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On the Language and Meter of the “Prayer to Mars” (Cato Agr. 141.2-3)

Intended to accompany the lustration of the fields by the sacrifice of three animals, the archaic “Prayer to Mars” was recorded in early Republican times by Cato at Agr. 141.2-3. C. Watkins has already given a thorough analysis of the prayer’s poetics in 1995, especially with regard to its place and status in Indo-European. However, Watkins did not treat its meter. A quantitative metrical analysis of the prayer as it appears in Cato leads to no scheme other than a free one similar to Cole’s Saturnian (1969). Since the prayer predates Cato considerably, any treatment of its language should be of its most restorable archaic form. This paper will attempt to restore the text of the prayer to a more archaic state, and explore its versifiability through the application of a new approach proposed for contemporary poetic texts.

J. Parsons (1999) has proposed an ingenious solution that captures the metrical scheme of the Saturnian, further postulating that a pre-Classical-Latin prosody operated in the language of the verses. Essentially, the Saturnian can be conceived of as a line of as long as sixteen syllables; Korsch’s caesurae and the central diaeresis divide the stichic verse into four dimeters, which can be acatalectic, catalectic, or hypercatalectic:

D ₁				D ₂				D ₃				D ₄						
ú	u	u		ú	u	u		ú	u	u		ú	u	u				
-	-	-	x		-	-	-	x		-	-	-	x		-	-	-	x
uu	uu	uu			uu	uu	uu			uu	uu	uu			uu	uu	uu	

where D_n = dimeter (Mercado 2003). Phonological processes such as elision, synizesis, etc., were exploited as poetic licenses only within a dimeter. This scheme successfully accounts for 148 literary and inscriptional verses (cf. Kruschwitz 2002) that have come down to us. Moreover, sequences of prose from the same time period can be scanned into acatalectic dimeters after Parsons, and so his scheme can be tested against the norms of the language.

After Parsons and Watkins (cf. Courtney 1995), the “Prayer to Mars” can be versified into similar dimeters with the same poetic licenses at work. Furthermore, the prayer can be colometrized into seven strophes, with lines of varying length, culminated by Saturnians in the center of the prayer. The prayer shows various types of respension. In a more archaic state—for instance, superfluous uses of *-que* (cf. other archaic prayers with asyndeton such as the Umbrian “Prayer to Jupiter Grabovius” at *Tab. Ig.* VIa22-34) having been removed, with older forms substituted for more recent ones, e.g. *Mâvors* for *Mârs* (cf. Lucretius and Vergil), etc.—the prayer can be versified into more pristine dimeters. As we place the “Prayer to Mars” more firmly in the context of Old Latin

language and poetry, we can also arrive at an account of the recent prehistory of the Saturnian's metrical composition.