

Editor's Note: Literary and Material Culture in Imperial Rome

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I am very happy to introduce the fourth and final set of papers in our series of clusters on literary and material culture. In this issue, in addition to two fine papers on *Literary and Material Culture in Imperial Rome*, we are privileged also to have a special “Paragraphos” from Richard Martin reflecting on the entire enterprise of interdisciplinary investigations between literary texts, philology, and material culture. Martin’s piece provides a fitting coda and a welcome set of reflections on this undertaking.

The second paper in the cluster itself, by Christopher van den Berg, “The *Pulvinar* in Roman Culture,” is an excellent example of the kind of interdisciplinary work this series of clusters has sought to encourage. We start with something that seems like it should be quite concrete. Look up the term *pulvinar* in almost any standard Latin lexicon, and you will find it to be some type of “couch” or “bed.” What could be more concrete, more material? But as van den Berg’s careful philology shows us, the *pulvinar* is no simple piece of furniture. It is the location of a complex set of shifting meanings that, depending on the context, can move from divine couch, to imperial marriage bed, to a form of temple at the Circus Maximus. The term refers less to an object than to the way in which a series of objects were deployed in divine or imperial contexts. “The available evidence paints a fascinating and well-rounded picture of the *pulvinar*, a capacious emblem in the cultural repertoire through which sanctity, legitimacy, and power were constructed and construed.”

Our first paper, Donald Lavigne’s “Embodied Poetic in Martial 11,” also demonstrates the way in which a resolutely interdisciplinary approach casts new light on what seems to be the most direct and transparent of references. In Lavigne’s case, it is less an object than a practice that is in question. By focusing on Martial’s epigrams on heteroerotic anal intercourse, particularly as depicted in relation to Martial’s “wife,” Lavigne demonstrates that Martial’s interest in these poems is neither simply to shock nor to titillate. Rather these earthiest of poems are deeply implicated in Martial’s own poetics and

in his claims to poetic mastery. At the same time, what in Martial seems the height (or depth?) of low mimetic realism turns out to be part of a complex and self-conscious set of polemics both with the elegiac tradition and with Martial's great epigrammatic predecessor, Catullus. Thus, once again, that which seemed most concrete and material becomes, if not exactly sublime, then fundamentally disseminated across a new range of practices and signifying networks.

Lastly, we are very lucky to have Richard Martin's superb "Paragraphos," "Words Alone are Certain Good(s): Philology and Greek Material Culture." Martin first offers a genealogy of the term "material culture," a kind of portmanteau construction that seems constantly in danger of transforming all that is material into a mere epiphenomenon of that most amorphous of scholarly terms: culture. Martin then challenges us to think again: both to take the *material* in "material" culture seriously and at the same time to refuse to step back from the interdisciplinary wager on which Classics and so much of contemporary humanities scholarship now depends.