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“Soft c” Jokes and the Biography of Plautus

At least by the time that Varro wrote his *Life of Plautus*, antiquity believed that Plautus came from the Umbrian hill town of Sarsina. Recently A. Gratwick (CQ 1973 78-84) has dismissed this datum as no more than an ‘inept construction’ on the pun at *Most.* 770&emdash;

TR. Sarsinatis ecqua est, si Vmbram non habes?

TR. Do you have a Sarsinian girl, if you don’t have an *umbra*?&emdash;

But Gratwick’s view, which has now become prevalent among English-speaking scholars, fails to explain exactly how an ancient scholar might have deduced solely from this wordplay on *Vmbra* (‘shade’ and ‘Umbrian girl’) that Plautus was himself Sarsinian. Varro may well have had independent evidence to establish Plautus’ citizenship, as Leo thought, but since we cannot know that for certain, arguments on either side reach an impasse.

I will reframe the question by asking *what internal evidence in the Plautine corpus might have made Varro think that Plautus was from Sarsina?* I suggest that Varro, inasmuch as he was working in the Alexandrian tradition of Eratosthenes, took instances of wordplay that pointed to dialectical variants in pronunciation as a basis for asserting that Plautus was from Sarsina. Since a characteristic feature of the Umbrian language was palatalization of the letter *c* before the front vowels *e* and *i* (approximating /ts/ or /sh/), I will focus on wordplays in the *Amphitruo* (383-4) and *Bacchides* (687, 1182-3, 361-2) that evidently require this palatalization. I will then offer a brief hypothetical reconstruction of the method whereby Varro might have made his conclusions, taking due account of the metatheatrical reference to the actor Pellio in *Bacch.* 213-5.