



[Martial, Epigrams VII.30](#)

The cosmopolitanism of the Roman empire as a challenge to Roman masculinity.

Name of the author: Martial

Date: 92 CE

Date: 1st CE Dec

Place: Rome

Language: Latin

Category: Roman

Literary genre: Poetry

Title of work: Epigrams

Reference: VII.30

Commentary:

The seventh book of Martial's *Epigrams* was probably published in December 92 CE, as it includes many epigrams celebrating the return of Domitian from his third campaign against the Sarmatians and alluding to the Saturnalia festivities. It is composed of epigrams dealing with various prosaic subjects, such as scenes of daily life in Rome, literary themes, personal attacks, patronal relationship and various jokes (see Galán Vioque, *Martial*, p. 9-12). It is also characterised by the fact that it has the greater concentration of polemical poems against Jewish men (Zeichmann, "Martial," p. 115, n. 8).

Contrary to most of the epigrams of book 7, which deal in a polemical way with Jewish sex or sexual practices, and associate Jewish men with homoerotic overtones (VII.35, [55](#) and [82](#)), heteroeroticism is the central theme of epigram VII.30 (Zeichmann, "Martial," p. 115). Martial's misogyny shows through many of his epigrams. Women are violently criticized for their libidinous character and their lack of chastity, which Martial suggests meant that they were far from embodying the qualities of the perfect Roman *matrona* (Galán Vioque, *Martial*, p. 214). In epigram VII.30, by listing ten men of all sorts of foreign origins who had intercourse with a fictive character, Caelia, Martial criticizes both "an excessively libidinous woman" and the "eccentric cosmopolitanism of the Roman women of his day" (Galán Vioque, *Martial*, p. 214). The enumeration becomes all the more grotesque when, after the listing of the foreigners chosen without any discrimination by Caelia, Martial concludes that she is contemptuous of giving her sexual favours to Roman men.

Firstly, the origins of the ten foreigners mentioned by Martial were not chosen at random by the poet. Many of them came from peoples that Rome tried to subject, such as the Parthians (v. 1), or that had already been subjected by force (Galán Vioque, *Martial*, p. 215). Among these peoples who had come under Rome's control, some had been submitted for many years, such as the Cilicians – if Martial was thinking about the pirates submitted by Pompey (see Galán Vioque, *Martial*, p. 216), or the Egyptians here represented through the metonym *Memphiticus* (v. 3). Other peoples had been submitted or experienced important defeats more recently. This is the case with the Dacians (v. 1), defeated by Domitian in 88 CE, and maybe of the Germans (v. 1) – if Martial had in mind the victories of Domitian over the Chatti in 83 and 89 CE. Concerning the Cappadocians (v. 2), even though they are sometimes represented in Roman sources as the objects of sexual jests (see Galán Vioque, *Martial*, p. 216), Martial might have been influenced by the fact that under Vespasian, the province of Cappadocia-Galatia became a "prominent military establishment" (Mc Nelis, "Ovidian," p. 401; Griffin, "Vespasian," p. 39-40). Concerning the Alans (v. 6), they caused some trouble for Vespasian during the 70s CE, especially when around 75 CE they raided Parthian territory (see Suetonius, *Life of Domitian* II.2; Josephus, *Jewish War* VII.244-251; Cassius Dio, *Roman History* LXV.15.3).

Among the various origins listed, Martial does not forget the Jews (v. 5). Even if this epigram was composed more than twenty years after the Judean war, Martial may have wanted to echo the victory of Vespasian and Titus in Judea in 70 CE. If it is the case, the epigram would have fitted in with the official speech existing since the beginning of Domitian's reign, and which aimed at maintaining the memory of Vespasian and Titus's success over Judea to assert the prestige of the Flavian dynasty – on this perspective see [Martial, Epigrams II.2](#). The way Martial depicts the Jews, specifically men here, is very interesting. As in other epigrams, he summarises them by their sexual organs, in particular through the fact that they are circumcised (here *recutitus*, v. 5 which technically means "whose foreskin has been pulled back"; for the same perspective see also the use of the adjective *verpus*, [Epigrams VII.82](#) and [XI.94](#); see Cordier, "Les Romains," p. 344).



To sum up, in this list the Ethiopians, embodied here by the phrase *niger Indus* “black Indian” (v. 4), are the only ones who are not placed in the category of the peoples who represent a real threat to Rome. They were commonly used in geographical enumerations to refer to the idea of extreme remoteness and otherness ([Martial, Liber Spectaculorum III](#)).

With this enumeration of the foreigners from verse 1 to 6, Martial may have appropriated the idea that Rome was a kind of miniature earth, gathering peoples from everywhere, and especially from the regions that Rome had recently subdued. A similar idea can be found in [Martial, Liber Spectaculorum III](#), an epigram written in 80/81 CE depicting the international and polyglot crowd coming to Rome to honour the emperor during the inauguration of the Flavian amphitheatre. Among the peoples mentioned by Martial in this epigram, many of them echo the peoples mentioned above (the Sarmatians, the Cilicians, the Ethiopians, the Germans through the Sygambri). Both the third epigram of the *Liber Spectaculorum* and this epigram show how Martial has been influenced by an Ovidian theme which consisted of the association of sexuality with “the new global geography of Rome’s imperial world” (McNelis, “Ovidian,” p. 400-401). Two passages in *The Art of Love* fits in with this idea.

The first one is a passage in which Ovid describes the *naumachia* (that is the staging of a naval battle) organised by Augustus in 2 BCE to re-enact the Battle of Salamis between Athenians and Persians. Ovid writes that numerous young men and women came from everywhere to attend the spectacle, a situation giving him the impression that “the mighty world was in the City” (*atque ingens orbis in Urbe fuit*, Ovid, *The Art of Love* I.174). As Charles McNelis rightly remarks, the opportunity for the young men and women, coming from everywhere to find mates in Rome, is clearly associated with Rome’s “global conquest” and Augustus’s final victory, which led to the reunification of east and west under Rome’s hegemony (McNelis, “Ovidian,” p. 401).

The second passage relevant here is a passage in which Ovid claims that it was not necessary for Roman men to search for affairs in foreign lands, as Rome gathered the greatest variety of beautiful women available in the world: “... yet Rome will give you so many maidens and so elegant that, you will say: ‘This city owns whatever exists in the world’” (*The Art of Love* I.55-56: *Tot tibi tamque dabit formosas Roma puellas, “Haec habet” ut dicas “quicquid in orbe fuit.”*; for the intertextual relationship, see Galán Vioque, *Martial*, p. 214). Once again, Rome is presented as a cosmopolitan city, a sort of miniature earth, a situation implying an important prerequisite: the fact that Rome had previously established an Empire which had reached universal dimensions.

If we consider only verses 1 to 6 of *Epigram VII.30*, we gain the impression that Martial develops, in a coarser way, this Ovidian association between a cosmopolitan sexuality and the new universal dimensions of the Roman empire (McNelis, “Ovidian,” p. 400-401). However, verses 7 and 8 mean that Martial’s epigram becomes an attack against cosmopolitan Rome. The criticism is created by the contrast between the two terms of the anadiplosis: *romana puella / Romana... mentula* (Galán Vioque, *Martial*, p. 219): “What is the reason why no Roman cock pleases you, despite the fact that you are a Roman girl?” (*Qua ratione facis, Romana puella cum sis, / quod Romana tibi mentula nulla placet?*). This literary technique highlights a humiliating and dangerous situation: Caelia, a Roman citizen, gave sexual favours to every foreigner that she could find in Rome, but denied the Romans. Through this contrast, Martial may have wanted to present Caelia’s sexual customs as a moral infringement on Rome, but also as a dangerous betrayal – as most of the foreigners were former enemies of the Roman people. As Charles McNelis rightly remarks, the main difference between this epigram and the Ovidian speech associating sexuality and Rome’s cosmopolitanism as a result of Rome’s territorial hegemony, is that Martial does not present the foreigners as submitted to Rome’s yoke. On the contrary, they are presented as the new “conquerors” of this Roman woman with her own consent and active participation (McNelis, “Ovidian,” p. 401). The allusion to the rejected Roman *mentula* (“cock”), and its association with the idea that Caelia’s behaviour is similar to a betrayal of Rome, reminds of the Ovidian association between sex and power. However, with Martial the perspective is slightly different. The Roman masculinity which is usually linked to Rome’s military strength and expansion is clearly challenged in this epigram by the actions of Caelia (McNelis, “Ovidian,” p. 401). The rejected penis, symbolizing the downgrading of Roman virility, appears as a sort of admonition to the Romans of the risk that Rome could one day be overwhelmed by the size of its Empire and the cosmopolitan society stemming from this global geography.

Keywords in the original language:

- [Alani](#)
- [Cappadoces](#)



- [Cilices](#)
- [Daci](#)
- [fututor](#)
- [Germani](#)
- [Indus](#)
- [inguen](#)
- [Iudaeus](#)
- [Memphiticus](#)
- [mentula](#)
- [niger](#)
- [Parthi](#)
- [recutitus](#)
- [Romana puella](#)
- [Sarmaticus](#)

Thematic keywords in English:

- [barbarians](#)
- [barbarisation](#)
- [Cilicians](#)
- [circumcision](#)
- [cosmopolitanism](#)
- [Dacians](#)
- [Egyptians](#)
- [enemy](#)
- [Ethiopians](#)
- [foreigner](#)
- [Germans](#)
- [Jews](#)
- [lust](#)
- [matrona](#)
- [Parthians](#)
- [Roman citizenship](#)
- [Roman empire](#)
- [Roman hegemony](#)
- [Roman masculinity](#)
- [Rome \(city\)](#)

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