roll of a slightly smaller height and the shape of a sextarius.

Эта статья посвящена месту в одном письме Августа Горацию, которое цитирует Светоний в жизнеописании поэта как подтверждение того, что он был невысокого роста и полноват (Suet. *De poetis* 3. 3. 9). В этом письме император в шутку находит связь между длиной полученного от Горация свитка и внешностью поэта, а затем говорит, что Гораций мог бы даже писать in sextariolo – выражение, которое привлекло много попыток истолкования. В этой статье я выступаю как против буквального понимания in sextariolo как “на небольшом кувшине”, так и против попыток увидеть в слове sextariolus технический термин для обозначения особого вида свитка. Вместо этого я предлагаю интерпретацию шутки, основанную на визуальном сходстве между свитком несколько меньшей высоты и формой секстария-сосуда.

## CONSPECTUS

GAUTHIER LIBERMAN

Petits riens sophocléens : *Antigone* V

(v. 1095–1099, 1110–1112, 1113–1114, 1127–1130, 1140–1141  
et 1149–1150, 1165–1171, 1206–1211, 1215–1218, 1223–1225,  
1226–1230, 1251–1252, 1278–1280, 1344–1346) ..... 173

DANIL KOSSAREV

The Criticism of Monarchy in Isocrates' *Cyprian Orations* ..... 199

ALEXANDER VERLINSKY

Plato's Last Word on Naturalism vs. Conventionalism in the *Cratylus*. II .. 218

MARCO DONATO

Aristotle's 'Platonic' Egypt ..... 239

DARIA KOHLER

On Bookrolls, Pints, and Somewhat Flat Jokes: Suet. *De poetis* 3. 3. 9 ... 263

DARIA ZUEVA, VSEVOLOD ZELTCHENKO

*Philogelos* 23; 130 and the Meaning of οὐ λούει ..... 272

S. DOUGLAS OLSON

Philological Notes on the Letter *lambda* in a New Greek-English  
Dictionary. III. ληναῖος – λόγος ..... 286

Keywords ..... 310

Hyperborei vol. XXI–XXX conspectus ..... 312

Hyperborei vol. XXI–XXX auctores alphabetico ordine dispositi ..... 324