



UDC 821.124

The Falernian Picnic (Hor. *Carm.* 2, 3)

Sofia Egorova

St. Petersburg State University,
7–9, Universitetskaya nab., St. Petersburg, 199034, Russian Federation; s.egorova@spbu.ru

For citation: Sofia Egorova. The Falernian Picnic (Hor. *Carm.* 2, 3). *Philologia Classica* 2021, 16 (2), 228–233. <https://doi.org/10.21638/spbu20.2021.205>

This article deals with the structure of Horace's *Carm.* 2, 3, in which the poet advises Dellius to cultivate calm and goes on to describe a luxurious picnic. Whereas other commentators since antiquity have connected Falernian wine with an anecdote of Quintus Dellius (Plut. *Ant.* 59, 4: "For he had offended Cleopatra at supper by saying that while sour wine was served to them, Sarmentus, at Rome, was drinking Falernian. Now, Sarmentus was one of the youthful favourites of Caesar, such as the Romans call *deliciae*." [Tr. B. Perrin]), this article seeks another reason why this particular kind of wine should be mentioned here. The phrase *interiore nota Falerni* in verse 8 probably indicates that the wine chosen for the picnic was not only of good origin, but also a vintage one, and this trait of Dellius can be viewed as an extreme desire to pursue the *joie de vivre*: he not only goes for a picnic (which would be a moderate way of spending holidays, see e. g., Cic. *Off.* 3, 58), but he chooses the Falernian for it, and — moreover — the aged one. Thus, the poem to Dellius is contrasted to other well-known poems from Book 2, namely *Carm.* 2, 14 (to Postumus, who will not enjoy his rare wine himself) and *Carm.* 2, 10, where the famous ideal of *aurea mediocritas* is expressed.

Keywords: aurea mediocritas, *Carm.* 2, 3, Dellius, Horace, nota, pittance.

1. Introduction

"Many moons ago" at the beginning of this millennium, in an attic room of the Philological Faculty (in the evening, for some reason), my fellow students and I read Horace's poems under the guidance of Prof. Alexander Gavrilov. He obviously wished to condescend our rather limited life experience and chose mostly poems of love and banquets. Probably with the same intention, he sometimes proposed deliberately modernized commentary or translation, such as: "boats are dragged from the winter sheds" (in Russian, "из ангаров корабли тащат...") for *Carm.* 1, 4, 2 or "*Turpe solum* — is by no means a piece of

parquet!” for *Carm.* 2, 7, 12. When we were reading the *Carm.* 2, 3, he drew our attention to the scene when an old amphora is fetched from a *deep* storage place: “either deep in the cellar, or in the whole pile of bottles” — was his remark. The discussion on this passage seems to me a suitable present for Alexander Konstantinovich’s 80th birthday.

2. *Carm.* 2, 3 and the Aftertaste of the Civil War

Let us recall the subject of this relatively small ode (28 lines). The poet advises the reader — along with the addressee of the poem, Dellius, who is named in line 4¹ — to stay calm in any circumstances, regardless of whether they are troubled (*rebus in arduis*) or favorable. Either way, one should avoid excessive joy; literally, to keep one’s mind moderate (*temperatam OLD, 3a*)² without superfluous gladness (*insolenti laetitia*). Whether you are gloomy all the time or, in contrast, while the Fates allow it, enjoy a picnic — with the description of the place of the picnic and the preparations that follow — there is no difference: we all, both rich and poor, have to go to eternal exile in the Kingdom of Hades (this mirthless theme takes up 3 of the poem’s 7 stanzas).

The complete set of afterlife motifs (equality of all people, the vanity of wealth, the image of an indignant heir, Charon’s boat) is the reason why this poem is often compared³ to the 14th from the same book, in which the poet recalls an abstract character, Postumus,⁴ of death. However, some difference is also noticeable: in the somewhat “monochrome” *Carm.* 2, 14, one sees a list of *topoi* (e. g., vv. 21–22: earth — house — a dear wife) in the places Dellius’ poem displays in vivid⁵ detail. This presents Dellius not only as a rich man, but someone who searches for refinement: a villa, bathed with the yellow Tiber (v. 18), Falernian wine (v. 8), the so-called *locus amoenus* (vv. 9–14): a meadow, the shade of a poplar and a pine tree, streaming water, the petals of quickly withering roses. Thus, in my opinion, the relationship to other poems would provide us more for the interpretation of *Carm.* 2, 3. Let us look not only at *Carm.* 2, 10 with its famous *aurea mediocritas* (see below), but also at a poem which is placed quite far in the collection and was composed much earlier — the poem to Plancus (*Carm.* 1, 7). Plancus was another well-known turncoat who left Mark Antony for Octavian, if, like most scholars, we agree that “our” Dellius is Quintus Dellius, a commander and politician (for his biography, see Wissowa 1901, 2447–2448).

Both characters earned more than ambiguous reputations. Roman society blamed L. Munatius Plancus, consul of 42 BC, for including his brother into the proscription list, while Dellius was accused of repeatedly changing his political allegiances: Messala Corvinus called him “desultor bellorum civilium”, i. e., a circus horse changer (Sen. *Suas.* 1. 7). Their life at the oriental court was the subject of numerous queer anecdotes, and we will encounter one of them later. For present however it is not all of society that is in question, but Horace and his way of reflecting the tensions of that difficult period. In the case of

¹ The vocative goes with the participle *moriture* — I remember Prof. Gavrilov asking: “Was Dellius pleased to get that?”

² Here we notice the first reference to wine that was usually mixed (*temperare, OLD 6*) with water.

³ Nisbet — Hubbard 1978, *ad loc.*

⁴ Meanwhile, even if this was a real person (e. g., the same Postumus as the one mentioned by Propertius [3. 12]), the name with the component *post-* is significant: as S. Harrison (*ad loc.*) noticed, the last name (*cognomen*) of an addressee was used by Horace even if it is related to the theme of the poem.

⁵ As Nisbet — Hubbard noticed (1978, *ad loc.*), this fragment contains plenty of colors: *alba, atra, flavus*.

Carm. 1. 7 (this poem has a simple structure: intro,⁶ admonition,⁷ example), he uses a mythical example — the return of Teucer, Ajax' brother, from the Trojan war — that turns the poem into consolation for Plancus who, like Teucer, *failed to save* his brother.⁸ Could this be grounds to suppose that the reader is meant to connect something in character or the story of Dellius with the theme of the poem? (One cannot deny the opposite possibility, as some of Horace's poems have just formal addressees.⁹)

The mere text of the poem suggests an extreme gloominess: the words "if you spend your life in constant gloominess" (*seu maestus omni tempore vixeris*) are to be taken as the beginning of the poem's progress towards consoling human misery in familiar enough fashion. A contrary interpretation casts Dellius as a hedonist (typical of the common view of Cleopatra and Antony's court), in which case the mention of gloominess marks one extreme (*seu... seu*), while the character is much closer to the other, knowing plenty of leisure.¹⁰

If we consider the historic information as well, we have to pay certain attention to Dellius' background. Plutarch (*Ant.* 59. 4) captures the story which, if it is true of course, explains the relationship between Dellius and Falernian wine. Rumour has it that once Dellius provoked Cleopatra with complaints about sour wine,¹¹ allegedly saying: "We drink some vinegar here, while in Rome Sarmentus drinks the Falernian." (There is a sexual connotation in this remark due to the mention of Octavian's catamite, but experts in this sphere¹² state that according to views of the time there was nothing for Octavian to be ashamed of. Meanwhile, some modern historians¹³ suppose that the whole rumor of Sarmentus was invented by Octavian's foes.)

Is this anecdote of relevance for Horace's *Carm.* 2. 3? And if not (either because the story was not well-known, or Dellius' personality is not emphasized, or Horace would not mention the youthful relationship of the now mature and settled *princeps*) — why then was the Falernian named here? In other words, is it possible to find some other rationale for mentioning this particular kind of wine?

3. A Picnic Menu

I must admit that I have not (yet?) managed to discover exactly what the Romans drank at their picnics. They were held mostly in private gardens (*horti*), so there were no problems with delivering wine or food. Meanwhile, Horace combines a pastoral topic with the refusal of "foreign dishes" (*Epod.* 2 and to some extent *Carm.* 1. 38), and it seems probable that during such an outing even a gourmet could be content with a simpler menu as

⁶ It has the shape of a *priamella*: enumeration of different objects or situations with the aim of making contrasts, when the main subject is at last named (cf. Hor. *Carm.* 1. 1 and in Russian poetry Anna Akhmatova, "Привольем пахнет дикий мед...").

⁷ It may be interesting that it starts with the same word as in *Carm.* 2. 3 (*Carm.* 1. 7. 17–19: ...finire *memento* tristitiam vitaeque labores molli, Plance, mero...).

⁸ On this poem and Plancus, see Kumaniecki 1947.

⁹ E. g., *Carm.* 1. 22; 2. 16.

¹⁰ Prof. Gavrilov noticed that the didactic tone of the poem is not to be taken too seriously: "Dellius himself knew very well where to lie and what to drink."

¹¹ Preserving the reputation of Cleopatra as a lady of the house — the location was Greece, not Egypt.

¹² E. g., Williams 2010, 328; in Russian, the translation of P. Quignard's work is of some interest as it exhibits a broad picture of sexual life in Ancient Rome (П. Киньяр. *Секс и страх*. Москва, Текст, 2000).

¹³ Osgood 2006, 264.

compared to a full-scale banquet. A specific trait of a Roman picnic is that it was relatively private: Cicero (Cic. *Off.* 3. 58) for instance stresses seclusion in private gardens with an entrance only for friends: *C. Canius ... cum se Syracusas otiandi, ut ipse dicere solebat, non negotiandi causa contulisset, dictitabat se hortulos aliquos emere velle, quo invitare amicos et ubi se oblectare sine interpellatoribus posset.* This passage shows, also, that a picnic itself was a usual form of *otium* for a well-to-do Roman citizen, and not an attribute of *dolce vita*. Still more, in Dellius' poem we see time limits for a period of leisure: the words *per dies festos* (vv. 6–7) are to be interpreted as “at holidays”, and not “all holidays long.”¹⁴ Thus, it is important not that Dellius lies on the grass in privacy (*te in remoto gramine... reclinatam*), but what he indulges himself in (*bearis*): the focus of the composition is *interiore nota Falerni* (vv. 7–8).

One of the best Italian wines¹⁵ is labelled here with “an inner mark” (*nota interior*). This mark, painted in an amphora or written on a papyrus tag (called a *pittacium* or *titulus*¹⁶) conveyed the place of origin and the year of the vintage. Strangely, one can hardly find examples of *notae* in modern times despite the immense number of ancient amphorae that have survived. But the papyrus *pittacia* found in Monza were studied within the context of early Christian communities,¹⁷ and there are some amphorae and jugs in Pompeii with paint that is still legible.¹⁸

However, the archeological standpoint is not of great importance for understanding the poem, as the words *mark*, *label* etc. soon become figurative. In the passage discussed, the phrase “an inner mark” is a part of a metonymy (the mark = wine with the mark) and has the same meaning as “a better mark” (the Latin *nota melior* is found more often¹⁹): fine wines were stored at the far end of the cellar — partly because they were placed there earlier, and partly because of safety and practicality, as they were not for everyday usage.

Meanwhile there still is some uncertainty to whether this detail points out the *kind* of wine (entrance > table wine > fine wine, including Falernian) or its *age* (entrance > the Falernian of recent years > the aged Falernian).²⁰ The second interpretation is preferable: it rules out pleonasm (the wine of inner mark = the Falernian), and in *Satires* (*Serm.* 1, 10, 24) Horace has almost the same phrase (...*suavior, ut Chio nota si conmixta Falerni est*), *nota Falerni* without any adjective denoting the kind of wine. One additional reason is that Falernian was produced in large amounts (Galen, though he lived in a later period, complained that all “Falernian” that was on the market could not be genuine [Ap. Athen. 276]), and in a rich man's cellar it would not have been the most valuable if only its age is

¹⁴ See *OLD* 6, with the closest example being Cato's *per ferias* (*Agr.* 2. 4); Horace used it in *per autumnos* (*Carm.* 2. 14. 15).

¹⁵ Our sources (mainly Plin. *NH* 14, 63) tell of three kinds of Falernian: dry (*austerum*), sweet (*dulce*) and light (*tenue*), but there was no difference among them in rarity or price, so they are of no interest for the present case.

¹⁶ The well-known passage in *Satyricon* (34, 6) provides both words and demonstrates that *pittacium* denoted a papyrus piece, while *titulus* — the text on it: “...amphorae vitreae diligenter gypsatae, quarum in cervicibus pittacia erant affixa cum hoc titulo: FALERNVM OPIMIANVM ANNORVM CENTVM. Dum titulos perlegimus ...” (These particular labels were obviously meant as a decoration, see n. 20).

¹⁷ With the photo of small amphorae with *pittacia*: Trout 2005, 132, fig. 1.

¹⁸ An example of a painted *nota*: Gods, Men, Heroes 2019, 182.

¹⁹ Cat. 68. 28; Cic. *Epist.* 7. 29 etc.

²⁰ The Falernian matured from 15 to 20 years, and afterwards it could be stored for quite a long time: Pliny registered the Opimian vintage (212 BC), which wine was drunk in the time of Caesar's dictatorship.

not emphasized. Therefore, the mention of *the aged Falernian* defines Dellius as a choosy person.

We then see what is opposed to the constant gloominess: our character not only (1) goes for a picnic in a remote and pleasant garden, but (2) he chooses the Falernian for it, and moreover (3) the aged one! This is the kind of behavior Horace landmarks with *laetitia insolens* in the beginning of the poem, vv. 3–4, whereas a more modestly furnished picnic would be a usual way of spending holidays.

4. Is this Horace's Advice?

Straight away the poem turns to the necessity of leaving all these nice things that are to be inherited by the heir (in *Carm.* 2. 14 this is probably the most vivid image²¹). The sudden transition between subjects must contain some emotional point, which however does not contain a clear answer to the question — does Horace agree with Dellius and recommend this “wasting life”? Is this the only human reaction to the inevitable (and then Postumus from *Carm.* 2. 14 is wrong in suspending the pleasure that fate will give to his heir²²) or is it not fully expressed advice to cherish the golden mean from *Carm.* 2. 10? Though there are no death motives in that poem, the concept of “the middle way”²³ is represented quite generally — both with the examples of extremities (a rocky coast — the high sea, dirty shacks — gorgeous palace, etc.), and with the figurative description of a “right” life: the end of that poem in particular is close to the first stanza of ours: *Rebus angustis animosus atque / fortis appare; sapienter idem / contrahes vento nimium secundo / turgida vela.*

A balance²⁴ of this kind can be perceived in *Carm.* 2. 3. What way leading to the golden mean may be divined for Dellius with his desire for *joie de vivre*? We have no continuation in this ode, but we have other poems — *Carm.* 1. 9; 1. 11; 1. 20; 1. 38; 2. 11; 2. 16; 3. 8; 4. 12 — and can infer Horace's advice. Namely, if neither frank despair nor delicate pleasures make the human being immortal, is it not a right to spend life *in simple joys*, without long preparations, with a glass of local wine, in the company of a few friends?

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²¹ Prof. Gavrilov remarked that “readers are simply browbeaten with such an heir.”

²² What is Horace's recommendation here? One can assume that Postumus should have consumed the rare Caecuban wine himself, just as Leuconoe (*Carm.* 1. 11) is told to filter wine so as to drink it right now (Nisbet — Hubbard 1970 ad loc.). On this metaphor, see Tarrant 2020, 52.

²³ In some sense Horace is very close here to the Chinese concept of balance and eternal change (vv. 15–20), but the *Mean* (zhōng yōng) of Confucius is not absolutely coextensive with *aurea mediocritas*.

²⁴ Nisbet — Hubbard 1978, ad loc., notice the idea of balance here also, but they point out the historical background: in his career Quintus Dellius must have found balance in many situations.

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Received: July 27, 2021
Accepted: October 15, 2021