

# The Lullingstone Mosaic Inscription — A Parody of Martial?

By S.R. COSH

## ABSTRACT

*The original poem inscribed above an image of Europa and the bull on the Lullingstone villa mosaic has long been recognised as referring to an episode in Ovid's Metamorphoses and making an allusion to Virgil's Aeneid. Here it is proposed that it is also a parody of a poem by Martial on the same subject and adds to the growing quantity of classical literature with which the fourth-century Romano-British elite are known to have been familiar.*

**Keywords:** Lullingstone villa; mosaic; inscription; Martial; Virgil; Ovid

The Europa mosaic at Lullingstone Roman Villa in Kent has always held a great fascination, not least because of the inscription accompanying an image of Europa being abducted by Jupiter in the guise of a bull (FIG. 9). The figured panel occupies an apse at the rear of the room and is orientated to be viewed from within it. Its exceptionally wide plain border was likely to have been intended for the placement of dining couches or a *stibadium* (a large semicircular couch). The inscription above the picture could be seen by diners from any position within the apse, which probably indicates that the owner of the villa attached some importance to it.

The inscription is in the form of a couplet and directly relates to the image:

INVIDA SI TA[VRI] VIDISSET IUNO NATATVS  
IVSTIVS AEOLIAS ISSET ADVSQVE DOMOS

If jealous Juno had seen the swimmings of the bull, more justly would she have gone to the halls of Aeolus. (*RIB* II, 2448.6)

This is apparently an allusion to Virgil's *Aeneid* 1.50 where Juno, the wife of Jupiter, calls upon Aeolus, the god of the winds, to raise a storm to overwhelm Aeneas' fleet as it makes for Italy. A.A. Barrett believes that, although Virgil inspired the subject matter and verse, the style more closely resembles Ovid in metre and style.<sup>43</sup> The poem, however, cannot be identified as his and was therefore probably an original composition, as were the two couplets on a mosaic at Frampton, which is also thought to date from the third quarter of the fourth century.<sup>44</sup>

Attempts have been made to see hidden meanings in the Lullingstone couplet. W.H.C. Frend draws attention to the opening word *INVIDA* (jealousy) which is used at the beginning of several fourth-century inscriptions (both Christian and supposedly pagan) in North Africa, where it was intended to ward off the 'evil eye'.<sup>45</sup> Martin Henig considers that this inscription may be a Christian cryptogram: by starting with the last letter of the first word and removing seven letters and leaving the eighth and repeating the

<sup>43</sup> Barrett 1978, 309–13.

<sup>44</sup> Cosh and Neal 2005, Mosaic 168.2; Ling 2007, 79–82.

<sup>45</sup> Frend 1955, 14–15.



FIG. 9. The Europa and the bull panel and inscription from Lullingstone villa. (Photo: Barry C. Burnham)

process, the name 'AVITVS' is spelt out, which, if the theory is correct, ought to be the name of the villa owner.<sup>46</sup> The same process, beginning with the first letter of the second line, spells out, with a slight adjustment at the end, 'IESVS' (i.e. Jesus). Charles Thomas goes even further and creates various grids using the letters of the couplet to form acrostics which spell out a possible garbled version of John 14, 6 in the New Testament and the words SIT IVI ITO VALE ISIS DEVS ('so be it, I have gone [from the religion]. Farewell, Isis, God'), hypothesising that Avitus has turned from Isis and has embraced Christianity.<sup>47</sup> In support of a Christian interpretation for the pavement is the presence of Bellerophon slaying the Chimera on the neighbouring mosaic panel, a scene featured on two pavements with Christian imagery at Hinton St Mary and Frampton in Dorset, and thought to be symbolic of Good overcoming Evil.<sup>48</sup> If the starting point of the couplet's composition was the hidden Christian message, particularly one as complex as Thomas proposes, it would have been a major *tour de force* to produce such a coherent piece, with its clear and sophisticated literary allusion, and it should be noted that not all scholars accept this hypothesis; the present author is similarly unconvinced.<sup>49</sup> Nevertheless, whether or not the couplet contains hidden messages does not detract from its still being a display of literary erudition.

Roger Ling, in his analysis of inscriptions on Romano-British mosaics and wall-paintings, cites three other literary or pseudo-literary examples at Otford, Frampton and possibly Colchester, which imply knowledge of a broad range of classical literature.<sup>50</sup> To these can be added figured mosaics without inscriptions which appear to illustrate the works of Virgil, Ovid and perhaps others. The most obvious is the mosaic from

<sup>46</sup> Henig 1997; Henig 2000.

<sup>47</sup> Thomas 1998, 47–54.

<sup>48</sup> Cosh and Neal 2005, Mosaics 172.1 and 168.2.

<sup>49</sup> Ling 2007, 78–9; Handley 2000.

<sup>50</sup> Ling 2007, 76–83.

Low Ham, Somerset, which famously shows scenes from Virgil's *Aeneid*;<sup>51</sup> while the mosaic from Room 12 at Brading villa, Isle of Wight, has plausibly been identified as having illustrations from Aratus, popular throughout the Roman period and translated afresh in the mid-fourth century by Avienus.<sup>52</sup> Several scenes from various sites in Britain could well illustrate Ovid's *Metamorphoses*,<sup>53</sup> as indeed does the scene of Europa and the bull from Lullingstone, hence perhaps the Ovidian style of the attached couplet.<sup>54</sup>

The scene of Europa clinging to the bull, her veil billowing in the wind, is portrayed in this conventional way on many mosaics throughout the Roman Empire, including one found in Old Broad Street, London in 1854, although this identification has been disputed.<sup>55</sup> Although the image long pre-dates Ovid, it closely conforms to his description. A slightly earlier incident in the story, where Europa places a garland over the bull's horns, occurs in a mosaic at Keynsham, near Bristol, and also reflects Ovid's words and the popularity of the tale.<sup>56</sup> Most scenes taken from the *Metamorphoses* are distinctive and would have been readily identifiable; there would have been no need to identify them with a tag. The creator of the couplet at Lullingstone clearly assumed that the viewer knew the story of Europa and merely provided a comment upon it.

In recent years literary quotes, particularly from Virgil, have been increasingly recognised as having been inscribed on everyday objects, reflecting the fact that these classic works were the cornerstone of education.<sup>57</sup> The many allusions to classical literature on mosaics and wall-paintings in fourth-century villas and town-houses in Roman Britain demonstrate a familiarity with the works themselves and the owners' desire to display this knowledge; the Lullingstone mosaic should be seen in this context. The reference to a scene from Virgil's *Aeneid* and the accompanying illustration possibly drawn from the pages of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, and in that poet's style, amply show this. However, a third, and perhaps more important, influence can be proposed: Martial.<sup>58</sup>

The Lullingstone inscription above the abduction of Europa appears to be a parody of a couplet by Martial composed to accompany a similar picture:

EUROPE PICTA:  
MUTARI MELIUS TAURO, PATER OPTIME DIVUM  
TUNC POTERAS, IO CUM TIBI VACCA FUIT

Picture of Europa: You could better have been changed to a bull, great father of gods, when Io was your cow. (Martial 14.180; trans. R.J. Ling)

Jupiter had transformed the nymph Io into a heifer in order to deceive his jealous wife, Juno. In the version of the tale as related by Ovid in *Metamorphoses* 1.588–667 Juno is not fooled at all; she demands the cow be given to her and orders the hundred-eyed Argus to guard the creature. As Io's father laments, now her husband and children have to come from the herd (1.659). Both couplets were written to accompany an image of Europa and the bull, and both allude to the relationship between Jupiter and Juno, offering witty alternatives based on their reading of classical literature. As a parody, it might be significant that the Lullingstone couplet is from the wife's point of view, taking the moral high ground, while Martial takes the lascivious husband's.<sup>59</sup> Although Martial's poetry might seem an unusual inspiration for an inscription

<sup>51</sup> Cosh and Neal 2005, Mosaic 207.1. On a pavement from Frampton, Dorset, Aeneas plucking a bough from the sacred oak is based on Virgil, *Aeneid* 6.210–11, but is also found in Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 14.113–15, and other scenes on the mosaic could have been drawn from that source; Barrett 1977, 312–14, Cosh and Neal 2005, Mosaic 168.1.

<sup>52</sup> Wilson 2006, 307–31.

<sup>53</sup> For example, Cyparissus: *Met.* 10.106–42, Leicester, Neal and Cosh 2002, Mosaic 25.3; Actaeon: *Met.* 3.139–252, Cirencester, Cosh and Neal 2010, Mosaic 421.46; Ganymede: *Met.* 10.155–61, Bignor, Neal and Cosh 2009, Mosaic 396.3; Daphne: *Met.* 1.451–567, Dinnington, Cosh and Neal 2010, 399, fig. 417a.

<sup>54</sup> Ovid, *Met.* 2.868–75.

<sup>55</sup> Cosh 2011; *contra* Witts 2011.

<sup>56</sup> Cosh and Neal 2005, Mosaic 204.10.

<sup>57</sup> See, for example, Henig 2002, 78–86.

<sup>58</sup> This suggestion was first briefly mentioned in Cosh 2011, note 3.

<sup>59</sup> It is perhaps significant that in much the same way Ovid's *Ars Amatoria*, encouraging the lover, is countered by his *Remedia Amoris*.

in mosaic, it is not unknown: a couplet by the poet (1.40), which also deals with the subject of envy, is quoted in full on an early fifth-century mosaic from Vinon-sur-Verdon in southern France.<sup>60</sup>

Martial's Book 14 is entitled *Apophoreta*, deriving its name from Saturnalia gifts presented by hosts, and is a collection of couplets each with the name of the present as a heading. The gift in question is a copy of a picture of Europa, perhaps the one by Antiphilius in the Porticus Pompeii in Rome referred to by Pliny the Elder.<sup>61</sup> In Martial 14.2, the introduction to his work, the poet invites the reader to browse and read only the titles if he prefers. It is quite possible that this was the stimulus for the Lullingstone couplet where someone has accepted Martial's invitation and created a clever couplet in the same spirit to fit the title. If the owner of Lullingstone villa had come across Martial's verse, he may well have appreciated the poet's wit through his own reading of Ovid and been inspired to create an alternative, more moral, version. However, we cannot be certain that the owner himself wrote this witty parody of Martial's couplet, if that is what it is, or that the writer was even a Romano-Briton, but its inclusion in the mosaic reflects the lively interest in literature and classical culture appreciated by the owner and, presumably, his guests. Ovid and Virgil they might well have known, but whether they were also aware of the Martial connection, or even meant to be, is debatable. One can speculate that one visitor came from a villa within 5 km of Lullingstone at Otford, where a quotation from Virgil's *Aeneid* was found inscribed in white paint on coloured wall-plaster, probably to accompany figured scenes of which a fragment survives.<sup>62</sup> It reminds us that the fifth-century writer Sidonius, in his epistolary description of the villa in Gaul which he had inherited, notes that, although his *frigidarium* does not have fancy wall-painting, its plain white walls are relieved by 'a few lines of verse'. These, he says 'will cause the new-comer to stop and read: these strike the happy mean, for although they inspire no longer to be read again, they can be read through without boredom'.<sup>63</sup> This is probably a typical example of Sidonius' false modesty, especially if the verses were by Sidonius himself. The letter is a pastiche of villa descriptions by Pliny the Younger and Statius,<sup>64</sup> and it is very possible that the poet at Lullingstone, who we can presume was the owner, was similarly harking back to classical literature and imitating it. If this were the case, we can now add Martial to the growing list of works available and known to the well-educated elite in fourth-century Britain.

This should not surprise us. At much the same time the Gallic poet Ausonius published a book of epigrams, some of which could not have been written without a good knowledge of Martial.<sup>65</sup> At the end of the work, he devotes six couplets to lampooning, in a Martial-like way, a Briton called Silvius Bonus, the final part of his name meaning 'good', who had criticised his poetry.<sup>66</sup> The epigrams rather labour the point that 'good' and 'Briton' were conflicting terms in his opinion and, presumably, that of others in Gaul. Although not specifically stated, it is probable that Silvius Bonus was a fellow poet and conceivably Ausonius is referring to the quality of Romano-British poets rather than Britons in general. Nevertheless, the poet who created the Lullingstone couplet can be seen as following the same tradition as Ausonius and, like him, being rather less crude than Martial as suited the time.

*Ash Vale, Surrey*

[stephencosh675@btinternet.com](mailto:stephencosh675@btinternet.com)

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<sup>60</sup> Lavagne 2000, cat. no. 918.

<sup>61</sup> Pliny, *Nat. Hist.* 35.114.

<sup>62</sup> Ling 2007, 76–8, 84, figs 11–12. Although Ling follows the excavator who considered that the villa was abandoned by A.D. 200, Detsicas 1983, 90 notes that it is unclear how this dating was arrived at and the majority of the pottery belongs to the third and fourth centuries.

<sup>63</sup> Sidonius, *Epist.* 2.2, trans. W.B. Anderson.

<sup>64</sup> Pliny the Younger, *Epist.* 2.17, 5.16; Statius, *Silvae* 1.3, 2.2.

<sup>65</sup> Kay 2001, 20.

<sup>66</sup> Ausonius, *Epigrammata* 107–12 (116–21); Martial wrote epigrams lampooning named critics of his work (for example 3.83) and on people whose names do not suit their attributes; for instance 3.36 concerns Chione, which means 'snow', but who herself is dark.

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## Tracing Troops: An Upper German Belt-Fitting from Roman Scotland

By FRASER HUNTER

### ABSTRACT

*A silver belt-fitting from Cramond in the shape of a ring-pommel sword is linked to a class of beneficiarius equipment typical of Germania Superior. It is argued that this represents troop movements connected with the Severan campaigns.*

**Keywords:** Cramond; Roman military equipment; military belt-fitting; ring-pommel sword; silver; Germania Superior; *beneficiarius*

The Roman fort at Cramond (near Edinburgh) was built in the A.D. 140s to defend the coastal fringes of the Antonine Wall frontier. It was probably abandoned in the A.D. 160s, but was re-occupied as a supply base during the Severan invasions in the early third century.<sup>67</sup> An interesting pit group discovered in 1985 in the fort's annexe is only now being prepared for publication. It contained two Trompetenmuster mounts and an exceptional silver belt-fitting which is the subject of this note (FIGS 10–11). These seem to have been part of a hoard; eight denarii were also recovered from the pit, ending with a coin of Caracalla (A.D. 206–9).

<sup>67</sup> Holmes 2003.