

## POETA CLASSICUS: WAS HORACE IN THE FLEET DURING THE BATTLE OF ACTIUM?

### Introduction

Let me begin by addressing the question raised in the title of the article – was Horace in the fleet of Octavian during the Battle of Actium, depicted in the 9<sup>th</sup> Epode? It is my deepest conviction that he was not there. That Maecenas was present goes largely undisputed,<sup>1</sup> but it seems highly improbable that Horace would not have made *explicit* reference to this unusual experience, had he truly been amongst the fleet.

Whilst there is some evidence of Horace's military experience, it is not possible to claim that he participated in this particular campaign. However, it is the ambiguity of various hypotheses that lead critics to not exclude his presence at the Battle of Actium.

This tendency is particularly evident at the end of the last century – D. Mankin summarizes a common consensus thus: “it appears likely that the setting is Actium, possibly on board a ship in the Caesarian fleet”.<sup>2</sup> Another supporter of this hypothesis, R. Nisbet, refers to the works of Wistrand and Kraggerud,<sup>3</sup> as well as his own, from 1984 to 2007.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Here we have a contradiction between *Elegiae ad Maecenatem* 1. 45 sq. (1<sup>st</sup> cent. AD) and the evidence of Appianus (*Civ.* 4. 50), who according to Wistrand's opinion, may have confused the Actium with the Alexandrian war (Wistrand 1958, 14–19).

<sup>2</sup> Mankin 1995, 159; see also 180 (on v. 35, following): “it <nausea> seems to be a possibly decisive indication that the poem is set on a ship in the Caesarian fleet <...>. Octavian himself spent the night following the battle on his ship, and it would not be surprising if his friends did the same”.

Nisbet 2007, 11: “It is disputed whether Horace was present at the Battle of Actium”. Mayer 1994, 273: “Horace may have been ...” (he also compares Horace's mention of a war experience with Aeschylus' epitaph); Watson 2003, 57: “it therefore seems likeliest that he was at Actium”. See also idem, 311; Wistrand 1958; Citroni 2000, 53.

<sup>3</sup> Wistrand 1958, 2–65; Kraggerud 1984, 66–128.

<sup>4</sup> Nisbet 1984, 9–17, Nisbet 2007, 11–12. For full bibliography see Setaioli 1981, 1716–1728.

In contrast, Ed. Fraenkel<sup>5</sup> was clearly against the assumption, but unfortunately this was because he believed that Maecenas was present in Rome as Octavian's vice-regent.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, without any prominent opponent, Watson<sup>7</sup> presents his case for Horaces' presence thus:

- In *Epode* 1 Horace declares his intention to follow Maecenas, even to war;
- There is some suggestion of autopsy in the 9th *Epode* (*at huc, sinistrorsum*);
- There are also references to military campaign(s) after Philippi (*Carm.* 2. 6; *Epist.* 1. 20).<sup>8</sup>

We will consider all three arguments, albeit in a different order and with some new considerations. The article will begin with a comparison of the 9<sup>th</sup> *Epode* with several other passages by Horace: this has not been done before, and the author believes that by doing so the reader may see a reflection of two events, of which Horace undoubtedly participated in one (the Battle of Philippi) and might have experienced the other (the shipwreck at the Cape of Palinuro).

## I. References to the Battle of Philippi and the Campaign Against Sextus Pompeius

Horace makes two references to the Battle of Philippi in the *Odes* (*Carm.* 2. 7; 3. 4. 26) and one in the *Epistles* (*Epist.* 2. 2. 49).<sup>9</sup> There are a number of reasons for this: the return of an amnestied friend;<sup>10</sup> custody of the Muses, who saved Horace from death several times; lengthy remembrance of youth (*Epist.* 2. 2. 41–54). It is worth noting that the earliest of these

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<sup>5</sup> Fraenkel 1968, 7.

<sup>6</sup> Based on the evidence of Appianus, see above n. 1. The same mistake drew Richard Bentley away from the discussion (Bentley 1711, 192): "... si carmen hoc in castris Caesarianis praesens scripsisset Noster: is vero tum Romae erat cum Maecenate urbi praefecto".

<sup>7</sup> Watson 2003, 3 n. 28.

<sup>8</sup> Here I omit Watson's argument: "the long established practice of taking a poet on campaign to hymn the expected military successes".

<sup>9</sup> The passage (*Serm.* 1. 6. 48 *quod mihi pareret legio Romana tribuno*) refers to the same period, but gives no information on the battle itself.

<sup>10</sup> Pompeius Varus was not the only friend of Horace who took part in the battle: others were Messala Corvinus, Lucius Sestius, Quintus Dellius a.o. (for a full list, and on the significance of the battle in Horace's life see Citroni 2000, 28).

The most detailed description of the battle at Philippi is found in the famous *Carmen* 2. 7. Set in the context of a welcome feast being prepared for Pompeius Varus the account of this historical event contains:

2) an indication of the historical significance of the battle – the death of the leaders and the failure of the republicans (2. 7. 11–12).<sup>11</sup>

unde simul primum me dimisere Philippi  
decisis humilem pinnis inopemque paterni  
et laris et fundi ...

vestris amicis fontibus et choris                                 25  
non me Philippiis versa acies retro,<sup>12</sup>  
devota non extinxit arbor,  
nec Sicula Palinurus unda.

<sup>11</sup> On the phrase *minaces turpe solum tetigere mente* see Nisbet–Hubbard 1978, 114–115.

<sup>12</sup> It is possible to consider these words a reference to the point when Brutus's legions were driven back while their ranks crumbled under pressure and the second and third reserve lines failed to keep pace with the retreat so that all three lines became entangled.

<sup>13</sup> Nisbet–Rudd 2004, 66. The same incidence is mentioned in *Carm.* 2. 17. 20 (for commentary see Nisbet–Hubbard 1978, 281).

Appianus delivers the news of the naval disaster at Capo Palinuro (*Civ.* 5. 98), along with the information that right after this Maecenas was sent back to Rome (*Civ.* 5. 99). Consequently it is quite possible to assume that Horace was present as a member of Maecenas' retinue, as he escorted him on route to Brundisium (*Serm.* 1. 5).<sup>14</sup>

Admittedly, it seems more appealing to consider the 1st *Epode* as a reference to Sextus Pompeius than to the war with Antony, especially considering that Horace states in this poem that he is ready to accompany his high-ranking friend to naval war, while the campaign of 31–30 BC took place both on land and at sea.<sup>15</sup>

The reference of the 1st *Epode* to the events of 36 BC is by no means a new idea – among its proponents are T. Dyer (with his article in *Classical Museum*, 1845) and M. W. Thompson.<sup>16</sup> Arguments against this relatively early date were put forward by Watson<sup>17</sup> and Williams:<sup>18</sup> they doubt that the opening piece of the book could date from so early on. Meanwhile the 1st *Epode* does not follow the traditional format of an opening poem and might have been placed first because it is the most serious of the four poems to Maecenas.<sup>19</sup>

After noting that the argument concerning the 1st *Epode* can be dismissed, let us observe some features in the passages above. Typically, when Horace describes the events that he witnessed

- 1) a place-name (e. g. of the battle) is directly stated;
- 2) 1<sup>st</sup> person pronouns and verbs are used (*sensi, me paventem, non me extinxit, dura emovere loco me tempora, me dimisere*);
- 3) Horace does not conceal the fact that he felt fear at being in the middle of fateful events.

This last point reveals a contradiction: even if there were not heavy casualties in *Bellum Actiacum*, a poet who described himself as *inbellis ac firmus parum* (*Epod.* 1. 16) could not but help indicating his presence in the fleet at Actium, as one of several dangerous situations experienced.

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<sup>14</sup> Another indirect argument can be discerned in the absence of information about any long-distant journeys made by Horace, apart from his visit to Greece in the 40s BC, whereas a usual route to Greece and back did not pass through the Tyrrhenian Sea.

<sup>15</sup> Unfortunately, the reference to Liburnian galleys (*Epod.* 1. 1), an anchor for many scholars' hopes, provides no clear victory one way or another, as this kind of vessels was used both in 36 and 31 BC (Watson 2003, 59 with further literature).

<sup>16</sup> Thompson 1970, 328.

<sup>17</sup> Watson 2003, 57.

<sup>18</sup> Williams 1972, 11.

<sup>19</sup> *Epodes* 1, 3, 9 and 14. For some analyses on the composition of the *Epodes* as a book see Egorova 2014 [С. К. Егорова, "Эподы Горация и традиция составления стихотворного сборника"], 208–227.

II. 9<sup>th</sup> *Epode*

Let us analyse now the text of the 9<sup>th</sup> *Epode*.

First of all, the 9<sup>th</sup> *Epode* is an example of symposiac poetry rather than a description of the entire battle.<sup>20</sup> It has a ring-composition: lines 1–6 contain plans for the future feast, while lines 21–38 describe the official triumph<sup>21</sup> marking the end of the war, with suggestions of a celebration. (This last section contains also some vague information on Antony's next movements.)

The first part of the poem begins with a rhetoric question: *quando... tecum sub alta ... domo ... bibam?* (ll. 1–4). These very words were for a long time interpreted as an indication of a scene far from Rome.<sup>22</sup> However other details suggest that the focus is not on the scene (at Maecenas' house), but rather the whole event – both the solemn feast with Caecuban wine (l. 1: *repostum Caecubum ad festas dapes*) and the concert (ll. 5–6: *sonante mixtum tibiis carmen lyra, / hac Dorium, illis barbarum*). Therefore, regardless of Horace's whereabouts, it can be deduced that the scene describes a specific celebration, at the end of the campaign, when Octavian's victory is undisputed. The present state is depicted with some indistinctness, which arises suspicion that the poem was composed after news of the naval victory had reached Rome.<sup>23</sup>

Following a 4-line junction (*ut nuper...*, ll. 7–10, of the Naulochus battle) the description of the battle itself begins with a series of general statements (a woman-leader, a mosquito-net amidst standards) and even a topos (an eastern court of Egypt is represented by palace-eunuchs),<sup>24</sup> – any of the details could have been guessed by anyone in Rome; while the action itself is reduced to a pair of episodes: desertion of Galatians (ll. 17–18) and the awkward movement (or forced immobility) of Antony's fleet (ll. 19–20).<sup>25</sup>

In this case, the only indication as to the presence of the poet *in situ* are two spatial references: *at huc* – 'but here' (hither, this way) in line 17 and *sinistrorsum* – 'to the left' in line 20.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> For an interpretation of the 9th *Epode* as a symposiac poem see Giusti 2016, 131 fol.

<sup>21</sup> It occurred 13–15 August 29 BC, see also *Carm.* 1. 37.

<sup>22</sup> E. g. Nisbet–Hubbard 1978, 100.

<sup>23</sup> This indistinctness was noticed even by Watson 2003, 3.

<sup>24</sup> Tac. *Ann.* 6. 31; Ter. *Eun.* 167–168; Hor. *Carm.* 1. 37. 9–10.

<sup>25</sup> Wistrand 1958, 2–65.

<sup>26</sup> I see no problem in sickness (nausea, l. 35): even if Suet. *Aug.* 17 states that Octavianus *in nave victor pernoctaverit*, there is no reason to assume that Horace writes the poem aboard, desperately seasick, and all the more so using Caecuban wine as a cure. The mention of a nervous qualm adds color to the naval context of the poem.

The first expression, “a crucial (in both senses) piece of evidence”,<sup>27</sup> is a reference to the desertion of Antony by 2,000 Galatians:<sup>28</sup>

at huc frementis verterunt bis mille equos  
Galli canentes Caesarem.

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at huc a<sup>2</sup> *unus* Bland. ad hunc V A a<sup>1</sup> Ccorr. R F δ<sup>1</sup> p u Ott. Ox. P Θ  
adhuc C<sup>1</sup> λ l δ<sup>2</sup>

Although Nisbet believes *at huc* to be “the only plausible reading”, it should be noted that this is only a recent correction of the text in the mss. The well-preserved reading is *ad hunc* (hunc = Romanum, l. 11, i. e. Marcum Antonium), which is also possible, though not too elegant.<sup>29</sup>

The passage is also problematic because the magnificent scene with snorting horses and singing horse-men galloping towards the enemy’s camp at the shore of the Actium peninsula differs greatly from other sources reporting on the desertion of Galatians:<sup>30</sup>

Velleius Paterculus mentions the desertion of the Galatian king Amyntas very briefly: *rex Amyntas meliora et utiliora secutus...* (84. 2).

According to Plutarch, Galatian left Antony’s camp a week, or at least a few days, before the battle (*Ant.* 63. 3).

Dio Cassius (50. 13. 8) adds an interesting detail: his focus is not on the desertion itself, but on Antony’s fear of being abandoned by his allies. In the chapter preceding that which describes the naval battle, Antony is said to call back some Galatians, who had been sent to Thrace to collect taxes. The historian does not tell whether they did in fact return, and one can assume that they did not.

This detail may also lead to the conclusion that the poem was written far from where the battle took place, by which time the events of several days had become known across Rome and Italy.

This intermediate derivation is also significant because the second passage, where the “signs of autopsy” are found, is very obscure:

hostiliumque navium portu latent  
puppes sinistrorsum citae.

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<sup>27</sup> Nisbet 2007, 12.

<sup>28</sup> The text and the *apparatus criticus* are taken from Borzsák 1984, ad loc.

<sup>29</sup> With the preposition *ad* meaning ‘against’.

<sup>30</sup> This was noticed often, see e.g. Watson 2003, 315.

These words were thoroughly examined by Wistrand<sup>31</sup> and Kraggerud,<sup>32</sup> who found phases of the naval action that support this contradictory description.<sup>33</sup> The word *sinistrorsum* (*sinistrorsus*) – ‘to the left’ – is particularly unclear in this context and seems to show some “starting point” from which the spatial direction are marked (i.e. to the right/left from the speaker). Nevertheless all the passages cited in connection to this word in the *OLD* suggest that usually this adverb implies the reference to the moving direction regardless of the location of the narrator:<sup>34</sup>

Ille sinistrorsum, hic dextrorsum abit (Hor. *Serm.* 2. 3. 50);

<Hercynia silva> oritur ab Helvetiorum ... finibus rectaque fluminis Danubi regione pertinet ad fines Dacorum et Anartium; hinc se flectit sinistrorsum diversis ab flumine regionibus... (Caes. *BG* 6. 25. 2–3);

Concipitur Appia in agro Lucullano Via Praenestina inter miliarium septimum et octavum deverticulo sinistrorsus passuum septingentorum octoginta (Fron. *Aq.* 1. 5);

... natus est VIII. Kal. Ian. in villa colli superposita prope Tarracinam, sinistrorsus Fundos petentibus (Suet. *Gal.* 4. 1).

This last observation does not solve the riddle of the verses 19–20,<sup>35</sup> but makes the presence of the poet unnecessary.

Therefore it is to be stated that

- 1) the text of the 9th Epode contains no clear signs of autopsy;
- 2) Horace was writing about events which had taken place several days, or even a week before the battle;
- 3) the passage lacks typical hallmarks, such as descriptions of his own impressions, first person narration, and so on.

### III. Minor references to military service after Philippi

The first of two poems in question is *Carm.* 2. 6, a declaration of love to Tibur (Tivoli) and Tarentum (Taranto),<sup>36</sup> addressed to a friend called

<sup>31</sup> Wistrand 1958, 26.

<sup>32</sup> Kraggerud 1984, 94.

<sup>33</sup> On the sequence of events see Pelling 2001, 54–59 esp. Figure 1, p. 60.

<sup>34</sup> The gloss Paul. Fest. P. 117M has no context: *Laetrorsum sinistrorsum*.

<sup>35</sup> The verb *lateo* does not imply movement, but rather a state or result, e. g. *in silvis abditī latebant* (Caes. *BG* 2. 19. 1).

<sup>36</sup> On Tarentum see also *Epist.* 1. 6. 44–45; 1. 16. 11.





the Elder mentions that baths were prescribed against wounds (*aquae volneribus medentur*, 31. 10), so it can be assumed that the scope of ailments the baths cured might extend to arthritis and old wounds, which must be valuable for soldiers who participated in the campaigns of 60–40 BC.<sup>41</sup>

The second passage is distinctly different, forming part of an autobiography in the last poem of the first book of the *Epistles*.

The “person” to whom the poem is addressed is particularly interesting – it is the book of *Epistles*, prepared for publication, and also a young man, recently freed, who wishes to leave the house and explore the world. Horace gives it/him the following commission (*Epist.* 1. 20. 19–25):

Cum tibi sol tepidus pluris admouerit auris,	
me libertino natum patre et in tenui re	20
maiores pinnas nido extendisse loqueris,	
ut quantum generi demas, virtutibus addas;	
me primis urbis belli placuisse domique,	
corporis exigui, praecanum, solibus aptum,	
irasci celerem, tamen ut placabilis essem.	

Line 23 contains the phrase *belli domique*, which has attracted the interest of those who believe that Horace might have been at other campaigns after Philippi. The phrase *belli domique* is a formal one<sup>42</sup> and usually goes with praise for a distinguished person who proved himself both in the war and civil life. Here the book/freedman should declare that Horace could please the finest people of Rome with the words *belli domique* relating either to *primis* or to *placuisse*.

Can it be a passing mention of partaking in Brutus’ campaign? Fraenkel interprets this passage so and even makes a moral inference: “... nothing obliged Horace to mention *belli* ... he has remained faithful to the memory of Brutus”.<sup>43</sup> Some friends of Horace, Messala and Sestius, were reported to have revered the last republican leader, even in presence of Octavian (Tac. *Ann.* 4. 34; Plut. *Brut.* 53; App. *Civ.* 4. 51. 223). Meanwhile Citroni,

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<sup>41</sup> This assumption would explain the tenses in *Carm.* 1. 7: *castra tenent* (l. 20), *tenebit Tiburis umbra* (ll. 20–21). There were some attempts to correct the text and to get rid of the Futurum, e.g. *latebris* [L. Müller], *recepit* [P. Maas], see Nisbet–Hubbard 1970, 103.

<sup>42</sup> With variants *duelli domique*, *bellique domique*; see OLD s. v. *bellum* 1b and TLL s. v. *bellum* (adverbialia temporis).

<sup>43</sup> Fraenkel 1968, 360.

on whose opinion one must rely in this particular question, feels that here "... reference to Philippi is highly improbable".<sup>44</sup>

One possible solution proposed by Citroni is simple and has been heard before: to refer the words *belli domique* to *primis* – "I pleased those who were the first people of Rome in the war and at home", meaning first Maecenas, and then Octavian. This opinion, though not popular with recent commentators (accepted by La Penna and Fedeli), was once quite common: Dacier (1691), Ritter (1857), Kiessling (1889),<sup>45</sup> L. Müller (1893). Those who prefer to read "I pleased in the war and at home the first people of Rome" (Ps.-Acro, Orelli, Wickham, Kiessling–Heinze, Fraenkel, Nisbet–Hubbard [on *Carm.* 2. 6], R. Mayer, Wistrand) have no strong arguments, except Orelli's "sic propria poetae laus augetur".<sup>46</sup>

Meanwhile compatibility of this formal phrase with the verb *placuisse* seems doubtful: according to the *OLD*, it means 'to be pleasing', 'to be liked or approved', 'to come into favour', so in the 20th *Epistle* it would more likely mean "he was chosen as a companion", or "he was dear to the leaders of the city". Two similar usages can be found in Horace's works: *quod placui tibi, qui turpi secernis honestum / non patre praeclaro...* (of Maecenas, *Serm.* 1. 6. 63–64) and *principibus placuisse viris non ultima laus* (*Epist.* 1. 17. 35).<sup>47</sup>

The usage of the phrase *belli domique* has quite a different effect, the verb (or expression) typically being used under different circumstances: once by Horace: *belli spectata domique / virtus* (*Epist.* 2. 1. 230–231; of Octavian); and also by other authors: *apud homines summa cum gloria belli domique versatos* (Cic., *De rep.* 1. 38. 3); *pectore res nostro est inter bellique domique / acta tot* (Ovid. *Met.* 12. 185–186); *omnia iuventutis decora belli domique* (Liv. 3. 19. 5), *praeefulgebat avus titulis bellique domique* (Sil. 4. 497) etc.

Thus we would agree with Citroni et al. in taking *belli domique* to refer to *primis*, noting also that the context of this *Epistle* as a whole and particularly the second half is ironic: the tale about a stubborn ass (ll. 15–16) and the words *ut quantum generi demas, virtutibus addas* (l. 22) rule out any serious interpretation. The speech belongs not to Horace, but to

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<sup>44</sup> Citroni 2000, 44.

<sup>45</sup> The version by Heinze (Kiessling–Heinze 1957) distinguishes *primis belli* and *primis domi*, which conflicts with the usage of the phrase (the only case with differentiation is Sall. *Iug.* 63. 2: *animus belli ingens domi modicus*, but here also one person is described).

<sup>46</sup> Orelli 1852, 588.

<sup>47</sup> This later passage shows that there is no need to specify where (or under what circumstances) one pleased the leaders.

the elderly addressee, who among other things names character traits considered important for a master: *irasci celerem, tamen ut placabilis essem* (l. 25). In this context it is not possible to discern any true great event drawn from the life of Horace.<sup>48</sup>

## Conclusion

To conclude, let us revise the considered passages. We know that Horace took part in the Civil war and fought at Philippi in 42 BC. Here we see explicit affirmation of this fact, adorned with allusion to Archilochus (*Carm.* 2. 7. 10 *relicta non bene parmula*) and gratitude to the gods for rescue (*Carm.* 2. 7. 13–14; 3. 4. 25–26). However for obvious reasons Horace does not make reference to this episode of his life too often, and therefore one should not look for references to the Battle of Philippi in the final *Epistle* of the 1<sup>st</sup> book.

In the 30s BC, Horace was a member of Maecenas' retinue. He accompanied him to Brundisium in 37 BC and very likely took part in the naval expedition against Sextus Pompeius in 36 BC (*Carm.* 2. 17. 20; 3, 4, 28; *Epod.* 1 [?]). This second episode of his military experience allows him to consider war part of his youth (*Carm.* 2. 6. 8), after which he retired to Rome and the surrounding area in peace and quiet.

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<sup>48</sup> This irony is expressed very well in Fraenkel's nice paraphrase: “... in front of an old man's hovel: ‘My master, you know, many years ago, he was a fine man and also a great poet. He came from a very humble family, and yet – would you believe it? – the best people of Rome used to invite him to dinner, Maecenas quite often, and sometimes even the Emperor Caesar Augustus’ and so forth” (Fraenkel 1968, 360).

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- E. Wistrand, “Horace’s Ninth Epode and its Historical Background”, *Studia Graeca et Latina Gothoburgensia* 8 (1958) 2–65.

The author strives to disprove the common assumption that Horace was present in the fleet during the Battle of Actium, and that he wrote the 9<sup>th</sup> *Epode* aboard. In fact, the poet never explicitly states this. Therefore the first section of the article compares the 9<sup>th</sup> *Epode* with descriptions of two events that Horace claims to have experienced himself: the battle of Philippi and the shipwreck by Capo Palinuro. Also the use of spatial reference points is considered, which would suggest that the narrator was present at the battle. Meanwhile the *at huc* (1. 17) is a medieval correction of a clumsy *ad hunc*, and the adverb *sinistrorsum* (1. 20) means usually ‘to the left in the course of travel’ and does not necessarily imply the narrator’s point of reference. Finally, the author compares the passage under scrutiny with another of the poet’s works: *Carm* 2. 6. and *Epist*. 1. 20. In the former Horace describes his lengthy experience of military service, exaggerating visibly, while his tone in *Epist* 1. 20. 23 is rather ironic and does not imply any autobiographical details. Furthermore, this author believes that the phrase *belli domique* refers to the adjective *primis*, rather than *placuisse*.

Автор статьи стремится опровергнуть распространенное допущение, согласно которому Гораций мог присутствовать в битве при Акции и даже написать 9-й *Эпод* на борту корабля, притом что поэт нигде не рассказывает об этом прямо. Текст эпода сравнивается с упоминаниями двух событий, которые Гораций называет как пережитые им: это битва при Филиппах и кораблекрушение у мыса Палинур. Далее рассматриваются те пассажи из 9-го *Эпода*, которые интерпретируются учеными как указания на присутствие рассказчика *in situ*. Однако в первом случае (*at huc*, ст. 17) речь идет о позднем исправлении рукописного *ad hunc*, тогда как второе наречие *sinistrorsum* (ст. 20) обычно означает 'налево по ходу движения' и не обязательно предполагает расположение рассказчика в центре координат. В заключение разбираются два места, в которых Гораций говорит о своем опыте военной службы: в *Оде* 2, 6 он явно преувеличивает его, а в *Послании* 1, 20, 23 речь, возможно, идет не о самом поэте (словосочетание *belli domique* следует скорее отнести к прилагательному *primis*).

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