



The Glass Ball Game

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THE GLASS BALL GAME*

CIL VI 9797 (= 33815a) = ILS 5173 = CLE 29:

Vrsus togátus nitreá qui primus pila
 lúsi decenter cum meis lúsóribus
 laudante populó maximis clamóribus
 thermis Traiáni, thermis Agrippae et Titi,
 5 multum et Nerónis, sí tamen mihi créditis,
 ego sum. ouantés conuenite pilicrepi
 statuamque amici flóribus, uiolis rosís
 folióque multó adque unguentó marcidó
 onerate amantés et merum prófundite
 10 nigrum Falernum aut Sétinum aut Caecubum
 uiuó ac uolenti dé apothéca dominicá
 Vrsunque canite uóce concordí senem
 hilarem iocósum pilicrepum scholasticum,
 qui nícit omnés antecessóres suós
 15 sénsú, decóre adque arte suptilissimá.
 nunc uéra uersu uerba dicamus senés:
 sum uictus ipse, fateor, á ter cónsule
 Véro patrónó, nec semel sed saepius,
 cuius libenter dicor exodiarius.

"Ursus, who was the first Roman to play with a glass ball properly with my fellow-players, while the people approved with greatest applause, in the baths of Trajan, in the baths of Agrippa and Titus, and frequently in Nero's (if only you believe me) - am I.

Gather together rejoicing, o pilicrepi, and lovingly cover the statue of your friend with rose and violet blossoms and many a leaf and ancient perfume; and pour forth the unmixed black Falernian or the Setian or the Caecuban, to one who is alive and willing, from the master's cellar; and sing with one voice of Ursus the old man, merry, full of jest, a pilicrepus, a scholar, who surpassed all of his predecessors with his taste, his dignity, and his most delicate art.

Now let us old men speak true words in verse: I have been defeated, I confess it, by the thrice consul Verus, my patron, not once but many times, whose exodiarius I am pleased to be called."

This is a very strange inscription, found on a large marble tablet excavated in the sixteenth century at St. Peter's in Rome, and presumably deriving from a statue base. The text was discussed by the great names of the

*) A version of this paper was read to an end-of-semester gathering of Professor Alföldy's Doktorandenkolloquium at the Union-Stube, Heidelberg, 11 February 1985. For helpful comment I am indebted to Tim Barnes and Alan Cameron long ago, and more recently to David Armstrong and Werner Eck.

nineteenth century, Borghesi, Mommsen in a playful mood (EE 1 (1872) 55-57 = *Gesammelte Schriften* 8 (1913) 189-191), Dessau (ILS), Buecheler (CLE), but has been barely noticed by the twentieth. Ursus the ball-player and ball-court attendant is a puzzle. At first glance he is a rather simple old man, absurdly proud of his achievements as a player, calling on his friends to praise him and to note that only one of the leaders of Roman society was able to defeat him at the game of pila. But on re-reading this quaint figure grows ever more grotesque in his astonishing simplicity. Suspicion should be aroused instantly by the very possibility of a game played with a glass ball, and the lines that follow are an appropriate *mélange* of problems and incongruities.

Line 1 *URSUS TOGATUS*. Ursus is the name of a free, not a freed-, man, and this Ursus is simply the client of Verus (18), not his *libertus*; *togatus* is not a cognomen but the equivalent of "Roman". (Mommsen) Cf. "*primus togatus saltare instituit*", Pliny NH 7.159. (Buecheler) The glass ball game is otherwise quite unattested in antiquity. (Mommsen, Dessau; cf. CIL VI. 33815a for a late mediaeval Byzantine reference). As indeed one might expect: how can anyone play with a glass ball? Glass balls might be useful for display but hardly for sport or exercise, being either too fragile or too heavy and bulky. And what would be the point of such a sport? The glass ball game is simply unbelievable. Moreover (in the absence of any statue at least) there may also be a joke here: the initial and incongruous picture is of a man (perhaps even a bear?) playing ball while wearing a toga.

Line 2 *DECENTER* is somewhat awkward, undercutting the previous words: I was the first to play with a glass ball - decently. Are we to take it that others had played with glass balls, but not properly?

Line 4 *THERMIS* of Trajan, of Agrippa and Titus, of Nero. Dessau cited much of the ample ancient evidence for the connection between ball-playing and the baths (neglecting one of the most interesting, the scene introducing Trimalchio to the *Satyricon*). The baths of Trajan stood within the boundaries of Nero's Golden House in the third region; those of Agrippa, probably rebuilt by Titus, and those of Nero stood near the Pantheon in the ninth.

Line 5 *SI TAMEN MIHI CREDITIS*. Whyever should we not believe him? We could speculate fruitlessly as to the special difficulties for ballplayers in Nero's baths, or we might take this as a general warning about the author's intentions: "Do you still believe me?" (The phrase *credite mihi* is a particular favourite of the untrustworthy Trimalchio: Sat. 47.6, 52.8, 77.6, cf. 69.2). All of this is followed, in line 6, by the much delayed, rather fatuous "*ego sum*".

Lines 6-11 *OVANTES - DOMINICA*. A bizarre picture. The professional ball-court keepers (*pilicrepi*, ILS 6431d, CIL IV.1926 - ballplayers are *pilarii*, ILS 5174) are to honour the statue of their comrade (*pilicrepus*, line 13) with flowers and libations of wine, and a *naif* or *faux-naif* wine-list is suggested. But, a first surprise, these tributes appropriate to the dead are to

be rendered to one who is both "alive and willing". (Compare Trimalchio in the baths who, after playing with a pila, applauds the supposed pouring of a funeral libation (propin) of Falernian wine to himself, Sat. 28.3; and of course there is his mock funeral, with perfume and libation of wine at 78.3). And, a second surprise, Ursus' wine is to come from the choice cellar of the emperor: thus Mommsen, on the correct interpretation of *apotheca dominica*, adducing Galen XIV.25K. Why a funeral libation to a living man, and why and how from the imperial cellars?

Lines 12-15 *URSUMQUE - SUPTILISSIMA*. It is somewhat excessive for an honorand to tell his friends how to praise him: "Fingite me mortuum esse. Dicit aliquid belli." *SENEM* is important new information about Ursus, later reinforced (line 16). Ursus and Verus (and Trimalchio: "subito videmus senem calvum ... ludentem pila") are old men. How did the elderly Ursus defeat all of his predecessors? It is a world turned upside down when "student pilae senes aleae iuvenes" (Sidonius Apollinaris, Epp. 1.8.2).

Line 13 *HILAREM, IOCOSUM, PILICREPUM, SCHOLASTICUM*. A strange collection, followed by the splendid "qui vicit ... arte subtilissima": sheer naive boasting?

Line 18 *VERO* thrice consul: M. Annii Verus, cos. III 126, as Mommsen demonstrated. Buecheler cited HA Marcus 4.9: the emperor Marcus Aurelius, Verus' grandson, "pila lusit adprime". What he should have added was that after his father's premature death the young Marcus was adopted by his grandfather and brought up in his house (ib. 1.10). Verus, like Ursus, is open to word-play, *Verus patrono* being also a true patron.

Line 19 *EXODIARIUS*. "Apud veteres in fine ludorum intrabat, qui ridiculus foret", Schol. ad Iuvenalem 3.175 (Buecheler). In effect a player in skits tacked on to the end of a show. Used here as a term of self-abasement, and by Ammianus Marcellinus at 28.4.33 as one of contempt. A strange end to the poem.

What renders these verses even more incomprehensible in light of their content is their technical mastery, a series of elegant and amusing *senarii* recalling Republican comic metre: compare Buecheler's comments, and Mommsen's somewhat puzzled "*carmen pulcherrimum ... certe pro poesis epigraphicae consuetis sordibus*". An extraordinary production for an elderly ball-court attendant. In short, observed critically, the Ursus of this inscription is not the simple old man he seems, but a largely fictional character wrapped in ambiguity and inconcinnity, a figure recalling Petronius' indelible cartoon, Trimalchio. If so, what was the author's intention in creating such a figure? And who was Ursus?

Verus is the clue, Ursus' patron and three times consul, and our link to a historical context. M. Annii Verus (PIR² A 695) was consul suffect in 97

under Nerva, ordinary consul in 121 under Hadrian, and then with marvellous rapidity ordinary consul again in 126. This man seems to have been a patriarchal spider, lying at the centre of a dynastic web which encompassed the great political families of Hadrianic Rome and included the emperor himself. The sections of this web can be plotted in some detail. Most importantly, for a large part of the time between his second and third consulships, Verus was the most powerful man in Rome as prefect of the city under an absent emperor. After considerable manoeuvring, his son-in-law was to become, as Antoninus Pius, Hadrian's successor; his grandson and son by adoption was to succeed in turn as Marcus Aurelius. Annius Verus, like the Ursus of the poem, was an old man in Roman terms by 126, in his late sixties or seventies. Yet he lived to see the adoption of his son-in-law by Hadrian, the adoption of his grandson Marcus by Antoninus Pius, and the marriage of Marcus to another grandchild, the daughter of Pius. However obscure he may be to us, his political pre-eminence under Hadrian is clear. He also, it appears, had an interest in playing with the pila, an interest indirectly confirmed in the education at his house of the young Marcus, an interest which caught the eye of the author of ILS 5173. The Ursus inscription is not about playing ball, it is about politics.

Dio Chrysostom, an older contemporary of Annius Verus, had composed early in the century four addresses on kingship, apparently with Trajan in mind. At one point he alludes to a ball-game called "Kings" played by boys, in which the players try to hit one another with the ball. Anyone who is hit loses, and the winner is called king (Or. 4.46-48). In a passage in the Theaetetus, Plato refers to what is apparently another version of the same game with different rules: "Everyone who misses shall 'sit down and be donkey', as children say when they are playing at ball; anyone who gets through without missing shall be king..." (146 A, Cornford translation). Ball-playing as allegory, with the ball itself signifying pre-eminence (and on the symbolism of the globe as regnum, see now P.Arnaud, MEFRA 96,1984,53-116). If one dropped the ball, one lost; if it were as fragile as glass could be, perhaps one would lose it irretrievably. In one game M.Annius Verus was the victor. In that particular match, the loser was not a donkey but a Bear.

Not to belabour the point, ILS 5173 is a political allegory, and Ursus is a real and very important figure, that is L.Iulius Ursus Servianus (PIR² J 631), the brother-in-law of the emperor Hadrian, who had him executed at a very advanced age "quasi affectatorem imperii". Ursus Servianus also had a grandson, Pedanius Fuscus (born in 113) who died with him, while Annius Verus' grandson (born 121) became Caesar; both young men were relatives of the childless Hadrian, and the two senes must have been natural political rivals. One sign of success in their rivalry, or game, is immediately evident.

Servianus was consul suffect in 90, the considerably younger Verus in 97; Servianus was ordinary consul in 102, Verus in 121; but in 126 Verus passed his older rival with his third consulship, for which Servianus had to wait until 134. Hence a precision: "sum victus ipse, fateor, a ter consule / Vero patrono", and a date perhaps of 126 for the poem.

The first sentence in the Ursus poem, ending appropriately with "ego sum", introduces the character with his particular talent or virtue, his popularity and the scenes of his triumphs. If the ball signifies political dominance, lusores should be Ursus' opponents (or his partisans, or both?), and the imperial thermae named should be the courts of those emperors and the pilicrepi their courtiers. Here the important point is that the baths are named in reverse temporal order: Trajan's, Titus' rebuilding of Agrippa's, and Nero's. Chronology then solves the problem of "si tamen mihi creditis", for Ursus Servianus was said to be about 90 years old at the time of his death, which would place his birthdate c. 47. In short, Ursus senex was indeed old enough to have appeared even at the court of Nero, unlikely though that might seem to the reader.

The second sentence commands the pilicrepi to pay homage to his statue and to sing of his accomplishments. Funeral rites are appropriate, mourning a man who had surpassed all of his predecessors over many reigns but who has himself now been outdone. He is abased, mockingly, nothing more than an exodiarius for the new champion. Naturally his funeral libation comes from the apotheca dominica, since the game was played at the imperial court. And the last sentence clearly and ruefully explains how the former champion has been brought so low: "vera versu verba...victus...Vero".

What is particularly strange is that this piece should have been inscribed at all. Literary versions and parodies of inscriptions are common, and mock inscriptions were often hung from real monuments, but this is rather extreme. One explanation is that the whole thing is a joke, based on the connection between Verus' known passion for playing ball and the notion of the ball game as political juggling: an elegant, self-deprecating and rather bitter joke, one not wholly complimentary to Verus. The aged L.Iulius Servianus wrote the piece himself, had it engraved on a marble slab - perhaps accompanying it with the statue of a toga-clad bear playing ball? - and had it delivered to M.Annius Verus on the Kalends of January, 126. When next they met, the two old men affected to laugh heartily at the joke. Fantasy perhaps, but this is a very strange inscription.