University of Reading

A frog in the throat: à propos AE 2012.740 = ZPE 181 (2012) 150

Article

Published Version

Kruschwitz, P. (2016) A frog in the throat: à propos AE 2012.740 = ZPE 181 (2012) 150. Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik. pp. 162-163. ISSN 0084-5388 Available at https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/58038/

It is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from the work. See Guidance on citing.

Publisher: University of Koeln

All outputs in CentAUR are protected by Intellectual Property Rights law, including copyright law. Copyright and IPR is retained by the creators or other copyright holders. Terms and conditions for use of this material are defined in the End User Agreement.

www.reading.ac.uk/centaur

CentAUR

Central Archive at the University of Reading

Reading's research outputs online

Peter Kruschwitz

A Frog in the Throat: À Propos *AE* 2012.740 = *ZPE* 181 (2012) 150

aus: Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik 198 (2016) 162–163

© Dr. Rudolf Habelt GmbH, Bonn

A Frog in the Throat: À Propos *AE* 2012.740 = *ZPE* 181 (2012) 150

In *ZPE* 181 (2012) 149–155, Armin Uwe Stylow presented a new curse tablet from Celti (Peñaflor, Province of Seville).[1] The fascinating piece, inscribed in a retrograde script, was transcribed and translated as follows:

> *Marcel(l)us Valerius mutus tacitus siet*
> *adversus C. Licinio Gallo. Quadmodum*
> *rana sene (!) lingua muta tacita est, sic Mar-*
> *cellus mutus tacitus debilitatus siet*
> *adv<e>rsus L[i]cinio Gallo.*

> "Valerius Marcellus soll sprachlos und stumm sein in dem Rechtsstreit, den er gegen Gaius Licinius Gallus führt. Ebenso, wie ein Frosch ohne Zunge sprachlos und stumm ist, so soll Marcellus sprachlos, stumm und unfähig zu jeglicher Handlung sein in dem Rechtsstreit, den er gegen Licinius Gallus führt."

In English:

> "May Valerius Marcellus be mute and silent (in his lawsuit) against Gaius Licinius Gallus. Like a frog without a tongue is mute and silent, thus may Marcellus be mute and silent and debilitated (in his lawsuit) against Licinius Gallus."

The unusual phrase *quadmodum | rana sene (!) lingua*, 'just like a frog without a tongue' was explained by Stylow as a reference to an 'imagined frog without a tongue' (as opposed to an actual frog that had been used as part of a magical ritual, that is), since frogs in the ancient world generally were deemed noisy and obnoxious and subject to voice-related punishments (without providing any evidence for tales that involve the removal of the tongue).[2]

While Aristotle assumed that a frog's γλῶττα (~ *lingua*) was involved in the production of specific sounds,[3] it was known already in antiquity that the production of speech in general was not an issue of the tongue alone.[4] In the case of frogs, it is much rather the stream of air that moves from the lungs via the larynx and the trachea into the air sac (which serves as a resonance chamber) that is responsible for the production of sound.

It may thus be worth considering two alternative explanations, especially as there are other contexts in which *rana* and *lingua* are closely related in ancient sources.

The first explanation, too, involves a substantially diminished ability to produce speech (as deemed desirable for the intended victim of the curse tablet). *Rana* as well as the diminutive *ranula* is a technical term that refers to swellings of the tongue or the tissue on the floor of the mouth (whence, unsurprisingly, the expression 'a frog in the throat'). These swellings, affecting both animals and humans, are debilitating

[1] A. U. Stylow, Stumm wie ein Frosch ohne Zunge! Eine neue Fluchtafel aus Celti (Peñaflor, Prov. Sevilla), *ZPE* 181 (2012) 149–155 (esp. 150 for the edition and translation of this piece).

[2] Stylow (nt. 1) 153 with nt. 33–34.

[3] See Arist. *HA*. 536a10 ff.: ὁ δὲ βάτραχος ἰδίαν ἔχει τὴν γλῶτταν· τὸ μὲν γὰρ ἔμπροσθεν προσπέφυκεν ἰχθυωδῶς, ὃ τοῖς ἄλλοις ἀπολέλυται, τὸ δὲ πρὸς τὸν φάρυγγα ἀπολέλυται καὶ πέπτυκται, ᾧ τὴν ἰδίαν ἀφίησι φωνήν ('the frog has a tongue of peculiar formation: the front part is firmly attached as in fishes (whereas in other animals it can move freely), but the part towards the pharynx can move freely, and has a fold in it, and with this they produce their peculiar cry', transl. A. L. Peck). Further on this cf. e. g. S. Noriega-Olmos, *Aristotle's Psychology of Signification: A Commentary on 'De Interpretatione' 16a 3–18* (BzA 303), Berlin–New York 2013, 28–30.

[4] On ancient language science see comprehensively J. Wollock, *The Noblest Animate Motion. Speech, Physiology and Medicine in Pre-Cartesian Linguistic Thought*, Amsterdam–Philadelphia 1997.

(cf. the expression in the curse tablet: *debilitatus siet*, 'debilitated' or even 'maimed'), as they impede salivation, swallowing, and production of proper speech. In fact, in humans this swelling, resembling a frog's air sac in visual appearance, can become up to walnut-sized. Several ancient authors refer to treatment of *rana* or *ranula*, involving surgery and medication.[5] Such a swelling in the mouth cavity, if combined with the absence of a tongue (*sene lingua*), would of course mean guaranteed silence. If this indeed is what the text of the Spanish curse tablet refers to, it more appropriately ought to be translated as follows:

> "May Valerius Marcellus be mute and silent (in his lawsuit) against Gaius Licinius Gallus. Like 'rana' and lack of tongue mean being mute and silent, thus may Marcellus be mute and silent and maimed (in his lawsuit) against Licinius Gallus."

Diseases and infirmities are, of course, common wishes for enemies in ancient curse tablets; it would therefore not appear to be out of question altogether for this one to wish for *ran(ul)a sene lingua* in a medical sense as something that is supposed to leave the victim *mutus*, *tacitus*, and *debilitatus*. The main problem with this is, of course, the question as to whether *rana sene lingua muta tacita est* can, in fact, mean what has been proposed as a translation here.

The second alternative must refer to a curious tale reported in Pliny's *Natural History*:[6]

> *Democritus quidem tradit, si quis extrahat ranae uiuenti linguam, nulla alia corporis parte adhaerente, ipsaque dimissa in aquam inponat supra cordis palpitationem mulieri dormienti, quaecumque interrogauerit, uera responsuram. addunt etiamnum alia Magi, quae si uera sint, multo utiliores uitae existumentur ranae quam leges; namque harundine transfixis a natura per os si surculus in menstruis defigatur a marito, adulterorum taedium fieri.*
>
> "Democritus indeed tells us that if the tongue, with no other flesh adhering, is extracted from a living frog, and after the frog has been set free into water, placed over the beating heart of a sleeping woman, she will give true answers to all questions. The Magi add also other details, and if there is any truth in them, frogs should be considered more beneficial than laws to the life of mankind. They say that if frogs are pierced with a reed from the genitals through the mouth, and if the husband plants a shoot in his wife's menstrual discharge she conceives an aversion to adulterous lovers."

The appeal of this reference for the Celti curse tablet lies not so much on the implied lack of power to produce speech in a frog without a tongue, but in the idea that it is, in fact, the frog's tongue that in the described magical ritual represents the ability to elicit truth. A frog without it is not only silent, but no longer potentially dangerous to a person who has something to hide.

Ultimately, the meaning of the curse tablets remains a riddle. From the evidence provided here, however, it seems possible to infer that the meaning of this remarkable text lies beyond the assumption of a merely outrageous metaphor that was chosen for no apparent reason. Which one of the two offered alternative explanations is more likely to apply (if any), is a different matter.

Peter Kruschwitz, University of Reading, Department of Classics, Whiteknights, PO Box 218, Reading RG6 6AA, United Kingdom – p.kruschwitz@reading.ac.uk

[5] See e. g. Columella 6.8 and Veg. *mulom*. 4.5.1 (on cattle). For a description of the procedure in human patients see Cels. *med*. 7.12.5: *sub lingua quoque interdum aliquid abscedit, quod fere consistit in tunica doloresque magnos mouet. quo, si exiguum est, incidi semel satis est; si maius, summa cutis usque ad tunicam excidenda est; deinde utrimque orae hamulis excipiendae et tunica undique circumdato liberanda est, magna diligentia per omnem curationem habita, ne qua maior uena incidatur* ('Sometimes also under the tongue an abscess occurs which is generally enclosed in a coat and causes much pain. If it is small, one cut is enough; if large, the skin over it is to be excised down to the coating; then the two margins are laid hold of with hooks, and the coating is to be freed from what it surrounds and completely extracted, taking great care throughout the operation that no large blood vessel is cut into', transl. W. G. Spencer).

[6] Plin. *nat*. 32.49, transl. H. Rackham.