

Proleptic Mountains? (Horace, *I.* 16.28)

After urging his fellow Romans to follow the example of the Phocaeans and abandon their city, Horace proposes an oath, and even provides a text. Though only line 28 is a problem, I quote the entire passage, since two other lines are pertinent (25-34):¹

sed iuremus in haec: ‘simul imis saxa renarint 25
 vadis levata, ne redire sit nefas;
 neu conversa domum pigeat dare lintea, quando
 Padus Matina laverit cacumina,
 in mare seu celsus procurrerit Appenninus
 novaque monstra iunxerit libidine 30
 mirus amor, iuvet ut tigris subsidere cervis,
 adulteretur et columba miluo,
 credula nec ravos timeant armenta leones
 ametque salsa levis hircus aequora.’

The problem is that the ‘Matine peaks’ (*Matina . . . cacumina*) of 28 do not seem to have existed. As Mankin puts it, “it is not certain where or what Matinus was. The few other references suggest a coastal region of Calabria or Apulia, although there are no notable ‘mountain peaks’ in this area”. He suggests taking *cacumina* as “tree-tops”, which seems unlikely when the Apennines follow. Watson quotes Nisbet and Hubbard on *C.* 1.28.3 (one of the “few other references”), who “suggest, not quite convincingly, ‘it is possible that Horace’s main contrast is between the river of the north and the hills (however low) of the extreme south’.”

Can we instead take *cacumina* as proleptic mountains, low and nearly flat lands that will have to become mountains before this oath can be violated? Will the low Matine hills first rise up into lofty peaks and only then be flooded by the rampaging Padus (Po), flowing uphill from hundreds of miles away? That seems no stranger than the Apennines stampeding into the sea in the next line: as Watson says there, “the *adynaton* is no stranger to bizarrerie”. Is the principle to be followed here *lectio absurdior potior*? The strongest point in favor of my interpretation is the proleptic adjective at the end of the speech (34), where the billy goat turns smooth (*lēvis*) as he acquires a taste for life in the salt sea.

¹ My text is the modern vulgate. I quote the two most recent commentaries on the *Epodes* or *Iambi*: D. Mankin (Cambridge, 1995) and L. C. Watson (Oxford, 2003).