



AN UNNOTICED TELESTICH IN VIRGIL, *AENEID* 8.246–9?*

ABSTRACT

The aim of this short note is to highlight a possible, hitherto unnoticed, telestich in Verg. Aen. 8.246–9, which presents the Greek word ΣΕΜΑ ('portent', 'wonder', 'prodigy', 'tomb'). To justify this identification, I will argue for its significance from its context in the poem (the battle between Hercules and Cacus), pointing out the insistence on the imagery of light and revelation, and the use of the phrase mirabile dictu, which appears in the same episode of the Aeneid, in the Latin poetic tradition.

Keywords: Virgil; *Aeneid*; telestich; ΣΕΜΑ

The battle between Hercules and Cacus is a major episode in *Aeneid* Book 8 alongside the meeting between Aeneas and Evander and the description of the Shield of Aeneas. Toward the end, when Hercules opens Cacus' cave, Virgil makes reference to the conflict between light and darkness, and to the fear felt by Cacus when he sees that there is no way out (8.241–53):

at specus Caci detecta apparuit ingens
regia, et umbrosae penitus patuere cauernae,
non secus ac si qua penitus ui terra dehiscens
infernās reseret sedes et regna recludat
245 pallida, dis inuisa, superque immane barathrum
cernatur, trepidant immisso lumine Manes.
ergo insperata deprensū luce repente
inclusumque cauo saxo atque insueta rudentem
desuper Alcides telis premit, omniaque arma
250 aduocat et ramis uastisque molaribus instat.
ille autem, neque enim fuga iam super ulla pericli,
faucibus ingentem fumum (mirabile dictu)
euomit inuoluitque domum caligine caeca.

But Cacus' lair and his vast palace appeared, and its shadowy caverns lay open deep within, just as if the earth, split deep by some force, should unlock the infernal seats and unbar the pallid realms hateful to the gods, and the vastness of the depths should be seen from above, and the shades should tremble at the invading light. With arrows from above Alcides presses him as he is caught suddenly by the unexpected light, shut in by hollow rock, and roaring unnatural sounds. Alcides calls upon all his weapons, and threatens him with branches and huge millstones. He, however—for now no other escape from the danger remained—spews forth a vast amount of smoke from his jaws—amazing in the telling—and covers his home in blinding fog...¹

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¹ Virgil's text is quoted from R.A.B. Mynors, *P. Vergilii Maronis opera* (Oxford, 1969). I quote the translation of the *Aeneid* from L.M. Fratantuono and R.A. Smith, *Virgil, Aeneid 8. Text, Translation, and Commentary* (Leiden and Boston, 2018). Translations of other works of Virgil are quoted from H.R. Fairclough, *Virgil: Eclogues, Georgics, Aeneid 1–6* (Cambridge, MA, 1916).

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Trapped and attacked by Hercules, Cacus expels a great cloud of smoke from his throat, which Virgil describes as wondrous to tell. If we look at lines 246–9, I think that further conclusions might be drawn:

cernatur, trepident immisso lumine ManeS.
 ergo insperata deprensum luce repentE
 inclusumque cauo saxo atque insueta rudenteM
 desuper Alcides telis premit, omniaque armaA.

The last letters of these lines form the telestich *SEMA*, a Greek word which bears a range of meanings, including ‘sign’, ‘omen’, ‘portent’ or ‘tomb’. The potentially accidental occurrence of acrostics and telestichs, especially short ones,² is a reason for caution and has spurred much debate in recent decades.³ In my view, however, this telestich is not accidental, since it fits the scene of the battle between hero and monster. The vocabulary used by Virgil is significant here.

As the light enters the cave, Cacus’ den is revealed by Hercules. Virgil seems to insist on a lexicon related to the fields of vision, light and revelation (for example 241 *apparuit*; 242 *patuere*; 246 *cernatur, lumine*; 247 *insperata luce*), which are clearly connected to the ideas conveyed by the term $\sigma\eta\mu\alpha$ (and by the related verb $\sigma\eta\mu\alpha\acute{\iota}\omega$),⁴ which conveys ideas of signs and revealing. The darkness of the cave is disturbed by the light that enters and reveals Cacus, and Virgil compares it to the underworld and Cacus to the Manes (who provide the first letter to the telestich at line 246) who would tremble at this sudden intrusion of the light of day. One must also note that line 246, the first of the telestich, opens with *cernatur*, thus reinforcing the meaning of $\sigma\eta\mu\alpha$, in the telestich. However, this play between light and darkness/underworld might lead us to think that Virgil is playing with the polysemy of $\sigma\eta\mu\alpha$, and nodding also to its meaning ‘tomb’. Scholarship has shown that $\sigma\eta\mu\alpha$ was used in this sense by the Augustan poets. Mitchell has pointed to possible telestichs of *SEMA* elsewhere in the *Aeneid* (9.270–3, relating to Ascanius and Nisus),⁵ in Hor. *Carm.* 2.3.13–16 as well as in Ov. *Her.* 2.136–9 and 6.106–9, with the meaning of ‘tomb’.⁶ In *Aen.* 8.246–9, where Cacus is about to die, this wordplay may also signify to Virgil’s original audience that the revelation of Cacus’ home turns it into his tomb. In doing so, the poet aligns himself with an established literary tradition.⁷

² See G. Morgan, ‘Nullam, Vare ... chance or choice in *Odes* 1.18?’, *Philologus* 137 (1993), 142–5 for a mathematical analysis of the (possible) accidental nature of short acrostics.

³ For further references, see, for example, M. Robinson, ‘Arms and a mouse: approaching acrostics in Ovid and Vergil’, *MD* 82 (2019), 23–73 and M. Robinson, ‘Looking edgewise. Pursuing acrostics in Ovid and Virgil’, *CQ* 69 (2019), 290–308. On acrostics forming Greek words in Latin poetry, see J. Abad Del Vecchio, ‘Literal bodies (*SOMATA*): a telestich in Ovid (*Metamorphoses* 1.406–11)’, *CQ* 71 (2021), 688–92. Abad Del Vecchio also offers a helpful list of recent scholarship on acrostics and telestichs. For more bibliography on Virgil and Virgilian wordplay, see C. Castelletti, ‘Virgil’s *sulcus primigenius* of Augustan Rome’, in M.C. Pimentel, A. Lóio, N.S. Rodrigues, R. Furtado (edd.), *Augustan Papers: New Approaches to the Age of Augustus on the Bimillennium of his Death* (Zurich and New York, 2020), 301–28.

⁴ LSJ s.v. $\sigma\eta\mu\alpha$. I am grateful to the reviewers for calling my attention to this aspect.

⁵ K. Mitchell, ‘Acrostics and telestichs in Augustan poetry: Ovid’s edgy and subversive side-swipes’, *CCJ* 66 (2020), 165–81, at 167: ‘Book 9 may feature a telestich (*SEMA*, 270–3) for pathetic effect, since in this passage Ascanius is promising all kinds of rewards to Nisus if he succeeds in his heroism – but all Nisus gets is his tomb ($\sigma\eta\mu\alpha$).’

⁶ Mitchell (n. 5), 170–1.

⁷ In the Greek epic tradition, Apollonius of Rhodes describes the death of Idmon, who is mortally wounded by a boar, noting that his tomb is marked so that everyone can see it in the future (*Argon.* 2.842, using the word $\sigma\eta\mu\alpha$). Readers may note some similarities between the Virgilian and the

Regarding the meaning of *SEMA* as ‘wonder’ and/or ‘prodigy’, one should also pay attention to the clause *mirabile dictu* (252), used of Cacus expelling smoke in desperation.⁸ Virgil is fond of this expression, and he used it eight times in discussing wondrous things, such as the grafting technique in *G.* 2.30–1 *quin et caudicibus sectis mirabile dictu | truditur e sicco radix oleagina ligno*,⁹ mares conceiving to the wind in *G.* 3.274–5 *exceptantque leuis auras, et saepe sine ullis | coniugiis uento grauidae mirabile dictu*,¹⁰ and in connection to *Fama* in *Aen.* 4.182.¹¹ Fratantuono and Smith describe the *faucibus ingentem fumum (mirabile dictu)* of *Aen.* 8.252 as ‘a note of particularly magical, supernatural force’.¹² The sense of the telestich is therefore coherent with the context, as Fowler previously noted for the famous *MARS* acrostic in the *Aeneid*.¹³

Considering the above, it seems to me that the telestich *SEMA* in *Aen.* 8.246–9 should be recognized as intentional. It runs to only four letters, and one might think it likely accidental for this reason, but the polysemy of the word *SEMA* means it is relevant to the context in the poem in several senses. Virgil’s insistence on the semantically related ideas of light, vision and revelation, and his use of the phrase *mirabile dictu*, typically associated with wonders and *prodigia*, also strengthen the case for the credibility and the intentional character of this wordplay.

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Apollonian episodes, since both describe a conflict between man and beast, and Apollonius refers to a tomb.

⁸ For Cacus and *prodigia*, see V. Jármi, ‘A *horrendum monstrum*: an interpretation of the figure of Cacus’, *ACD* 49 (2013), 203–18.

⁹ ‘When the trunks are cleft—how wondrous the tale!—an olive root thrusts itself from the dry wood.’ R.F. Thomas, *Virgil Georgics, Volume 1, Books I–II* (Cambridge, 1988), ad loc. notes that the passage ‘suggests a θαῦμα, “miracle”, and looks in addition to the miraculous graft that follows (32–4)’.

¹⁰ ‘Then oft, without any wedlock, pregnant with the wind (a wondrous tale!) they flee over rocks.’

¹¹ For more examples, see Fratantuono and Smith (n. 1), 365.

¹² Fratantuono and Smith (n. 1), ad loc.

¹³ D. Fowler, ‘An acrostic in Vergil (*Aeneid* 7.601–4)?’, *CQ* 33 (1983), 298. Regarding the expression *mirabile dictu*, I propose two other poetic examples: in *Met.* 14.406, Ovid reacts with *mirabile dictu* to the description of the *prodigia* provoked by Circe’s magical powers, when the forests start to move and the ground groans; Lucan uses the same phrase at 5.672, when describing the giant wave that deposits Caesar on land.