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# WHO WAS SABINUS ILLE?

## A reinterpretation of Catalepton 10

Iiro Kajanto

The identity of Sabinus formerly Quinctio, a muleteer from Gallia Cisalpina, probably from Cremona, who ended up on the *sedes eburnea* (Appendix Vergiliana, Catalepton 10, a parody of Catullus' *phaselus ille*), has provoked much controversy. Three different identities have been suggested, but the case is not yet closed.

Unanimity has not been reached on the authorship of the poem, either. To cite only the most recent contributions, whereas K. Büchner argues that the poem cannot be attributed to Virgil,<sup>1</sup> R.E.H. Westendorp Boerma dismisses his arguments as "subjective" and regards the poem as "un authentique poeme de jeunesse" of Virgil.<sup>2</sup> All things considered, I do not think that the Virgilian authorship can be seriously doubted. But even if the poem were not his, it does not affect the problem discussed in this paper.

According to the most widely held opinion, Sabinus was the *consul suffectus* of 43 B.C., P. Ventidius Bassus, *Picens genere et loco humili*, as Gellius 15 4,3 describes him. This identification had been suggested by a Humanist, Petrus Victorius, in the sixteenth century. But it was F. Bücheler<sup>3</sup> and Th. Mommsen<sup>4</sup> that made it popular in modern scholarship. A number of other scholars have followed their example.<sup>5</sup> The identification of Sabinus with P. Ventidius Bassus has also been accepted in the most important works of reference.<sup>6</sup>

There are certainly some noticeable similarities between Sabinus and P. Ventidius Bassus. Both were in origin *muliones*, and both had risen to the dignity of a *sella curulis*. In Catalepton, Sabinus was himself a muledriver, whereas Ventidius, as described by Gellius, is said to have been a furnisher of mules and carriages to magistrates. The difference is, however, inessential. Ventidius, a *homo novus*, was frequently derided as a *mulio*,<sup>7</sup> most notably in an anonymous lampoon posted on the walls of Rome, *mulas qui fricabat consul factus est* (quoted by Gellius, loc. cit.).

This identification has not, however, remained unchallenged. On the contrary, it has been rejected by most scholars who have discussed the poem in any

detail. The first to have raised doubts was Ae. Baehrens.<sup>8</sup> Th. Birt<sup>9</sup> and E.T. Merrill<sup>10</sup> attacked the identification almost simultaneously. They have been followed by others.<sup>11</sup>

The arguments against the identification can be summed up as follows. In Catalepton 10, Sabinus was a native of Gallia Cisalpina, whereas Ventidius came from Picenum. Again, Sabinus began as a mule-driver, whereas Ventidius was a contractor, even a post-master. As I remarked above, in popular imagination there was little difference here, and the argument may be dismissed. But it is the nomenclature that seems to be decisive. Ventidius bears a cognomen only in late authors (Gell. loc. cit.; Eutr. 7, 5,2), none in contemporary republican sources.<sup>12</sup> But it is not possible to argue that he was first called Quinctio, changed then to Sabinus, and finally to Bassus.

Ventidius Bassus/Sabinus has also been identified with a certain Sabinus mentioned by Cicero in a letter to Trebonius, fam. 15 20,1 "*Oratorem*" *meum* (scil. his book) *Sabino tuo commendavi. natio me hominis impulit ut ei recte putarem; nisi forte candidatorum licentia hic quoque usus hoc subito cognomen arripuit; etsi modestus eius vultus sermoque constans habere quiddam a Curibus videbatur*. But as has been convincingly demonstrated,<sup>13</sup> it is unlikely that this Sabinus has anything to do with Ventidius Bassus or the Sabinus of Catalepton. Cicero does not say that Sabinus had really assumed this cognomen. The whole passage is only a witticism on the well-known implications of the name Sabinus (cf. below, p. 52). It is not even evident that this obscure Sabinus was an office-seeker at all. Finally, Cicero does not suggest a change of name, only assumption of a cognomen by those who previously did not have one.

Instead of Ventidius Bassus, some potentate of the provincial town Cremona has been presented as the hero of the poem.<sup>14</sup> He had indeed been a muleteer, and risen high in society, but the *sedes eburnea* did not here suggest a curule magistracy. Because some inscriptions of the chief magistrates of provincial towns bear a *sella curulis* in relief,<sup>15</sup> it has been suggested that Sabinus ended up as the *decurio* of his native town. But other scholars have been unwilling to grant even this. The reference to *sedes eburnea* only showed that a retired owner of a transport firm could be flattered by portraying him as reclining on an ivory chair.<sup>16</sup>

Few new details have been added to these two competing interpretations in recent years. But R. Syme has presented, though only tentatively, a new candidate.<sup>17</sup> After once again reviewing all the evidence against the identification of Sabinus with Ventidius Bassus, he suggested that C. Calvisius Sabinus, the consul of 39 B.C., might be the man, or at any rate in a better position than Ventidius.

Now the case for Calvisius Sabinus rests on fragile evidence. The only con-

necting link seems to be his cognomen, but this does not take us very far. Sabinus was a very common name (see below, p. 52). Syme can only offer hypotheses: "he may easily have begun as a contractor of supplies..." Though Syme concedes that Calvisius' origin is nowhere stated, he nevertheless conjectures that he came from the Latin colony of Spoletium. He quotes a local honorary inscription set up *Pietati [C.] Calvisi C.f. Sabini patroni, co(n)s(ulis), VIIvir(i) epul(onum), cur(ionis) max(imi)* [...ILS 925 = CIL XI 4772. Though Dessau, ad loc., stated that the inscription *vix* belonged to our Calvisius Sabinus, and suggested his son, the consul of 4 B.C., or his grandson, the consul of 26 A.D., as more likely candidates, and though Pros. Imp. Rom. C<sup>2</sup> 353 shares his view, Syme insists that we have here the consul of 39 B.C. He argues that *pietati* was a tribute to Calvisius Sabinus' well-known loyalty. According to Nicol. Damasc., Vita Caes. 26, he was one of the two men to remain by the body of murdered Caesar. Again, Syme contends that the lettering, ascertained through autopsy, tells for an earlier date. But this argument is unconvincing. Paleography is notoriously an unreliable guide in dating inscriptions. It is likewise improbable that *pietati* implies loyalty to murdered Caesar. It is more likely that it suggests the loyalty of a patron to the town protected by him. Though dating on paleographical criteria is uncertain, epigraphical criteria can be more useful. An honorary inscription, such as this one, listing all the honours of a person, suggests the Early Empire rather than the republic.<sup>18</sup> And even though the person recorded here were after all Calvisius Sabinus, the consul of 39 B.C., what bearing does this have on our problem? The person honoured was the patron of a colony, not necessarily its native. Moreover, Spoletium is far from Cremona.

In contrast to what Syme maintains, Calvisius Sabinus is in a worse case than Ventidius Bassus. There is practically no connecting link between him and our Sabinus.

The discussion on the identity of Sabinus has thus led to a blind alley. It might seem that nothing new can be said and that the problem must be left unresolved. Yet I think that a very simple explanation has so far escaped serious consideration. It may be that we have here, not a real problem of identity, but only a kind of pseudo-problem.

At first, the suggestion of Birt and others that Sabinus ended up as a magistrate of Cremona does not seem acceptable. The decisive point is the reference to *sedes eburnea*. Because the whole poem is a parody of Catullus, *sedes eburnea* cannot have failed to evoke Catullus' famous *sella in curuli struma Nonius sedet*, which certainly suggests Rome. Since everybody knew that poem, a brief mention of an eburnean chair sufficed to suggest a *homo novus* who had climbed up to the highest social ladders. There was no need to dwell on the intermediate stages of

his career.

It is worth notice that, despite striking similarities in structure and in the very expressions, the end of Catalepton is quite different in tone from the Catullian piece:<sup>19</sup> *sed haec prius fuere: nunc eburnea / sedetque sede seque dedicat tibi, / gemelle Castor, et gemelle Castoris*, corresponding to *sed haec prius fuere: nunc recondita / senet quiete seque dedicat tibi, / gemelle Castor, et gemelle Castoris*. The final triumph of Sabinus stands in contrast to the *recondita quies* of the *phaselus*. The phrase *sed haec prius fuere* has thus acquired a quite new connotation. A nostalgic summing up of the past active life of *phaselus* in Catullus, in Catalepton it serves to throw the enormous success of the one-time mule-driver into sharper relief. All this is effected by changing only three words out of sixteen! This is an example of the genius of Virgil (probably it was he) in subtly remodelling a borrowed theme.

The point of the poem would be much less effective if *eburnea sedes* only suggested a magistrate of a provincial town. This is one more argument against Birt's interpretation.

It is odd that the verse *nunc eburnea / sedetque sede seque dedicat tibi, gemelle Castor, et gemelle Castoris*, should have been interpreted so that Sabinus had his magistrate's chair in front of the temple of the Dioscuri. This misconception has led to some unnecessary argumentation and to attempts to find the true locality of the temple in the North.<sup>20</sup> The verse, if read carefully, does not imply that *eburnea sedes* had anything to do with the temple. Two separate facts were recorded, the position of a high magistrate, and the dedication of one's image, probably a statue, to the temple of the Dioscuri.<sup>21</sup>

Since the poem no doubt suggested a Roman scene, and since a high magistrate of the State was referred to, the poem may after all owe something to Ventidius Bassus. He had become the prototype of a *homo novus* who had obtained the highest positions and honours Rome had to offer. But he could not shake off the label of *mulio* which envious and prejudiced people had affixed to him (cf. above). The similarities between the anonymous lampoon, *mulas qui fricabat . . .*, and Catalepton 10, *bidente dicit attodisse forcipe / comata colla*, are probably not accidental. With Bücheler,<sup>22</sup> one has to concede that there scarcely were two similar *muliones* in contemporary Rome. Because of this verisimile connection with Ventidius Bassus, the poem may have been written 43 B.C. or some time afterwards.

Nevertheless, the obstacles to a true identification with Ventidius seem to remain insurmountable. He is never recorded to have borne the name Sabinus. It is sheer desperation to argue that he changed his name twice. Neither does

*Picens origine* (Gellius) harmonize with the localities of the poem; cf. *ultima ex origine*: Sabinus cannot have been an immigrant.

All these difficulties vanish if we relinquish attempts to identify Sabinus with any known or unknown person. **Sabinus was not a historical figure at all. He was a fictional character representing the *homo novus* of the revolutionary period.** It is odd that this very obvious interpretation has not earlier been given serious consideration. To be exact, a few scholars have certainly thought of this possibility, but only to reject it.<sup>23</sup>

The well-known figure of Ventidius Bassus may have served as a starting-point, but only as a type, not as an individual. His career suggested the story of a successful *mulio* to Virgil (or someone else), but everything else is invention in a way similar to any character in fiction. The very fact that the poem is a parody of another poem, and follows it almost literally, makes it unlikely that it should record a real character. Sabinus is certainly described in realistic details. It is a portrait true to life. But is it not precisely the speciality of a poet to create life-like characters?

Evidence for the contention that Sabinus was a fictional character can indeed be mustered. In contemporary Rome, lampoons and satires were often written on fictitious persons. The nearest equivalent to our poem is Horace's fourth epode, a satire upon a former slave who had become a military tribune and was now showing off on the *via sacra*, a scandal to all good Romans. His name was not revealed. Though Kiessling-Heinze still believed, largely because of the untypical military tribunate, that Horace was aiming at some particular person, F. Jacoby<sup>24</sup> and E. Fraenkel<sup>25</sup> rightly conclude that the tribune represented a type rather than a living contemporary.

It is in general a mistake to believe that the victims of literary invective were always particular persons more or less well-known to the readers. In Horace's satires, a great many living people were obviously recorded.<sup>26</sup> But it is equally true that he also portrayed type characters. These people may have significant names,<sup>27</sup> Opimius, Maltinus, Cupiennius, Porcius, etc. Another group is made up of mythological names such as Tantalus, Orestes, Ulysses, etc., typical slave names Dava, Davus, and typical Jewish names, Apella. No particular persons can have been aimed at by these names.

The same applies to Catalepton 10. It is probable that the names Quinctio and Sabinus (verse 8: *iste post Sabinus, ante Quinctio*) were nothing but type names for "a man of servile extraction" and "a true-blue Roman", respectively. They served to convey the idea of a low-born man who had risen to the highest positions in the state, just as Ventidius Bassus, once a captive in a Roman triumph.

obtained a curule magistrate's chair. The significance of these names was perceived by Bücheler,<sup>28</sup> though he did not draw the right conclusions from them.

Quinctio is a typical slave name in that it is coined with the suffix *-io* from a common Roman name. As I have shown in another connection,<sup>29</sup> the suffix had a pejorative connotation. This may explain the fact that one fifth of all cognomina obtained with this suffix belonged to slaves and freedmen. On the other hand, similar names were rare in senatorial nomenclature. Quinctio was not as frequent among slaves and ex-slaves as was Rufio,<sup>30</sup> but still a fairly typical slave name. Roughly one third of all the examples belonged to this category.<sup>31</sup> In extant material, it is not borne by a person of any standing.

Sabinus is likewise a type name. It is the commonest of all geographical cognomina, and one of the most popular Latin cognomina.<sup>32</sup> Geographical cognomina probably originated as genuine ethnics recording native places, though this connection later on grew dim and was finally wholly effaced. But the particular popularity of Sabinus must have been due to non-geographical factors. To a Roman reader, the word Sabinus suggested the moral excellence of the *veteres*.<sup>33</sup> As a cognomen, it had a connotation similar to Probus, Severus, and other names of a like character; cf. the passage from Cicero's Correspondence quoted on p. 48. Significantly, Sabinus was seldom borne by slaves and ex-slaves. Only a bare 5 % of the ca. 1240 examples of this name in pagan Latin epigraphy belonged to these people.

Type names were not exceptional in Catalepton; cf. Noctuinus, Catalepton 6 and 12, "the night-reveller".

Sabinus is represented as changing his name to obliterate all memories of his less reputable past. Replacing an old cognomen by a new one was not unknown. In literature, several freedmen are recorded to have dropped their old cognomen, smacking of slavery, and assumed a good Roman one instead.<sup>34</sup>

It is, however, unlikely that Quinctio/Sabinus was thought to have been a manumitted slave. Though peregrines *civitate donati* and sons of *libertini* were elected senators and magistrates in the revolutionary period,<sup>35</sup> we do not know of ex-slaves in these positions. Dio 48, 34,4 certainly tells the story of two slaves standing for office 39 B.C., the other actually elected a praetor, but these scandals of the triumviral period are too glaring exceptions to be of any help here. Even in Italian towns, freedmen were in practice ineligible for municipal magistracies.

If Sabinus were an emancipated slave, the climax of the poem *nunc eburnea sedetque sede* would be very strong, perhaps too strong for a Roman reader. The victim of Horace's satire in the fourth epode held the position of *tribunus militum*, but though even this office was barred to ex-slaves, the scandal was here less



outrageous, the tribunate being an equestrian office.<sup>36</sup>

It is possible that the name Quinctio suggested here, not a freedman but the son of a freedman. We can read from the poem that he was not represented as a typical slave; cf. *paterna lora*, line 22, which shows that his father had been a *mulio*, too; at any rate, the lines *ultima ex origine / tua stetisse dicit in voragine*, imply that he cannot have been an imported slave. If Quinctio/Sabinus is interpretable as the son of *libertinus* raised to a high position, he represents a typical case in the revolutionary period, and a deep-felt scandal to all Roman patriots.

If we accept this conclusion, the difficulties encountered in the interpretation of the poem will prove surmountable. The wellknown story of Ventidius Bassus caught the imagination of the poet (Virgil no doubt), who created a similar character in a delightful but not at all malicious parody of a famous poem of Catullus. Sabinus was an otherwise fictional character, and so were the details of his career.

<sup>1</sup> P. Vergilius Maro, RE VIIIA (1955) 1081–82.

<sup>2</sup> In Vergiliana. Recherches sur Virgile, Roma aeterna III (1971) 417–418.

<sup>3</sup> Kleine Schriften II (1927) 509–10.

<sup>4</sup> Gesammelte Schriften IV:1 (1906) 175–76.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. e.g. E. Meyer, *Der Emporkömmling*, diss. Giessen 1913, 44–46; T. Frank, *Vergil's Apprenticeship*, CPh 15 (1920) 116–117; E. Fraenkel, *Vergil und Cicero. Atti e memorie della reale Accademia Virgiliana di Mantova*, N. S. 19–20 (1926–27): Virgil had been influenced by Cicero's denunciations of Ventidius; W. Wili, *Vergil* (1930) 16.

<sup>6</sup> Stein, Sabinus, RE IA (1920) 1592–95; M. Schanz – C. Hosius, *Geschichte der römischen Literatur* II<sup>4</sup> (1935) 86; H. Gundel, P. Ventidius Bassus, RE VIIIA (1955) 797–98 ('vielleicht') and *Der kleine Pauly* 4 (1972) 1484 ('wohl identisch').

<sup>7</sup> Cic. fam. 10, 18,3 *Ventidique mulionis castra despicio*; Plin. nat. 7, 135 *Cicero (auctor est) mulionem castrensis furnariae fuisse*.

<sup>8</sup> *Poetae Latini Minores* II (1880) 33 *parum hoc probabile duco*. His own identification with Sabinus magister in *Catalepton* 5 is, however, improbable.

<sup>9</sup> *Jugendverse und Heimatpoesie Vergils* (1910) 114–25.

- <sup>10</sup> On Cic. Fam. xv.20, Verg.(?) Catal. and Ventidius, CPH 8 (1913) 380–400.
- <sup>11</sup> E. Galletier, *Epigrammata et Priapea* (1920) 191–96; Z. Zimmermann, *Virgil und Catull*, Ph. Woch. 42 (1932) 1119–30 (a good discussion of the poem from an aesthetic point of view); A. Rostagni, *Virgilio Minore* (1933) 35–39; R.E.H. Westendorp Boerma, *P. Vergili Maronis Catalepton II* (1963) 29–38.
- <sup>12</sup> In *Fasti triumph.* 38 B.C., only P. Ventidius P.f. Cicero calls him Ventidius, fam. 10, 17,1 etc., occasionally P. Ventidius, fam. 10, 34,1.
- <sup>13</sup> Merrill, *op. cit.* (fn 10) 395–96.
- <sup>14</sup> Thus Birt, *op. cit.* (fn 9) 117 and others.
- <sup>15</sup> ILS 6446, Nuceria, from the Early Empire; CIL XII 1029, Avennio, probably from the same period, Cf. Mommsen, *Staatsrecht I*<sup>3</sup> (1887) 402.
- <sup>16</sup> Merrill, *op. cit.*, 393.
- <sup>17</sup> Sabinus the Muleteer, *Latomus* 17 (1958), especially 79–80.
- <sup>18</sup> Cf. Kajanto, *Un' analisi filologico-letteraria delle iscrizioni onorarie*, *Epigraphica* 33 (1971) 7.<sup>1</sup>
- <sup>19</sup> Cf. the excellent analysis of Zimmermann, *op. cit.* (fn 11).
- <sup>20</sup> Birt, *op. cit.* (fn 9) 124. Frank, *op. cit.* (fn 5) read from the poem that the praetor's court was frequently held "at the lower end of the forum and apparently near the front steps of the temple of Castor", to which Merrill, Ventidius and Sabinus, *ibid.* 298-300, gave a sarcastic reply.
- <sup>21</sup> Erecting one's own statues was not uncommon, cf. Dio 60, 25,2–3. It was only Claudius that somewhat restricted this licence.
- <sup>22</sup> *Op. cit.* (fn 3) 510.
- <sup>23</sup> Meyer, *op. cit.* (fn 5): Sabinus was not a sufficiently typical figure; Merrill, *op. cit.* (fn 10) 393.
- <sup>24</sup> *Eine vergessene Horazemendation*, *Hermes* 49 (1914) 460.
- <sup>25</sup> Horace (1957) 57–58.
- <sup>26</sup> N. Rudd, *The Satires of Horace* (1966) 132ff.

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 143ff.

<sup>28</sup> Op. cit. (fn 3) 509.

<sup>29</sup> Latin Cognomina (1965) 113; 120–23.

<sup>30</sup> Rufio was commoner among slaves and ex-slaves than among the freeborn. Cicero, Milo 60, quotes it as a type name for a slave.

<sup>31</sup> Latin Cognomina, 174.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Cic. Vat. 36, *severissimi homines Sabini*; Verg. Aen. 8, 638 *Cures severi*; Prop. 2, 32,47 *duri Sabini*; Ovid. am. 2, 4,15 *rigidae Sabinae*, etc.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. H. Chantraine, *Freigelassene und Sklaven im Dienst der römischen Kaiser* (1967) 138–39; examples in M. Lambertz, *Die griechischen Sklavennamen* (1907) 4 fn 2.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Suet. Jul. 76,3; 80,2–; Dio 43, 47,3; A.N. Sherwin-White, *The Roman citizenship*<sup>2</sup> (1973) 324ff.

<sup>36</sup> S. Treggiari, *Roman Freedmen during Late Republic* (1969) 65.