

Rethinking the circumcised phallus in Martial's *Epigrams*

The poems of Martial and Juvenal are well-known for the satirical and critical attacks on individuals from all walks of life. The people of Judea and the followers of the Jewish religion do not escape their critical eye. Moreover, in the aftermath of the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in 70 CE and the subsequent squelching of the rebellion by the Flavian emperors, the Jews became a much more likely target in satirical literature (e.g., Juv. 3, 6, 15; Mar. 7.30, 7.55, 7.82, 11.94). Much of the critique of the Jews focused on the stereotype of their proselytizing, their association with money, their over-sexualization, and their specific dietary restrictions. However, whereas these critiques are prominent in the works of Juvenal and other writers from the 1st century BCE – 1st century CE, Martial seemingly focused his satirical eye on the other prominent marker of Judaism: circumcision. In no fewer than five epigrams (7.30, 7.55, 7.82, 9.57, 11.94), Martial makes Jewish circumcision the climactic moment of his epigrammatic joke. Moreover, more often than not, Martial goes beyond mere mention of circumcision and connects the circumcised Jewish phallus to the stereotype of the over-sexualized Jew. The main vehicle for this shift in focus is the choice between two terms for the circumcised phallus: *recutitus* and *verpus*.

Therefore, this paper shall examine Martial's use these two terms for circumcision and will identify that, whereas one of them, *recutitus*, is a generic term for the practice, the other, *verpus*, is a sexually-charged term that draws attention of the over-sexualized nature of the phallus through its similarity to an erect and sexually-aroused phallus. To show this distinction, a brief examination of previous uses of the term in a non-Jewish context will be provided.

Finally, this paper will turn to a close reading of Martial 7.82 to re-interpret the epigram based on this nuanced reading of circumcision.

Select Bibliography

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