Some more ways to die: Accidental deaths in Hellenistic epigrams

In this article, the focus falls on five Hellenistic epigrammatic poets (Theaetetus of Cyrene, Antipater of Thessalonica, Bianor of Bithynia, Apollonides of Nicaea and Antiphilus of Byzantium) and epigrams they wrote on the theme of extraordinary accidents. Typically of Hellenistic epigrammatists, each poet aimed at finding novelty and surprise, or at varying (and outdoing) predecessors’ efforts. The process generated innovative language and thought, pushing the literary epigram far away from its origins in lapidary epitaphs. The article aims at demonstrating this.

Keywords: Hellenistic Epigrams; Accidental Deaths; Theaetetus; Antipater of Thessalonica; Bianor; Apollonides; Antiphilus.

Introduction

In the Palatine Anthology (Anthologia Palatina, henceforth AP), the 10th-century collection of Hellenistic epigrams, there are clusters or series of epigrams dealing with a common theme, which Richard Reitzenstein (1970 [1893]:95–97) termed Konkurrenzgedichte [poems of rivalry] (cf. also Fraser 1972:611; 863–864 nn. 426–430; Nisbet 2003:29–34; Obbink 2004:27). The aim of each poet was to create a competing variation of a version by a predecessor in order to exhibit his own linguistic skill and poetic invention. Restrictions of space allow only a limited selection and treatment here. This article discusses the theme of unusual and even bizarre accidents as treated by five epigrammatists: Theaetetus of Cyrene, Antipater of Thessalonica, Bianor of Bithynia, Apollonides of Nicaea and Antiphilus of Byzantium. Not much has been written on these poets or their epigrams, and then most of that is unsubstantiated and largely negative and dismissive. In each epigram, the language and thought will be discussed in detail in order to demonstrate the way in which the narratives are presented, and to add to the as yet scanty scholarly debate around these poets and poems. In the cases of Theaetetus and Apollonides, and Antipater and Bianor, epigrams on the same theme are compared.¹

There is an aspect that all but one of these poets share: they had some connection with Italy and Republican and Imperial Rome. Whereas the epigrammatists of the 3rd, 2nd and early 1st centuries BCE had enjoyed the royal patronage of the Ptolemies, some were now clients of wealthy and influential Roman politicians and even of members of the imperial family (cf. e.g. Bowersock 1965:122–139; Pelliccio 2013:21–22; Williams 1978:134–138). Relevant biographical information is provided on these poets’ connections with Imperial Rome. I trust that this offering will please the honoranda, all the more because her field of study and research was the Early Roman Empire.

Theaetetus of Cyrene

Two epigrammatists with this name feature in the AP. Callimachus lauds the earlier poet in the early 3rd century BCE and from Cyrene for having shunned the traditional, well-trodden path of dramatic contests, where he failed, in favour of the less usual, less-travelled path of epigrammatic poetry.² In the Palatine Anthology, 35 epigrams are ascribed specifically to Theaetetus Scholasticus (6th century CE), and five others simply to ‘Theaetetus’, presumably the earlier poet.³ A sixth epigram (2 G-P), found in Diogenes Laertius (4.25), is an epitaph for the philosopher, Crantor, who died sometime between 270 and 265. This provides a terminus post quem for Theaetetus’ dating.⁴ It is very likely that the latter wrote the following epigram:

1. All translations are my own, unless otherwise stated.
Pathos is created in a crescendo of details. The setting of the scene: a cold night in winter, the occupants in wine-induced sleep or still dining; the locality: the great house of Aristogoras; the unnoticed fire rising up from below; the 80 free-born and enslaved perishing together; the impossibility of identifying the remains of the victims; the shared, communal funerary urn, funeral rites and tomb; and the certainty that Hades can still distinguish each victim in the ash and restore their urn, funeral rites and tomb; and the certainty that Hades can easily know even in the ash. Their family members could not separate their bones; their common urn and common honours were theirs. And one tomb was erected. But each one of them happened to suffer this hostile funeral pyre.

None of this is explained in the epigram; the reader has to fill in the gaps and believe that the event was possible. The diction of the epigram is quite simple, with only a few words that invite further scrutiny. The past participle οἰνωθέντα (heavy with wine) is not unusual, but the combination with οἶκον is attested only here.4 The poet may have intended two meanings of οἶκος: ‘the great house of Aristogoras’ as a reigning family who are themselves enslaved perishing together; or ‘the drunken house’ as hypallage.5 The middle participle ὑπονειμάμενον is found only here and means ‘having eaten away from beneath’.6 The sense here is that the fire started somewhere beneath the inmates, presumably in the hypocaust, and silently and unobserved spread and consumed the unsuspecting victims. The noun προσκηδέες, in the sense of blood-relationship, is unattested before Theaetetus.7 Apart from the hypallage in οἰνωθέντα ... οἶκον, there are other stylistic devices: the poetic form ἄμμα για for the more usual ἄναμμα;11 the unparalleled iunctura of ἐχθρῆς ... πυρκαϊῆς with the notion of the pyre being ‘hostile’ – that is not according to normal ritual practice; and the anaphora and alliteration in ξυνὴ δ’ ἦν κάλπις, ξυνὰ δὲ τὰ κτέρεα.

The narrative of a building collapsing and killing the banqueting occupants is not new.12 The account of Callimacus, a contemporary of Theaetetus, contains details that reappear or are varied in Theaetetus’ epigram. Callimacus mentions the ceiling or roof (μελάθρος), the dinner guests (δαιτυμόνων) and the house of the great Scopas-family (οἰλικόν μαγεύοντων ὀἶκος ἐπὶ Σκοπᾶς [the house fell on the mighty sons of Scopas]). Other poets vary the details of probably fictitious events and emphasise the dramatic irony and tragedy of people dying while enjoying themselves.13

Antipater of Thessalonica

Antipater of Thessalonica was active around 11 BCE to 12–15 CE. He had an important patron in Rome: Lucius Calpurnius Piso (born in 49/48 BCE, consul in 15, died 32 CE), to whom (and his two sons) Horace dedicated his Epistula ad Pisones or Ars Poetica.14 Some of Antipater’s epigrams are addressed to Piso.15

He also enjoyed imperial patronage. He addresses Gaius Iulius Caesar, son of Julia, the grandson and adopted son of Augustus, who was sent to the East by Augustus in 1 BCE and died in 4 CE (AP 9.59/46 G-P; 9.297/47 G-P).16 He also heaped exaggerated praise on Cotys, king of Thrace from 12 to 19 CE (AP 16.75/48 G-P).17

In the Anthology 35, epigrams are ascribed to him with certainty with the rubric ‘Antipater of Thessalonica’, but many more are probably his in another 96 epigrams where the authorship is indicated simply as ‘Antipater’ or ‘Antipater or another poet’.18 Appreciation of his poetry has been largely negative,19 but a recent assessment has found his epigrams clever, marked by subtle irony and pointed, unexpected endings.20

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5. Compare also Abdelhamid (2018:13) who takes the epigram as evidence of the ‘high-status life’ and the abundant production of wine in Cyrenaica at the time.
6. LSJ s.v. οἶκος. Also TLG.
7. LSJ s.v. οἶκος. III.
8. LSJ s.v. ὑπονειμάμενον. Gow and Page (1965:2.523) point out that, while νειμάμενον is often used of fire (as in Hiom. Il. 23.17; Hdt. 5.101), the compound occurs elsewhere only in Epich. fr. 9, but in the sense of ‘deceive’ or ‘cheat’; compare LSJ s.v. νειμάμ- B.L.2b, as metaphor. Elsewhere the use of the verb is restricted to medical writers and lexicographers; compare TLG.
10. LSJ s.v. προσκηδέες ιτ: ‘connected by marriage’, ‘kinsfolk’; Gow and Page (1965:2.523). Later found only in Apollonius of Rhodes (4.717) and Herodotus (8.138); TLG.
11. LSJ s.v. οἰνωθέντα and οἰνωθέν: ‘connected by marriage’, ‘kinsfolk’; Gow and Page (1965:2.523). Later found only in Apollonius of Rhodes (4.717) and Herodotus (8.138); TLG.
12. Simon. Fr. 510 PMG (testimonia only); Call. Ant. B. 64.11–14 Pfeiffer (only a reference to the Scopas in a restored text); after Theaetetus: Cic. De Or. 2.86.351–353; Quint. 11.2.11–16 (who regards the story as fictitious); also Ov. 11.511–512; Val. Max. 1.8. Compare Campbell (1991:374–379); Page (1975:242–244).
15. AP 6.242/43 G-P; 249/45 G-P; 335/41 G-P; 9.92/2 G-P; 93/31 G-P; 428/1 G-P; 541/44 G-P; 552/42 G-P; 10.25/40 G-P; 16.18/30 G-P.
18. Gow and Page (1968:2.20–21); compare Degani (2002a); Cameron (2003a) – ‘80-odd’.
19. For example, Hight (1979a: 73) classified him as ‘graceful, witty, and unimportant.’

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The following epigram deals with the death of a baby who approached a bee-hive:

τὸ βρέφος Ἐρμώνακτα διεχρήσατο, μέλισσα, φεῦ κύνες, ἀποπλανίην κυρία μαμόμουν οὐκ ἐξ ὀμίλους ἐγκυμόνων πολλάκις. ἡγνοίησεν ὁ δειλὸς βουγενέες, αἰαὶ, κέντρας εἶ δ' ὄργοι φοῖλα μεμφόμεθα, πεῖθο τυλικάκει καὶ ἄστριθον μικρὸ μελίσσων ἀϊνέν κἀκεῖνος πικρὸν ἑπταῖ μέλα.

[Bees, you’re slim baby Hermonax (alas, you dogs!), a crawling child going after honey. Though often fed by you, you have killed him, alas, with your stings. If we warn against snakes’ nests, listen to Lysidice and Amyntor not to praise bees either; they also have in them bitter honey.] (AP 9.302/69 G-P, [author’s own translation])

Bees are accused of killing a baby named Hermonax when he crawled towards a hive. He was after the honey which he had often been fed, but now ironically, caused his death. The tragedy serves as a warning, issued to him and others by the parents, Lysidice and Amyntor, that bees, despite being associated with sweetness, are as dangerous as snakes.

The tragedy is highlighted by the antithesis of the first words of lines 1 and 2: τὸ βρέφος [the innocent child] and φεῦ κύνες [the dangerous dogs]. The abusive κύνες, already in Homer, is here strengthened by the exclamation of anger, φεῦ, and this, together with the interjection common in tragedy οὐ, elevate the grief and outrage. The killing of the child by the bees is contrasted with their having also nourished him; sweetness turns into bitterness.

There is apparent innovation in a few words: διεχρήσατο, in the secondary, passive sense of kill or destroy, seems first to be attested here and is particularly violent-sounding word for the bees’ attack; ἀποπλανίην appears here first; the use of μαμόμουν is limited to poetry; the passive ἐγκυμόνων in the sense of ‘be fed’ occurs nowhere else; and φοῖλα for serpents’ nests, reappears only later.

The last word confronts the critic with the choice of literal logic or poetic expression. Both the Palatine and Planudean codices have μέλι. However, Jacobs proposed βέλος [weapon] to apply more logically to both snakes and bees. On the other hand, μέλι creates an oxymoron with πικρὸν [bitter honey], that encapsulates the theme of the epigram – something that βέλος cannot do. Bianor, who composed a variation on this epigram, also creates the oxymoron in the last line (see below). Poets are not bound by strict rules of logic.

**Bianor of Bithynia**

The *floruit* of Bianor falls in the age of Augustus and Tiberius in the 1st century CE. Epigram AP 9.423/16 G-P describes the destruction of Sardis by an earthquake in 17 CE. Twenty-two epigrams in the AP bear his name. His work is regarded as mediocre, conventional in theme and lacking in stylistic skill. The freak accident, described in the next epigram, also concerns a baby stung to death by bees – a variation on the previous epigram:

κοῦρον ἀποπλανήτην ἐπιμάζιον Ἑρμώνακτα, φεῦ, βρέφος ὡς ἄδικης ἐλείτε βουγενέες, ἤγονησον ὁ δειλὸς ἐξ ὀμίλους οὐλόσσας ἐλθὼν· αἱ δ' ἔχεον ἦτε χερειότεραι. ἀντὶ δ' θοίνης ἐνέμαξαν φοῖλα κέντρα· ὦ πικραί, γλυκερῆς ἄντιπαλοι χάριτος.

[A young baby boy, straying, unattended, Hermonax – alas! how unjustly you killed him, you ex-bred bunch. The poor child did not know as he went to you as if you were honey-bees. But you were worse than adders. Instead of a feast you pressed your murderous stings into him, a sharp ones, antagonists of your sweet gift.] (AP 9.548/17 G-P, [author’s own translation])

The tragedy in miniature plays off with a minimum of detail. A baby boy called Hermonax, still being breast-fed, crawls off towards a bee-hive, knowing only its association with honey, but ignorant of the danger. The bees attack more aggressively than vipers and sting the child to death and in the process betraying their own nature as makers of honey.

The narrative focuses alternately on the child and bees: the baby (κοῦρον ... Ἑρμώνακτα, 1) and the bees (φεῦ ... εἵλετε βουγενέες, 2), the baby (ηγονήσον ὁ δειλὸς, 3) and the bees (ἐχέον ἦτε χερειότεραι, 4), with a strong contrast between the deadly stings and sweet honey in the final couplet (ἀντὶ δ' ... θοίνης ... ἐνέμαξαν φοῖλα κέντρα, 5; πικραί, γλυκερῆς ἀντίπαλοι χάριτος, 6). Pathos is created for the baby: he was still young and not yet weaned (ἀποπλανήτην ἐπιμάζιον, 1); and the poor child was innocent and unknowing (ηγονήσον ὁ δειλὸς, 3). Revulsion is expressed for the bees: they are ‘born of oxen’ (βουγενέες, 2); they acted unjustly (φεῦ, βρέφος ὡς ἄδικης ἐλείτε, 2); they were worse than adders (ἐχέον ἦτε χερειότεραι, 4); and they betrayed their own natures by causing death instead of pleasure (ἐνέμαξαν φοῖλα κέντρα, ὦ πικραί, γλυκερῆς ἀντίπαλοι χάριτος, 5–6).

There is some unusual diction. The substantive ἀποπλανήτην means ‘wanderer’ or ‘fugitive’, and is recorded elsewhere only in the Codex Palatinus, accepted by Beckby (1965:3.370), as does LSJ s.v. ‘Πικραίς, ἀντίπαλοι χάριτος’. An image of the child built in the Codex Planudeus epigraph in the grounds that ἐπιμάζιον is late.

22. Compare also Setti (1890:101).
23. Compare also Setti (1890:101).
24. LSJ s.v. διαρίσιος, II.2 (pass.), where only D.L. 1.102 is mentioned.
25. LSJ and TLG s.v. ἐρημπότης (elsewhere dubiously at Nic. Th. 9.206, 397 and Opp. Cyn. 3.110). The reading of the first line here is approved by Beckby (1965:3.370), as does LSJ s.v. ‘Nic. Th. 9, 5 et cetera of a mouse, AP 9.86 (Antiph).’ Gow and Page (1968:1.54–55; 2.74) accept the reading of the codex Planudeus ἐρημπότητος on the grounds that ἐρημπότης is late.
27. LSJ s.v. φεῦ: ‘feed on popp’, ‘bread-feed’; compare also TLG.
28. LSJ s.v. φοῖλας; ‘den, lair, esp. of the caves of bears’; later of serpents’ nests (e.g. Paus. 8.16.2; Luc. Philosoph. 11).
29. Jacobs (1817:526): ‘Comparatio cum serpentibus efficit, ut scribendum existimem: κικενίας πικρὸν ἑπταῖ βέλος.’ Gow and Page (1968:2.74) follow Jacobs, since serpents and bees have different ‘venoms’ and methods of injecting them; Beckby (1965:3.188) follows the codices.
30. Compare also Setti (1890:101).

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later in Philip, AP 9.240, also of a child straying into danger. The adjective ἐπιμάζων (for the more usual ἐπιμαζόμενος), meaning ‘on the breast’, ‘not yet weaned’, only appears again much later in the 6th-century epigrammatist, Agathias (AP 5.276, not 275 as in LSI), and then of a young woman. The earliest attested occurrence of βουγενάς [born of an ox] is attributed to Empedocles who used the term to refer to imaginary strange creatures such as those ‘with rolling gait, countless hands, bull-born, human-faced’ (ἐξοντοῦ ἀκρότερα βουγενή αὐθόφρους), a phrase cited by Plutarch in a philosophical discourse. Philetas seems to be the earliest to apply the term to bees (βουγενάς ... μελίσσας, Fr. 22), and Callimachus also used the term of bees (ἀπὸ βουγεναίων, Fr. 383.4 Pfeiffer). After Bianor, Meleagros writes ἔργα δὲ τεχνήεντα βουηγενέεσσι μελίσσας/καλὰ μέλει 

The following epigram is a variation on the theme of a collapsed ceiling:


29. LSJ s.v. ἐπιμαστίδιος.
31. See Gow and Page (1968:2.207) and 125 on Antiphil. AP 5.307.3/13 G-P.
33. First attested in Call. Dion. 124. Compare LS and TGL s.v. ἐμμάζεσθαι II; φοίνιος II.2
34. Beckby (1965:3.378, 806).
35. Gow and Page (1968:2.147); see now Pelliccio (2013:30–34).
41. Degani (2002c); Gow and Page (1968:2.147); see now Pelliccio (2013:30–34).
47. Degani (2002c); Gow and Page (1968:2.147); see now Pelliccio (2013:30–34).
48. Reitzenstein (1895 [1965]).
A wife, Philinna, entreats her husband, Diogenes, not to remarry after her death. He (conveniently?) forgets and hastens to remarry. The late wife’s revenge is inevitable: on their wedding-night the bridal-chamber collapses on the couple, thus ending the marriage before dawn. There is an implicit moral: the wishes of a dying person should be heeded; if not, punishment is certain. The seriousness of the oath, emphasising the marital bond, is clear from Euripides, Alcestis 276: μὴ πρὸς σε θεὸν τής με προδούναι, μὴ πρὸς παίδων, μὴ πρὸς φίλων, τοίς φρονείσας [by the gods, do not take upon yourself to desert me, nor by the children whom you will make orphans] and Demosthenes, In Aphobus 2.20.5: ἱκταῖο, ἀντιβολῷ πρὸς παίδων, πρὸς γυναικῶν, πρὸς τῶν άντων ἁγάθων ὤμις [I beseech you, I entreat you, by your children, by your wives, by all the good things that you have].

The structure of the brief narrative develops in two contrasting stages in the first two couplets: Philinna’s entreaty, moving, elevated and full of pathos (1–2); and the cold and terse mention of Diogenes’ action, followed suddenly by the consequences (3–4), the juxtaposition of their names separated by the enjambment reflecting their opposition. In the final distich comes the vengeance of the departed wife (5–6). Philinna’s presence dominates the epigram.31 A few words and expressions seem unique or rare. The causative use of σχάζω (for σχέψα) is found only here, the shortened form and sound of the verb vividly evoking the sudden collapse of the room.32 The active infinitive σαξίζο ο with an object accusative other than σαξίζονα is rare and awkward, but from the context here used in the special sense of pouring a libation at a wedding-ceremony.33 The intransitive δεύτερα φίλτρα γάμου καὶ μήνας ἀφρωτος are unique.34 The simplex form στέλλω for the compositum περιστέλλω in the sense of bury, is rare.35 Stylistic features are the epic and tragic overtones in γονάζομαι,36 μήνας,37 and ἄφυκτος;38 the hypallage in δεύτερα φίλτρα γάμου, where the epithet naturally belongs with γάμω,39 and the variation in δεύτερα φίλτρα ~ δεύτερον ἀφρωτος ἀντιβολῶ, suggests the opening lines echo the scene in which Alcestis declares that she is willing to die in the place of her husband Admetus and beseeches him not to remarry (Alc. 300–325); her reasons are a fear of a stepmother who will be hostile to their children.

Comparison with the epigram of Theaetetus above, reveals the degree of variation on the topic. The setting changes from a banqueting-hall in a grand abode to a private room in an ordinary home; the time from a winter’s night to a wedding-night; the number of victims from 80 to two people; the names from Aristagoras to Philinna and Diogenes; the cause of the disaster from a basement fire to the wrath of the deceased wife when her dying wish is ignored; from the remains of the dead being indistinguishable to the victims not seeing the light of the next day; and the lesson that Hades can identify the dead to the advisability of heeding the last wishes of a person, especially when expressed in the name of the children.

Antiphilos of Byzantium

Fifty-one epigrams, 45 in the AP and six more in the API, are ascribed to Antiphilos of Byzantium, who also lived in the 1st century CE. There are testimonia which help us estimate his floruit. The first is his epigram AP 9.178/6 G-P in which ‘Nero’ is praised for his generosity to Rhodes:

I, Rhodes, who once was Helios’ island,40 am now Caesar’s, and I boast of equal light from both. Just when I was nearly extinguished, a new radiation illuminated me, o Helios, and Nero’s light shone beside yours.41 How shall I say to whom I owe most? The one brought me to the light from the depths, and the other saved me as I was sinking. (transl. Paton 1958:93, [Adapted])

Reizenstein confidently and Paton tentatively identified the Nero as Tiberius and related it to epigram AP 9.287/23 G-P, by Apollonides:

I, the holy bird, who had never set foot in Rhodes, the eagle who was but a fable to the people of Cercaphus, came borne through the vast heaven by my high-flying wings, then when Nero was in...
Both Antiphilus and Apollonides, possibly near-contemporaries, refer to Helios’ island, indulge in hyperbole (Caesar as a second sun and a future Zeus) and refer only to ‘Nero’. Reizenstein and Paton link the epigram to Suetonius who reports an event shortly before Tiberius’ departure from Rhodes in 2 CE (Tib. 14.46):

*Ante paucossero quam revocaertur dies aquilum quam nasta Rhodiconsepect in culmine domuselussedit ... [In fact, a few days before he was recalled, an eagle, never before sighted in Rhodes, alighted on the roof of his house ... (author’s own translation)]

However, Tiberius is not known to have benefited Rhodes in any way and in fact lived there involuntarily as a recluse to hide his ignominia (Suet. Tib. 12.1) and would hardly have done the Rhodians any favours. Jacobs argued for Nero, citing Tacitus, who records that Nero, at 16 years of age, restored the freedom of the Rhodians (reddita Rhodiis libertas, Ann. 12.58), taken away in 44 CE by Claudius. This act probably occurred in 54 CE after Nero became emperor.86 The Rhodians’ appreciation is preserved on an inscription87 which cites Tacitus, who records that Nero, at 16 years of age, restored the freedom of the Rhodians (reddita Rhodiis libertas, Ann. 12.58), taken away in 44 CE by Claudius.88 This act probably occurred in 54 CE after Nero became emperor.89 The Rhodians’ appreciation is preserved on an inscription87 which commemorates on a drachm, showing on the obverse, Nero’s Helios, wearing a laurel crown with the sun’s rays forming a halo, and, on the reverse, Nike standing on a prow with a wreath and palm, and opposite her a rose signifying Rhodes (póloos).90

Less direct evidence of Antiphilus’ dating is provided by his epigram AP 7.379, which refers to the great mole built at Puteoli (Dicaearchia). Once thought to have been built by Caligula, but more probably begun by Claudius and completed by Nero.91

Antiphilus’ inventiveness, metrical skill, elaborate and cultured style, use of exotic vocabulary, neologisms and antitheses, evidence of the influence of Leonidas of Tarentum has been acknowledged.92 However, I have not found any epigrammatic variations on the themes of the two epigrams discussed above; they seem to be unique.

The freakish accident in the following epigram involves a herdsman:

69. Higlet (1797b) left the identity of the ‘Nero’ open, dating the composition of the epigram to 5 BCE if it was about Tiberius, or 54 CE if it involved Nero. Cameron (2003b) states briefly that Nero was thanked for restoring the liberty of Rhodes.]

70. 0.12.1.1: ἵπτερον [a rock where no goats go], glossed by Hesychius as ὑψηλή τότος, [a steep place] echoes Homer who also applies it to a rock: κατ’ ἵπτερος πέτρος (II. 9.15 = 16.4) and ἕκ’ ἵπτερος πέτρος (II. 13.63). The only other poetic texts to use the phrase are the Homeric Hymn to Pan 4 (κατ’ ἵπτερος πέτρος) and Perses (dates unknown), AP 7.501.3–4 (πέτρος ὁ δὲ/πέτρος). Also very rare in poetry is βόσκει [fodder feed]: Homer implies it to food for fish (βόσκει ψυχῆς, II. 19.268) and Theocritus to sheep (να πέφεκα βοσκάντων ίον βόσκει [not all the flock] graze on my feed), Idyll 25.8).93 Antiphilus is here

A cowherd descends a cliff by rope to obtain honey from an otherwise inaccessible hive, but one of his dogs chews through the rope which had become covered with honey and the man falls to his death. The narrative is clear and neat: the first two couples build up the scene, while the third couple gives the sudden result and moral. However, Gow and Page, referring to a fuller account by the historian Conon (1st century BCE–1st century CE), criticise the poet for leaving too much to the imagination and taking too much for granted.94 Yet, the reader can clearly reconstruct and visualise the event: the honey is in an inaccessible place on the rock-face; it is far more easily and far less perilously retrieved from the cliff-edge above than by ascending with ropes; from the cliff-edge the dog then bites the rope, which by now has honey on it from other descents.95

Once more, critics have to remember that writing history and poetry, differ in the latter’s greater reliance on the reader’s imagination, necessitated by the condensed expression in the restricted format of the genre. The historical or prose narrative will generally be longer. If Antiphilus knew Conon’s tale, he would have counted on his readers to recognise and acknowledge his poetic recreation of the historian’s version.

There is irony in the effort the herdsman puts in and the devastating outcome. The style is simple: only a few words drawing closer attention. The phrase ἵπτερον ... πέτρον [a rock where no goats go], glossed by Hesychius as ὑψηλή τότος, [a steep place] echoes Homer who also applies it to a rock: κατ’ ἵπτερος πέτρος (II. 9.15 = 16.4) and ἕκ’ ἵπτερος πέτρος (II. 13.63). The only other poetic texts to use the phrase are the Homeric Hymn to Pan 4 (κατ’ ἵπτερος πέτρος) and Perses (dates unknown), AP 7.501.3–4 (πέτρος ὁ δὲ/πέτρος). Also very rare in poetry is βόσκει [fodder feed]: Homer implies it to food for fish (βόσκει ψυχῆς, II. 19.268) and Theocritus to sheep (να πέφεκα βοσκάντων ίον βόσκει [not all the flock] graze on my feed), Idyll 25.8).93 Antiphilus is here
talking of cattle. Borchus is a βουποίμην, a word found only here.\(^{79}\) Antiphilus is also the only recorded poet to use χαρινομένη [stained] of honey.\(^{80}\) The adjective άτρυγές is found only here.\(^{81}\) The verbδέσωσιστό (for ἐρύωσιστό to avoid a lengthened syllable) implies violent dragging, drawing or plunging – here tragically and ironically fatal instead of profitable.\(^{82}\)

The next epigram turns to an elderly corpse-collector: νεκροδόκον κλιντῆρ Φίλων ὁ πρέσβυς ἀείρων ἐνδόθεν, ὑπάργυρα μάθουν ἐνδόθεν, σφάλματος εἶναι οὐκ ἔχειν ἐνδόθεν· ἤ πάντα ἐνοχοῦ εἶναι ἐνδόθεν, ἐκάλεσε δ’ ἡ πόλις πρόσροσιν.\(^{83}\) τῶν δ’ ἄλλων ἐφάρσα γνεκοστόλον, αὐτός ἐπ’ αὐτῷ ἀσκάνησεν ὁ γέρων ἀρχισφορόν Ειλαθεν.\(^{84}\) [Old Philo was lifting the couch for the dead, bending himself, in order to earn his daily wage, and falling from a slight stumble, died, for he was ready for Hades, and his grey hair, a reason, was calling; and that bier which he bore for others, the old man himself carried for himself without knowing it] \(^{85}\) \([\text{AP 7.634/19 G-P, [author’s own translation]}]\)

The epigram revolves around the tragic irony of an aged corpse-collector suddenly succumbing to his end after tripping and being himself a copse being carried away. The simple style is deceptive. Words used in a new sense are νεκροδόκον [receiving the dead], for the more usual νεκροδέγμον, used of Hades by Aeschylus, Prometheus 152–153 (‘Under/ of the corpse-taker’, of Hades, receiver of the dead), but uniquely applied to a bier by Antiphilus;\(^{86}\) κλιντήρ, primarily a couch, here a bier, a meaning found elsewhere only in a Greek epigram (ἐμί δ’ ἀλυπότατος κλιντήρ πάντεσσι ἑτοῖμος [the one who carries the corpses across]; Antiphilus, however, uses it in the sense of someone ‘bearing the dead’).\(^{87}\) Finally, the participle ἀσκάνησεν is quite rare.\(^{88}\)

**Conclusion**

The above discussion has tried to show how skilful the selected Hellenistic epigrammatists were in exploiting the brief form of the epigram to recreate the tragedy of accidental deaths. Within the confines of the genre, they managed to develop stories that exhibit the typical features of narrative and drama: setting, actors, action or events, sometimes also speech. The epigrams discussed above treat serious topics: the collapse of roofs on people enjoying themselves (Theaetetus 7.444; Apollonides 9.422), a baby stung to death by bees (Antipater 9.302; Bionar 9.548), a honey-seeker falling to his death (Antiphilus 7.622), and a corpse-collector tripping and dying alongside his cart (Antiphilus 7.634). Even though these and similar accidents probably occurred often enough in everyday life, what appears in the epigrams is a deliberate literary construct aiming at recreating something new, surprising and intellectually engaging in style and content. Although the narrated events are fictitious, the sympathy of the reader is aroused by means of pathos, vivid detail and epic or tragic diction, and strong irony.

As for style, one notes the (at least for us) innovative diction in the use of rare words, neologisms, new uses of familiar words, new *inuncturae*, and unique figurative language and other figures of speech. In the case of epigrams on the same topic, comparison reveals the variation in which later poets strove to vary and outdo a predecessor. This was one of the basic elements of Hellenistic literary theory and practice, which was to be taken over and perpetuated by the Roman poets in the well-known process of *imitatio et aemulatio*.

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**Competing interests**

The author declares that no competing interest exists.

**Author’s contributions**

I declare that I am the sole author of this research article.

\(^{79}\) LSJ and TLG s.v. βουποίμην. Also Gow and Page (1968:2.129); Müller (1935:35).\(^{80}\)

\(^{80}\) LSJ and TLG s.v. χρανια; ‘stain’, ‘smear’.

\(^{81}\) LSJ s.v. ἀτρυγές; ‘unharvested’, ‘not gathered’; Müller (1935:35).

\(^{82}\) LSJ s.v. έρυσις A, B.

\(^{83}\) LSJ s.v. νεκροδόκον, νεκροδέγμον. Also Gow and Page (1968:2.129).

\(^{84}\) LSJ s.v. κλιντήρ; Müller (1935:64).

\(^{85}\) LSJ s.v. σπάλνα.

\(^{86}\) Beckby (1965:2.370); Gow and Page (1968:1.102–3; 2.129); Hecker (1843:278–79); Waltz et al. (1960:122).

\(^{87}\) Tr. Evelyn-White (1914:449).

\(^{88}\) LSJ s.v. ἀγκώθου, where the citation of Paulus Silentiarius is incorrectly given as 5.249 instead of 5.250, and which does not mention Antiphilus; compare TLG.

\(^{89}\) LSJ s.v. φαλάμα I. The reference to 4.289 (ἔτοιμον εἰς σφάλματα νέωτον whenever he should decline to stumbling) rather involves the metaphorical meaning of ‘fault’ or ‘error’; s.v. II.2. Compare also TLG.

\(^{90}\) LSJ and TLG s.v. νεκυοστόλον.

\(^{91}\) LSJ s.v. χαρινομένη [stained] of honey.\(^{80}\) The word νεκυοστόλον [ferrying the dead] is rare and elsewhere applied to the river, Styx. The Suda lexicon under N glosses the word as ὁ τοίς νεκροῖς δαπερῶν [the one who carries the corpses across]; Antiphilus, however, uses it in the sense of someone ‘bearing the dead’. Finally, the participle ἀσκάνησεν is quite rare.\(^{82}\)

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