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# “WAXING THE KNEES OF THE GODS” IN JUVENAL (10. 55) AND PRUDENTIUS (*APOTH.* 457)

## 1. Iuv. 10. 54–55: Textual Problems

Juvenal’s Satire 10 develops the well-known Stoic thesis that human prayers are meaningless since people cannot distinguish good from evil and their aspirations are often harmful. The only reasonable thing left to be prayed for at all is reduced to “a sound mind in a sound body” (*orandum est ut sit mens sana in corpore sano*, v. 355).<sup>1</sup>

The introductory part starts with the main thesis, succinctly condemns pursuit of eloquence (9–10), strength (10–11), wealth (12–27), and political honours (36–46), and refers to the example of Democritus, who laughed at the foolish crowd and despised Fortune. Further it is summed up by v. 54–55 (echoed further in v. 346 *nil ergo optabunt homines?*):

ergo supervacua† aut perniciose petuntur  
propter quae fas est genua incutere deorum. 55

**54** *del. Leo*, **54–55** *del. Knoche* | supervacuo *Bickel* | aut <ne> perniciose petantur ... deorum? *Lachmann* : aut <et> *Schurzfleisch*, aut <vel> *Doederlein*, s. et vel *Campana* : aut <ut> p., p. q. ... deorum? *Munro* : aut <quae> p. petuntur ? propter quae ... deorum? *Bücheler* *probante Housmano* : putentur *Richards* *probante Duff* : aut <vel> p. putantur *Mayor*, alii alia **55** mos est *Ruperti* | incutere *Madvig* : cf. *Prudent.* *Apoth.* 457 genua incutere Dianae

<sup>1</sup> I agree with Brink 1972, 37–40 that while v. 356 is playfully disguised as a variation of a conventional prayer for mental and physical health (see examples in Mayor 1878, 356 ad loc.), this ‘health’ is at once reinterpreted in terms of a Cynic-Stoic virtue (357–362 *fortem posce animum mortis terrore carentem, qui...*), and further it is specified that one can achieve this virtue himself and not depend on Fortune (363–366).

V. 54 needs emendation for prosodic reasons: a hiatus together with a lengthened short vowel in arsis is inconceivable. Bücheler's proposal, supported by Housman,<sup>2</sup> to insert *quae* and put two question marks is tempting:

Then, what unnecessary or pernicious things are prayed for?  
For the sake of what is it (*on the contrary*) right to wax the knees  
of the gods?

This would provide an elegant pair of asyndetically opposed questions:<sup>3</sup> the first one introducing the following exemplification of wrong aspirations – 56–113 political power, 114–132 eloquence, 133–187 military glory, 188–288 longevity, 289–345 beauty – and the second one anticipating the conclusion (346–362: *mens sana in corpore sano* understood as inner virtue).<sup>4</sup>

Alternatively – if one inserts another monosyllabic word after *aut* or adopts Bickel's *supervacuo* (with hiatus)<sup>5</sup> – the lines might be regarded as a statement (a rhetorical question is also possible<sup>6</sup>); if so, *quae* in v. 55 is relative:

Then, people pray for unnecessary things [or, with Bickel: pray  
without necessity] or even (for) pernicious things, for the sake of  
which it is (considered) right to wax the knees of the gods.

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<sup>2</sup> Bücheler 1879, 355–356; Housman 1905, 90 (“*quae et que saepe numero in codicibus propter per interciderunt*”); adopted in Clausen 1959 a. o.

<sup>3</sup> Lachmann was the first one to take *propter quae fas est...* as a question; on the same lines Munro in Mayor 1878, 84 and Highet 1954, 278. However, if only one question, the one about proper prayers, were posed, it would be odd to take it up by five long sections dismissing wrong prayers.

<sup>4</sup> *Pace* Leo it can hardly be a problem that the answer to the question posed in v. 55 begins after almost 300 verses: the train of thought at the end of the satire is sophisticated (cf. n. 1 above), yet the satire has a clear structure, so that a competent reader would be able to keep in mind v. 55 even after a prolix answer to the question posed in v. 54. The objection of Ernout 1960, 322 “la double interrogation paraît bien maladroite” is arbitrary.

<sup>5</sup> Bickel 1943, 93, citing hiatus after the long vowel in the same position in 3. 70 *Samō hic*, 6. 274 *suā atque*, 6. 468 *agnoscī atque*, 12. 110 *bellī et*; cf. n. 11 below.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. v. 346 *nil ergo optabunt homines?*

Madvig found it impossible that *fas est* describes the act of improper prayer,<sup>7</sup> but Bickel rightly objected that it might be an ironic reference to what now came to be sanctioned by the society.<sup>8</sup>

Arguing for the athetesis of v. 54, Leo claimed that the whole satire dwells on the harmful<sup>9</sup> and not on the superfluous; this and the metrical defects of v. 54 made him athetize it. In his view, *propter quae* in 55 is exclamatory; the interpolator failed to grasp this and patched up a verse that would govern the relative *quae*.<sup>10</sup>

However, Bickel rightly pointed out that the idea of the superfluous is conveyed by the image of Democritus laughing at excessive outward honours and other follies (v. 33–53), as well as by the main point of the satire, “not to bow before fortune” (v. 52–53, 365–366): a wise man rejects fortune’s gifts as irrelevant, not as (inevitably) harmful.<sup>11</sup>

Thus, if v. 54–55 are taken as a statement, *supervacua* in v. 54 may refer to v. 33–53, while *perniciosa* refers to v. 56–345. If, following Bücheler, v. 54–55 are taken as a pair of questions, one will have to concede that common aspirations are both superfluous (to a wise

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<sup>7</sup> Madvig 1887, 561–562.

<sup>8</sup> Bickel 1943, 91 (siding with Friedländer 1895, 460 and quoting 6. 329 *iam fas est, admitte viros* and 6. 628 *iam iam privignum occidere fas est*).

<sup>9</sup> Apart from anticipating v. 56–345, v. 54 echoes v. 8–9 *nocitura toga, nocitura petuntur / militia*.

<sup>10</sup> Leo 1910, 49–52 supported by Jachmann 1943, 263–264 with n. 1, who adds that *ergo* is inappropriate and gives away interpolation (on no good grounds). Knoche 1940, 31 with n. 2; 1950, 93 (supported by Willis 1997, 134 and, tentatively, Tengström 1980, 19–21, 25) considers the difficulties of v. 54–55 serious enough to athetise them both and suspect an early interpolation (*genua incere* is echoed in Prudentius); anyway, the unusual expression *genua incere* speaks against it.

<sup>11</sup> Bickel 1943, 92 (cf. *idem* 1912, 144–145 and n. 5 above). Yet, he agrees with Leo that Juvenal does not regard wealth, power, eloquence, military glory, longevity and beauty as *supervacua*. His emendation *supervacuo* aims at solving this difficulty: not the common blessings themselves are superfluous, but the act of praying for them (since gods know better). – Anderson 1982, 346, who posits strong influence of Seneca’s *De tranquillitate animi* on Juvenal’s philosophic satires, also refers *supervacua* to the preceding v. 53, quoting *Tranq.* 13. 1 *hoc secutum puto Democritum ita coepisse: “Qui tranquille volet vivere nec privatim agat multa nec publice”, ad supervacua scilicet referentem ...* Cf. schol. vet. ad v. 54: *ut Democritus dixit*.

man, at least) and potentially harmful, but in order to beef up his argument,<sup>12</sup> in v. 56–345 Juvenal lays stress on the latter.<sup>13</sup>

## 2. *genua incerare deorum*: Wax Tablets with Vows?

Whatever solution be preferred for the text,<sup>14</sup> it leaves us with the semantic difficulty of v. 55 that has remained in the shadow of the discussions about the textual problems and has not attracted the proper attention of scholars: why is a prayer or a vow described as “waxing the knees of the gods”, *genua incerare deorum*?<sup>15</sup>

This curious expression has almost universally been taken to refer to sealed wax tablets that contained vows and were supposedly fixed at the knees of the statue; possibly, this was implied by scholia vetustiora ad loc. (see n. 27 below). The association arises naturally, since verbs meaning ‘to cover with wax’ (*cerare*, *incerare*, *κηροῦν*) are frequently used in reference to wax tablets, which themselves provide a logical link to vows in the form of votive offerings.

Yet the central problem with this explanation is the unclear association between wax tablets and the knees. Some scholars attempted to explain it by suggesting that wax tablets were laid upon the knees of seated statues;<sup>16</sup> others refer to a particular practice of attaching the

<sup>12</sup> V. 57–355 are justly reproached for ostentatious rhetoric that lacks philosophical depth (cf. Lehrs’ hand-written vitriol quoted in Friedländer 1895, 452–453 and remarks in Courtney <sup>2</sup>2013, 398).

<sup>13</sup> Thus Courtney <sup>2</sup>2013, 392: he sees *supervacua* as hinting at v. 35, but admits the problem: “The former question is answered in 56–345 (though the stress is laid entirely on harmful things; *supervacua* are not so well suited to satire)”. – If one regards *supervacua* both as ‘pointless’ and ‘excessive’ (Murgatroyd 2017, 35), one may find the mention of the latter in v. 56–345: e. g., 104–105 *nimios optabat honores / et nimias optabat opes*; 154 *iam tenet Italiam, tamen ultra tendere pergit*; 251–252 *queratur ... nimio de stamine*. Yet, the connection to v. 35–46 and pairing with *perniciosa* suggests that *supervacua* should rather mean ‘pointless’.

<sup>14</sup> Apart from athetizing both v. 54–55 (see n. 10 above).

<sup>15</sup> Its meaning in the echoing words of Prudentius’ (*Apoth.* 457 *genua incerare Dianae*) will be discussed below in section 4.

<sup>16</sup> Duff 1898, 334 “the custom ... of writing a prayer or vow on a wax tablet and placing it on temple walls or on the knees of divine images”; Musurillo 1961, 174 “on the laps of the gods”; Marie 1961, 43; [Rudd]–Barr 1991, 204 “Petitions written on wax-coated tablets were placed on the knees of gods”.

sealed wax tablets with vows to the thigh of a statue;<sup>17</sup> sometimes these two versions are mentioned together or confused.<sup>18</sup>

Edgeworth rightly puts forward two crucial objections against the first option: (1) such a practice is not attested anywhere at all;<sup>19</sup> (2) statues of gods in seated position are much rarer than those in standing or reclining positions, especially in the art of the Flavian and Antonine periods. Therefore, even if vows were indeed laid on the knees of seated statues, this would apply to a very limited range of deities (like, say, the Olympian Zeus). Besides, the metaphor of ‘waxing’ in this case would be somewhat strained.

The evidence for the peculiar custom of fixing sealed vows on wax tablets to statues deserves a closer look. It should be emphasised that these vows must be distinguished (a) from tablets *ex voto*, i.e. paintings or inscriptions that were offered to gods as expressions of gratitude,<sup>20</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Rutgers 1618, 451–464; Ruperti 1804, 308 “nam vota solebant in cerea concipi tabula, et haec imaginibus deorum, inpr. genibus earum, cera adfigi”; Mayor 1878, 84 “The wax tablets hung from or fastened to the knees...”; Pearson–Strong <sup>2</sup>1892, 177; Friedländer 1895, 460 “Wachstafeln, die die Gelübden enthielten, wurden an die Kniee der Götterstatuen geheftet oder andere Tafeln mit Wachs angeklebt”.

<sup>18</sup> Gnlika 2001, 1–8 = 1964, 52–57 (at length); Courtney <sup>2</sup>2013, 404; Murgatroyd 2017, 35–36, 39 with n. 48.

<sup>19</sup> Edgeworth 1999, 184–185. However, offerings other than wax tablets could be laid on the knees of seated statues: see *Il.* 6. 92 (πέπλον) θεῖναι Ἀθηναίης ἐπὶ γούνασιν, with Leaf 1886, 203–204 ad loc.; besides, donations are sometimes seen in the hands or upon the knees of votive statuettes: Rouse 1902, 67; 304 with n. 5.

<sup>20</sup> These were normally placed on votive walls and pillars or inside temples, sometimes near the statues of gods (as in Herod. 4. 19 ἐκ δεξιῆς τὸν πίνακα, Κοκκάλη, στῆσον / τῆς Ὑγίειης); the usual term was πίνακα ἀναθεῖναι (πίναξ ἀνάκειται). For other instances of these votive tablets see, e. g., Headlam 1922, 181–182 on Herod. 4. 19 (confusing this practice with the passages discussed below); Arph. *Thesm.* 773 ff. with Austin–Olson 2004, 260 ad loc.; Maltby 2002, 192 on Tib. 1. 3. 28; Bömer 1958, 163–164 on Ov. *Fast.* 3. 268; Jane Harrison in Hunter–Handford 1927, 208 on Aen. *Tact.* 31. 15 (πινάκιον ἡρωϊκόν). – H. R. Bailey in Mayor 1878, 85 (followed by Pearson–Strong <sup>2</sup>1892, 177) wrongly links the passages discussed below to Aesch. *Suppl.* 463 νέοις πίναξιν βρέττα κοσμήσαι τάδε (the suppliants threaten to Pelasgus “to adorn the images of gods with tablets of a novel kind” – i.e., as they explain in v. 465, “to hang themselves from the images of the gods”). Friis Johansen – Whittle 1980, 336 ad loc. rightly doubt that such donations could be suspended from the statues, as κοσμήσαι is vague and other evidence is wanting.

and (b) from the unsealed votive tablets with vows that were placed in temples in public view.<sup>21</sup>

Apul. *Apol.* 54. 7 (implying that common gestures can be misinterpreted as sorcery): *votum in alicuius statucae femore signasti: igitur magus es. aut cur signasti? tacitas preces in templo deis allegasti, igitur magus es; aut quid optasti?..*

You sealed a vow<sup>22</sup> on the thigh of some statue – therefore, you are a magician; otherwise, why would you have written it? You prayed to the gods in the temple in a quiet voice – therefore, you are a magician; otherwise, what would you have asked?...

Philostr. *Her.* 9. 6–7 (of an old cult statue of Protesilaos in the abandoned sanctuary of Elaious): περιτρίψας δὲ αὐτὸ ὁ χρόνος καὶ νῆ Δί' οἱ ἀλείφοντές τε καὶ ἐπισφραγιζόμενοι τὰς εὐχὰς ἐξηλλάχασιν τοῦ εἶδους.

Time has worn it away and, by Zeus, those who anoint<sup>23</sup> it and seal their vows here have changed its shape.<sup>24</sup>

Luc. *Philops.* 20 (of a bronze statue of a certain Pellichus,<sup>25</sup> worshipped by votive offerings and supposedly wandering at night):

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Iuv. 12. 100–101 *legitime fixis vestitur tota libellis porticus* with Stramaglia 2008, 277–278 ad loc.; schol. vet. ad Iuv. 9. 139 *aut certe quia in ceris vota figuntur apud templa*.

<sup>22</sup> Pace Latte 1960, 328, Versnel 1981, 32 with n. 123 and Campana 2004, 129–130 *votum signare* can hardly be taken here as ‘write a vow (on a statue)’ (cf. *OLD* s.v. 1b). Abt 1908, 284–285 ad loc. rightly points out that the context suggests secret vows hidden from the public, so it cannot refer to the inscriptions engraved on thighs of votive statues; *signare* should therefore refer to sealing (*OLD* s.v. 8c ‘to fasten or enclose with a seal’; cf. Apul. *Met.* 10. 9, of sealing the money). – The annual ceremony in Plin. *Epist.* 10. 35 (ad Traianum) *Sollemnia vota pro incolumitate tua ... et suscepimus, domine, pariter et solvimus precati deos, ut velint ea semper solvi semperque signari* was public and suggests merely affixing a seal to the officially recorded vows (*OLD* s.v. 8a); see Sherwin-White 1966, 611–612 ad loc.: “The record of the vow was sealed and kept, to be exactly paid the next year”.

<sup>23</sup> Probably anointing with oil (cf. Arnob. 1. 39; Min. Fel. 3. 1) or perfumes (see, e.g., Brøns 2025, 184–191) is meant.

<sup>24</sup> Transl. Maclean-Aitken 2002, 15–16.

<sup>25</sup> Eucrates tentatively identifies him as a Corinthian general (ch. 18).

Πολλοὶ ... ἔκειντο ὀβολοὶ πρὸ τοῖν ποδοῖν αὐτοῦ καὶ ἄλλα νομίσματα ἔνια ἀργυρᾶ πρὸς τὸν μηρὸν κηρῷ κεκολλημένα καὶ πέταλα ἐξ ἀργύρου, εὐχαί τινος ἢ μισθὸς ἐπὶ τῇ ἰάσει ὅποσοι δι' αὐτὸν ἐπαύσαντο πυρετῷ ἐχόμενοι.

A number of obols ... were lying at his feet, and some other small coins of silver had been stuck to his thigh with wax, and leaves of silver, prayers or payment for a cure from one or another of those who through him had ceased to be subject to fever.<sup>26</sup>

Cf. schol. vet. ad Iuv. 10. 55: in signis. insignare. vota facere

On statues. To fasten with a seal [or: to inscribe?].<sup>27</sup> To make vows.

These three passages indeed attest a peculiar practice of attaching vows or prayers to the statues – both marble ones (as, probably, in Philostratus) and bronze ones (as in Lucian). In Apuleius and Philostratus these vows are enclosed with a seal, so that no one can learn their content.

In Lucian, the situation is slightly different. The silver leaves mentioned there were of two kinds: some of them were intended as votive offerings inscribed with a prayer,<sup>28</sup> and some served as purely

<sup>26</sup> Transl. Harmon 1921, 351, with corrections.

<sup>27</sup> Rutgers 1618, 462 (followed by Heinrich 1839, 267; Iahn 1851, 318) deletes an asterisk and reads “*in signis insignare*”. Probably, the scholiast meant this rare verb to refer to sealing (thus Du Cange s.v.; cf. *MLW* s.v. 1b ‘besiegeln’). Still, it is also possible that he used it in the sense ‘to inscribe (vows on statues)’ (cf. *CGL* II. 284. 17 ἐγγράφω); if so, he must have imagined that one covered the knees of the statues with wax and wrote vows on it (Campana 2004, 129–130 argues that this was actually meant by Juvenal; see, however, n. 22 above); cf. Porphyry’s, as well as Ps.-Acro’s, inept explanation of Hor. *Serm.* 2. 3: *incerare parietes soliti erant poetae et ibi scribere, siquid noctu in mentem venisset*. – Scholia recentiora absurdly suggest that the wax from the candles held by the prayers dripped onto the statues (Grazzini 2018, 124 [rec. φ and χ]; Gallo–Grazzini 2021, 398 [rec. λ]; cf. n. 59 below).

<sup>28</sup> A parallel could be found in inscriptions on Corinthian votive terracotta tablets: *IG* IV. 212 [...τὸ δὲ] δὸ[ς] χά]ρίεσ(σ)αν ἀμοιβάν, (echoing *Od.* 3. 58; cf. *IG* IV. 212–215). See Strunk 1960, 117; cf. Rouse 1902, 80 with n. 7.

votive offerings, i.e. as payment for the healing. If κεκολλημένα refers to πέταλα as well as νομίσματα, these leaves were fixed to the thigh with wax along with silver coins<sup>29</sup> and later fell off. If κεκολλημένα does not refer to πέταλα, these were laid at the statue's feet. In any way, they were not on the statue: ἔκειντο is the common predicate for ὀβολοὶ ... καὶ ἄλλα νομίσματα ... καὶ πέταλα, and further a Libyan slave attempts to steal all of it (πάντα ἐκεῖνα) in the absence of the statue. Thus, vows on silver leaves in Lucian may have initially been attached to thighs, but they were essentially votive offerings and were not sealed.

Surprisingly, it follows that these statues may not necessarily be the ones of gods, and they can be located outside of temples. In Lucian, the statue is of a man and it stands in a private place;<sup>30</sup> Apuleius is vaguely referring to "some statue",<sup>31</sup> and in Philostratus, the statue is of a hero who was given divine honours, and it stood in a sanctuary, albeit abandoned.

In Apuleius and, possibly, in Lucian, vows and prayers on votive offerings were attached to thighs (not knees!), while Philostratus does not specify this. This poses the first problem: in order to apply the words *incerare genua* to the custom in question, one must extend the notion of 'thighs' to 'knees', which is overstrained. One might

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<sup>29</sup> Ogden 2007, 156 n. 48 cites *IG VII. 303* = Petrakos 1997 [B. X. Πετράκος, *Οι επιγραφές του Ωρωπού*], 231–238 (no. 324): gold and silver coins and pieces that were nailed to the walls of Amphiarus' sanctuary in Oropus and later are mentioned to have fallen off (lines 6–8).

<sup>30</sup> Ogden 2007, 143–144, 156 with n. 34, 35, 37 and 41 refers to the healing statues of the athletes Polydamas and Theagenes (Luc. *Deor. conc.* 12; Paus. 6. 11. 8–9) as well as of Alexander (Paris), Peregrinus-Proteus and Neryllinus (a flamen under Antoninus Pius according to Jones 1985, 40–45): Athenagor. *Legat.* 26. 3–4. It is noteworthy that the Hellenistic bronze statue of the Boxer found on the Quirinal shows clear signs of wear from (obviously) reverential touching, especially on the brass knuckles of the right hand, as well as on the fingers and toes of the outstretched right foot (Zanker 2005, 48–49).

<sup>31</sup> Tacit vows offered "to gods in temples" are mentioned as the next risk to be accused of sorcery; one might assume that "some statue" in this case is neither of a god, nor stands in a temple. Yet, the text may also imply a contrast between secret and open vows, both being made to gods in temples: sealed tablets with vows instead of non-sealed ones (see n. 21 above), and praying in a quiet voice instead of in a loud voice; further Apuleius says: *contra: nihil in templo precatus es: igitur magus es; aut cur deos non rogasti?*



conceive that tablets were hanging down from thighs so as to reach the knees (though it is not certain), but even this would hardly make the metaphor more convincing.<sup>32</sup>

It is not quite clear which wax could be referred to by the metaphor inherent in *incerare*. It seems a fair assumption that the vows attached to the thighs of the statues, like the more common unsealed ones placed in temples,<sup>33</sup> were also written on wax tablets rather than on parchment or papyrus; yet, in Lucian, the vows are probably inscribed on silver leaves (and hardly sealed), while in Apuleius and Philostratus the material is not specified.

The vows were probably attached to marble or bronze with wax (as in Lucian). So, the wax that ‘covered’ the knees of the gods could be (1) that of the wax tablets, (2) that of the seal, or (3) that used for fixing it to the statue (it is the only wax that is in direct contact with the statue).<sup>34</sup>

Now the second problem is that, even assuming that the knees of the statues somehow came in touch with the tablets, it would hardly be natural at all to describe the knees as “covered with wax”, whatever degree of humorous hyperbolizing one might be willing to accept.<sup>35</sup> As the tablets were sealed, their wax was not even on the outer surface;<sup>36</sup> the same applies to the wax of the seal. Admittedly, one might conceive *incerare* as a way of saying that parts of the statue were ‘covered’ with the bits of wax used for affixing tablets to marble or bronze – but if so, it would cover the thighs and not the knees.

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<sup>32</sup> In accepting it one probably proceeds from the supposition that this custom rooted in the notion of knees as place of mercy (see section 3 below on the gesture of touching knees in a prayer), but the origin of this custom remains obscure.

<sup>33</sup> See n. 21 above.

<sup>34</sup> Ruperti 1804, 308 (above, n. 17) and Murgatroyd 2017, 35–36 vacillate between (1) and (3), Gniska 2001, 1–2 = 1964, 52–53 between (1) and (2), inclining toward (2); (3) is preferred by Rutgers 1618, 461 and Courtney <sup>2</sup>2013, 404, who mistakenly ascribes this view to Gniska (*versiegeln* means ‘to seal with wax’, not ‘to fasten with wax’).

<sup>35</sup> Gniska 2001, 3 = 1964, 53 sees here a play on words with *inaurare* that in his view makes the metaphor easier to understand. I am not aware of any examples of gilded knees or legs documented in ancient statuary.

<sup>36</sup> Say, if a suitcase with clothes were put on a sofa, would it allow a metaphorical statement that the sofa is ‘clothed’ or ‘covered with clothes’?

Finally, a third, more general objection can be raised against the traditional interpretation: the passages in Apuleius and Philostratus associate the custom in question with sealed – that is, secret – vows,<sup>37</sup> which does not suit Juvenal’s context. In this case, the idiom would restrict the vows he speaks of to secret ones, whereas the common aspirations he exposes as “unnecessary or pernicious” (both before and after v. 54–55) require no secrecy and would scarcely be sealed.

Thus, contrary to most of the scholars, it is problematic to interpret the expression *incerare genua* as referring to vows enclosed with a seal and fixed to the statues of the gods.

### 3. Metaphorical Reference to Clasping the Addressee’s Knees in Prayer? The Waxing of Statues and Other Objects

The mention of knees in the context of prayer suggests another line of interpretation that refers to the well-attested ritual gesture of clasping the knees of the person prayed to. This custom is mentioned by many of those who defend the interpretation of *genua incerare* discussed above.<sup>38</sup>

A detailed survey by Sittl<sup>39</sup> points out four possible variations of the gesture: (1) both knees are clasped; (2) in Eur. *Hel.* 894 and *Suppl.* 165, one knee is clasped, but it may be *singularis poeticus*; (3) one hand clasps one knee (another one may simultaneously touch the chin); (4) hands are stretched out towards the knees without touching them.

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<sup>37</sup> It is otherwise in Lucian, but there silver leaves with prayers are mentioned alongside other precious offerings, which gives no reason to posit the same usage of wax tablets.

<sup>38</sup> Rutgers 1618, 461; Weidner 1873, 223; Mayor 1878, 84; Duff 1898, 334; Courtney 2013. Still, it is far from certain that the habit of fixing vows to (the thighs of) the statues originates in the same notions as the gesture of clasping the knees. Neither is it certain, *pace* Weidner, Duff and Courtney, that the latter has anything to do with the obscure Homeric idiom θεῶν ἐν γούνασι κείραι (*Il.* 17. 514 et al.).

<sup>39</sup> Sittl 1890, 163–166; cf. *ThLL* VI. 2. 1878–1879 s.v. “*genu*”; to the point cf. Plin. *NH* 11. 250: *haec* (scil. *genua*) *supplices attingunt, ad haec manus tendunt, haec ut aras adorant* etc.

The passage from Arnobius (6. 16. 6) leaves no doubt that statues of gods were also prayed to by handling their knees:

Ita enim non videtis spirantia haec signa, quorum plantas et genua contingitis et contrectatis orantes, modo casibus stillicidiorum labi...

Do you not see that these statues that seem to breathe, whose feet and knees you touch and keep handling [or: caress] as you pray to them, sometimes crumble under the raindrops...

In view of this, it is tempting to interpret *incerare genua* in this vein, with *incerare* functioning as a kind of equivalent to ‘touching’ or ‘handling’.

An attempt along these lines was made as early as 1607 in Ramirez de Prado’s edition of Martial:<sup>40</sup> he explained the word *cerea* (1. 92. 7 *lacerna* and 4. 53. 5 *abolla*) as referring to small pellets of condensed sweat in garments, resembling wax, and suggested that *incerare* implies touching statues with sweaty hands, allegedly leaving similar marks.<sup>41</sup> However, (1) it is more likely that *cereus* simply refers to the yellowish colour of old and soiled wool (as opposed to white), and (2) it is cloth and skin – not marble or bronze – that becomes covered with yellowish pellets of dried sweat mixed with dirt; marble and bronze are more likely to tarnish or wear down (the Spanish expression *roer los santos*, ‘to gnaw at the saints’, cited by him, obviously refers to kissing).<sup>42</sup>

<sup>40</sup> Ramirez de Prado 1607, 121 (ad Mart. 1. 92. 7).

<sup>41</sup> Along similar lines, Fels 2011, 72 (translation of Prud. *Apoth.* 447) “...und machte die Knie der Diana durch Küssen ganz schmierig”. However, (1) kissing of knees is much more rarely attested than kissing of hands and feet (Sittl 1890, 166–169), to say nothing of clasping of knees; and (2) the analogy between smearing with saliva and waxing is questionable.

<sup>42</sup> For other examples of bronze statues worn down by repeated reverent touching and/or kissing, see Lucr. 1. 316–318 (the right hands of bronze statues near city gates); Cic. *Verr.* 4. 94 (the chin and mouth of the bronze statue of Hercules in Agrigentum); and n. 30 above. A famous modern example is the worn-down toes of Saint Peter’s right foot in the Vatican, now resembling a sock.

Edgeworth suggests a more plausible solution, taking *incerare* metaphorically as “to give a smooth, waxy appearance”.<sup>43</sup> He compares areas of bronze statues rubbed to a shine by frequent touch to marble statues polished with wax, the *tertium comparationis* being their lustrous surface (Iuv. 12. 88 *fragili simulacra nitentia cera*) resulting from the polishing of bronze and the removal of patina.

Tempting as it is, this suggestion also encounters difficulties: (1) it would confine all prayers to bronze images of gods, excluding marble ones, which, by contrast, lose their glamour through frequent touch; (2) waxing marble statues (γάνωσις, on which see further) was a regular practice in antiquity, so in this case the metaphor for wearing down bronze statues would evoke the confusing analogy with the protection of marble ones.<sup>44</sup>

Meanwhile, the concept of ‘waxing’ can be analogically linked to ‘handling’ or ‘stroking’, based on the actual process of applying wax, which included rubbing the wax in with subsequent polishing. The phrase *genua incerare* can be interpreted as ‘*genua prensare*’ if we posit two semantic shifts: (a) from ‘waxing’ to ‘stroking’ or ‘rubbing’; (b) from ‘stroking’ or ‘rubbing’ to ‘intense reverent touching’.

Shift (b) is nicely illustrated by a passage in Plautus’ *Asinaria* (v. 670–678), in which the slave Leonidas, when asked to give money to his young master Argyrippus, insists that the latter first rub his knees:

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<sup>43</sup> Edgeworth 1999, 185. Campana 2004, 129 objects that a similar meaning of *incerare* is not attested; however, the verb is rare (*ThLL* s.v. lists only eight occurrences, including scholia), and it is unreasonable to rule out the possibility of metaphorical usage simply because it is not attested more than once.

<sup>44</sup> Evidence for waxing statues and objects of bronze in antiquity is lacking. For bronze vessels oil seems to have been used, probably due to frequent contact with fire. With regard to bronze containers used for boiling, γεγανωμένος must refer to tinning (Crito Med. apud Gal. XII. 490 K. ἀγγεῖον χαλκοῦν γεγανωμένον; Aet. Am. 12. 55 ἀγγεῖον γεγανωμένον τῷ κασσιτέρῳ; et al., thus Stephanus and LSJ s.v. γανόω; Glare’s *Supplement* [1996] surprisingly deletes the section title “II. *tin, lacker*” and puts these examples under the title “*make bright, polish*”). Plin. *NH* 21. 85 ...*parietumque etiam et armorum tutelam* may refer to preserving painted walls and (wooden) shields.

LEON. ...at qui pol hodie non feres, ni genua confricantur. 670

ARG. Quidvis egestas imperat: fricentur. dan quod oro?..

(...)

ARG. Furcifer, etiam me delusisti?

LEON. numquam hercle facerem, genua ni tam nequiter  
fricares. 678

LEON. ...But I swear, if you don't rub (my) knees, you  
won't get it today.

ARG. One cannot argue with necessity. Fine, I'll rub them.  
But will you give me what I asked for?...

(...)

ARG. You, gallows-bird! You mocked me?

LEON. I wouldn't have done that, had you not rubbed (my)  
knees improperly.

Clearly, Leonidas does not demand an actual knee massage or anointing of knees here;<sup>45</sup> it is just a metaphor that playfully describes clasping his knees in a prayer.<sup>46</sup>

Similar examples of the metaphorical shift from 'rub' to 'embrace, press against oneself' can be found in Statius:

*Silv.* 5. 1. 162–164 *anxius omnibus aris / illacrimat signatque  
fores et pectore terget / limina...*

<sup>45</sup> Thus, implausibly, De Melo 2011, 215 (“*kneels down and massages Leonida’s legs*”). Gurlitt 1921, 138 (followed by Bertini 1968, 279 and Lilja 1983, 22) oddly suggests here a kind of homosexual intercourse in the form of “*Knierreiten*”. Versnel 1998, 97 and Auhagen 2009, 23 n. 81; 200 mistakenly refer the phrase to the kneeling of Argyrippus. – The reference to a suppliant gesture was justly recognized as early as in the commentary of Pylades Brixianus (Giovanni Francesco Boccardo) 1514, fol. LXV verso “*nisi mihi genua atrectans supplicaveris*” (in later editions this quotation is ascribed to Janus Dousa); thus Ussing 1875, 411–412; Hurka 2010, 227.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. Plaut. *Pseud.* 1189–1190 (in a bath): *uncti hi sunt senes, fricari sese ex antiquo volunt*, where *fricari* refers *prima facie* to massage, but, probably, hints at beating (*pace* Adams 1982, 184, the meaning ‘to get masturbated’ seems out of place here).

*Theb.* 10. 52–53 pictasque fores et frigida vultu / saxa terunt;  
*Silv.* 2. 1. 193 similes tergenter pectore ceras [curas *codd.*].<sup>47</sup>

Thus, rubbing or stroking the knees would be an appropriate designation for an ardent supplication. It remains to defend shift (a) and show that the image of ‘rubbing’ or ‘stroking’ can be conveyed by the metaphor of ‘waxing’. A close parallel can be found in an affected passage from a Russian-Jewish writer Andrej Sobol (1923):<sup>48</sup>

С подносом плывет в столовую тетушка Гликерия, за тетушкой семенит Илиодор, шуршит свежим номером “Известий”, вошит пол шлепанцами...

Aunt Glikeria is floating into the dining room with a tray; Ilidodor is trotting behind her, rustling with the latest issue of “Izvestia”, waxing the floor with slippers...

In modern times, wax has been applied to wooden furniture and floors primarily in the form of a paste mixed with turpentine, and occasionally in a hot, liquefied state; in both cases, it was rubbed in and subsequently polished. For antiquity, the method of waxing is not attested in full detail: wax was not mixed with turpentine but rather melted and liquefied with oil, and most evidence refers to encaustic techniques.<sup>49</sup> Nevertheless, it can be shown that the processes of rubbing and polishing were present in at least some instances.

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<sup>47</sup> The emendation of Sandström 1878, 19–20 *cerae* – i.e., “wax bust” – is universally accepted: Glaucias, the addressee’s recently deceased *puer delicatus*, is said to recognize his master’s friend Blaesus in Elysium, because he had seen his master weaving wreaths and ‘wiping with breast’ (Blaesus’) similar looking *image* (‘wiping away similar worries’ would give the boy no help in identifying).

Delz 1992, 243–244 and Newlands 2011, 111 suspect that *pectore* is corrupt, because in their view *tergentem* should refer to cleaning the effigy rather than embracing it (they cite *CIL* VIII. 9052. 13 *ita ut statuam meam et uxoris meae tergeat et unguat et coronet*); Sandström also regards *tergentem pectore* as suspicious – perhaps, in vain.

<sup>48</sup> Sobol 1927 [Андрей Соболев, “Китайские тени”, in: id., *Собрание сочинений*], 9.

<sup>49</sup> See, e.g., Blümner 1887, IV, 448–457 on encaustic wax painting on tablets, ships and other wooden objects.

First of all, we should examine the process of waxing marble statues (γάνωσις), as this is the analogy most likely to come to mind in connection with the phrase in question. The relevant evidence is found in two closely related passages: Plin. *NH* 33. 122 and Vitruv. 7. 9. 3–4; these either derive from a common source or reflect Pliny's direct borrowing from Vitruvius.<sup>50</sup>

Both texts describe a process in which painted walls are coated with a mixture of what is called Punic wax<sup>51</sup> and oil, applied with bristles (*saetis*), then heated with burning charcoal to melt and absorb the wax into the surface. The final step is polishing: first with candles – that is, cold wax – and then with pure linen. Both texts add that marble statues were treated in the same way: *sic et marmora nitescunt* (Pliny); *uti signa marmorea nuda*<sup>52</sup> (?) *curantur* (Vitruvius). Drawing on temple accounts that mention utensils for wax polishing, Blume-Jung demonstrates that the full procedure applied to walls was also used for statues – that is, they too were coated with liquefied wax mixed with oil and then polished with cold wax and linen.<sup>53</sup>

Γάνωσις was the final touch in producing the statue (Plut. *Mor.* 74 b [*De adulatore et amico*] ...ἐπιλεαίνοντες καὶ γανοῦντες), and it was regularly applied in ritual practice.<sup>54</sup> An analogy between waxing and manual actions such as rubbing or stroking might therefore be drawn from the final stage of γάνωσις applied to marble statues.

Apart from that, one might assume that in everyday life in antiquity, other objects – made of wood, bronze, or terracotta – could also have been coated with wax in a manner that involved rubbing and polishing, even though such practices are not attested in the sources.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> The text of both passages is given in Appendix 1 below; for a detailed analysis see Blume-Jung 2021, 100–111.

<sup>51</sup> For technology of its preparation see Plin. *NH* 21. 83–84.

<sup>52</sup> For the problem of *nuda* see Appendix 1 below.

<sup>53</sup> Blume-Jung 2021, 105–107; Blume 2015, 46–47: along with wax, sponges and linen, one also purchased oil and nitron for preparing the Punic wax and liquefying it.

<sup>54</sup> See lists from Greek temples in Blume-Jung 2021, 105–107; Iuv. 12. 88 *fragili simulacra nitentia cera* with Prud. *c. Symm.* 203, *Ham.* 404–405 (discussed below). For γάνωσις in Plut. *QR* 98 (287 c), see n. 73 below.

<sup>55</sup> Internal waxing of clay vessels for oil storage is attested in Colum. 12. 15–16; of wooden cups in Theocr. 1. 27 and Ov. *Met.* 8. 670. Cf. n. 44 above and n. 73 below.

4. Prudentius' Imitation of Juvenal:  
The Waxing of Knees (*Apoth.* 447) and of Gods  
(*Ham.* 404; *c. Symm.* 1. 203)

Prudentius, who readily borrows from Juvenal,<sup>56</sup> imitates the phrase in question when ridiculing Julian the Apostate for worshiping false gods (*Apoth.* 454–459):

perfidus ille Deo, quamvis non perfidus orbi,  
augustum caput ante pedes curvare Minervae      455  
fictilis et soleas Iunonis lambere, plantis  
Herculis advolvi, *genua incerare* Dianae,  
quin et Apollineo frontem submittere gypso  
aut Pollucis equum suffire ardentibus extis.

This emperor, treacherous to God but not to the world, bowed his august head at the feet of Minerva, licked the sandals of a clay Juno [or, earlier: ...of a clay Minerva], rolled himself at the feet of Hercules, waxed Diana's knees, bowed his forehead before a plaster Apollo, and smoked the horse of Pollux with burning entrails.

Gnilka rightly points out the sequence *pedes – soleas – plantis – genua* and defines the motif as “servile adoration of feet”.<sup>57</sup> The context clearly suggests that *incerare genua* refers to a (caricatured) suppliant posture, in line with “licking” Juno's sandals and prostrating before Hercules' feet. It is therefore very likely that Prudentius understood the ‘waxing of knees’ precisely in the way suggested above, which may support our interpretation.

By contrast, taking *genua incerare* as a hyperbole that hints at wax tablets and alludes to *inaurare*, Gnilka argues that Prudentius, misinterpreting Juvenal, thought of an actual coating of the statue's knees with wax.<sup>58</sup> He draws this conclusion from two passages in which images of gods are actually described as being covered with wax. These passages deserve a closer look, as they attest the waxing of sculptures in private premises.

<sup>56</sup> For the list of imitations see Lease 1895, 71–72; Schuster 1909, 91–94.

<sup>57</sup> Gnilka 2001, 4 = 1964, 54.

<sup>58</sup> Gnilka 2001, 4–7 = 1964, 54–56.



*c. Symm.* 1, 201–207:

...puerorum infantia primo  
 errorem cum lacte bibit, gustaverat inter  
 vagitus de farre molae, saxa inlita ceris<sup>59</sup>  
 viderat unguentoque lares umescere nigros;  
 formatum Fortunae habitum cum divite cornu 205  
 sacratumque domi lapidem consistere parvus  
 spectarat matremque illic pallere precantem.

The infancy of children imbibed the error with their first milk; it had tasted, amidst infant wailing, the flour of sacrifices; it had seen the wax-smearred stones and the black Lares damp with ointment. When he was little, he had observed an image of Fortune with the horn of abundance and a consecrated stone placed at home and his mother growing pale as she prayed there.

*Ham.* 404–405:

incerat lapides fumosos idololatrix  
 religio et surdis pallens advolvitur aris.

An idolatrous religion smears smoky stones with wax and prostrates itself, pale, before deaf altars.

In Gnilka's view, these instances of sculpture-waxing in Prudentius also echo *genua incerare deorum* in *Iuv.* 10. 55, and he even goes so far as to suggest that Prudentius, having misunderstood Juvenal's idiom, came to imagine a custom of covering images of gods with wax – a practice Gnilka considers non-existent – analogous to anointing images with oil (hence the Lares damp with perfumed oil in the following line).<sup>60</sup>

<sup>59</sup> Ewald 1942, 60, referred to by Gnilka 2001, 7 = 1964, 56 n. 15, noticed that *illita ceris* is borrowed from *Ov. Met.* 8. 670 (cf. n. 55 above). – Edgeworth 1999, 185 impossibly refers this and the following example to the dripping of votive candles on temple pavements (cf. n. 27 above).

<sup>60</sup> Gnilka 2001, 7 = 1964, 56, supported by Tränkle 2008, 121 n. 46 and, with reservation, by Palla 1981 ad *Ham.* 404–405 (he takes *Ham.* 404 to imply placing wax tablets all around the statue, not only over their feet, and *c. Symm.* 1. 203 to reflect the actual practice of coating statues with wax; the latter, however, is incorrectly regarded by him as unrelated to cultic practice).

The hypothesis that Prudentius compiled his knowledge on the details of the pagan cult not from personal experience, but from reading classical authors – whose descriptions he could have misinterpreted, thereby distorting the rites in question – is further reinforced by Gniska with reference to the problems that he sees in Prudentius' use of the word *caespes* in ritual context (see Appendix 2 below). However, this view meets with three objections:

(1) even if Prudentius associated *genua incerare* with coating whole statues with wax, as in *Ham.* 404 and *c. Symm.* 1. 203, waxing Diana's knees in *Apoth.* 457 would still be different; if so, he must have imagined that in some cases only parts of statues were coated with wax, which makes his illusion implausibly complicated;

(2) the practice of coating statues with wax, *a.o.* in cult, is well attested in literary and epigraphic sources (see section 3 above and Appendix 1 below);

(3) it can be shown that *Ham.* 404 and *c. Symm.* 1. 203 are closely related to *Iuv.* 12. 88;<sup>61</sup> in contrast, their resemblance to *Iuv.* 10. 55 and *Prud. Apoth.* 457 is confined to the verb *incerare*, which in the latter case is but a playful metaphor that depicts a suppliant gesture.

*Iuv.* 12. 183–190:

ite, igitur, pueri, linguis animisque faventes  
sertaque delubris et farra imponite cultris  
ac mollis ornate focos glebamque virentem. 185  
iam sequar et sacro, quod praestat, rite peracto  
inde domum repetam, graciles ubi parva coronas  
accipiunt fragili simulacra nitentia cera.<sup>62</sup>  
hic nostrum placabo Iovem laribusque paternis  
tura dabo atque omnis violae iactabo colores.

So go, slaves, hold your tongues and hearts in check, crown the shrines, sprinkle sacrificial flour on the knives, and decorate the soft altars and green turf. I will follow shortly and, after the sacrifice has been properly performed, which takes precedence, I will return home, where the small images, shining with brittle wax, receive slender wreaths. Here I will appease our Jupiter, offer incense to the paternal Lares, and scatter violets of every colour.

<sup>61</sup> Thus already Blümner 1884, III, 202 n. 1.

<sup>62</sup> Schol. vet. ad loc.: *incerata signa deorum*.

Indirect evidence strongly suggests that Juvenal's "little images" are the Lares: they are appropriately described as "little",<sup>63</sup> were often adorned with wreaths,<sup>64</sup> and were offered sacrifices upon returning home (Juvenal thanks the gods for the safe return of a friend who survived a storm).<sup>65</sup>

Lares are said to shine with "brittle wax"; it has been understood to mean that the images themselves were made of wax,<sup>66</sup> but this is very unlikely, as other examples of Lares made of wax are lacking, and the *lararium* was often (though not always) placed near the hearth, so wax images would be in danger of melting. Therefore, it seems certain that the images of Lares are said to be coated with wax.<sup>67</sup> The epithet 'crumbling' can imply either that the wax coating crumbled and peeled off due to the heat from the fire,<sup>68</sup> or, more plausibly, that cold wax used for final polishing was indeed brittle.<sup>69</sup>

The context and imagery of Prudentius is undeniably similar: in *Ham.* 404, coating smoky stone images with wax in general is ridiculed (Lares are possibly, but not necessarily implied here), and in *c. Symm.* 1. 203–204 stony images coated with wax are mentioned alongside black (i.e., smoky) Lares damp with ointments in the context of a sacrifice.

Whether *saxa inlita ceris* are the same as *lares nigri* or images of other gods is not fully certain, but in view of *Iuv.* 12. 88, the first option seems preferable. If so, the two coordinated direct objects governed by the verb *viderat* refer to one and the same thing: "wax-

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<sup>63</sup> See Nisbet–Rudd 2004, 268 ad *Hor. Carm.* 3. 25. 15–16 *parvos coronantem ... deos*.

<sup>64</sup> Nisbet–Rudd 2004, 268; Courtney <sup>2</sup>2013, 465 ad loc.

<sup>65</sup> Courtney <sup>2</sup>2013, 465, with literature; however, there are no other examples of them being honoured upon the return of someone outside the family.

<sup>66</sup> Blümner 1884, II, 155 n. 6; Gniska 2001, 7 = 1964, 56 agrees with him on that and therefore denies that the passage in question is related to *Ham.* 404 and *c. Symm.* 1. 203.

<sup>67</sup> *Hor. Ep.* 2. 66 *renidentes Lares* has been explained in the same vein: Blümner 1884, III, 202 n. 1, [Kiessling–]Heinze <sup>7</sup>1930, 498 and Watson 2003, 112 ad loc.

<sup>68</sup> Thus Wilson 1903, 124, followed by Courtney <sup>2</sup>2013, 465 ad loc. Stramaglia 2008, 271–272 objects that stressing this detail would not be appropriate in the description of a joyful feast.

<sup>69</sup> Munro's explanation in Mayor 1878, 236 ad loc. that the wax crumbled before melting into hot wax that was further applied to images is far-fetched.

smeared stones and Lares glistening with ointments” – that is, stone statues of the Lares, smeared with wax and glistening with ointments. Unusual as it looks, it sits well with the following lines, where *formatum Fortunae habitum* and *sacratumque ... lapidem*, likewise coordinated, also refer to the same thing (= ‘the consecrated stone image of Fortune’).<sup>70</sup> Thus, it appears that on festive occasions the Lares were both coated with wax and anointed with perfumes.

## 5. Conclusion

It has been shown that the commonly accepted interpretation of the phrase *genua incerare deorum* in Iuv. 10. 55 as referring to the practice of attaching wax tablets with vows to statues is unsatisfactory, as the metaphor in this case would be far-fetched; the tablets, according to the evidence, were attached to thighs, not to knees; and in all likelihood, they were sealed and thus contained secret vows, which does not fit Juvenal’s context.

The phrase is best explained as a reference to the praying gesture of clasping the addressee’s knees: the verb that denotes ‘waxing’ instead of ‘touching’ metaphorically refers to the intensive rubbing and polishing typical of the final stage of coating statues (and, possibly, other objects) with wax.

Prudentius’ imitation of the phrase in *Apoth.* 447 clearly refers to the same gesture and suggests that he also understood *incerare genua* in Juvenal as a metaphor for ‘rubbing’ the knees (by analogy with techniques of waxing).

On the contrary, the mention of waxing stone images of gods in *c. Symm.* 1. 203 and *Ham.* 404 is not related to the phrase in question, as it is inspired by the reference to Lares coated with wax in Iuv. 12. 88. Gnllka’s idea that Prudentius had no proper knowledge of the pagan cult and could provide false evidence based on misinterpreted passages from classical authors is to be rejected. Quite the opposite: Prudentius is a reliable witness to pagan cultic practices, even though, due to philological difficulties and the lack of corroborating evidence from other sources, some details that he mentions may remain unclear.

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<sup>70</sup> Likewise in Iuv. 12. 185: *mollis focos* and *glebamque virentem* refer to the same.

*Appendix 1.*  
Pliny and Vitruvius on γάνωσις

Plin. *NH* 33. 122: inlito (*scil.* minio) solis atque lunae contactus inimicus. remedium, ut pariete siccato cera Punica cum oleo liquefacta candens saetis inducatur iterumque admotis gallae carbonibus inuratur ad sudorem usque, postea candelis subigatur ac deinde linteis puris, sicut et marmora nitescunt.<sup>71</sup>

Vitruv. 7. 9. 3–4: at si qui subtilior fuerit et voluerit expolitionem miniaceam suum colorem retinere, cum paries expolitus et aridus fuerit, ceram Punicam igni liquefactam paulo oleo temperatam saeta inducat; deinde postea carbonibus in ferreo vase compositis eam ceram <una> cum pariete calfaciundo sudare cogat fiatque ut peraequetur; deinde tunc candela linteisque puris subigat, uti signa marmorea nuda curantur (haec autem γάνωσις graece dicitur).

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una (*scil.* <sup>a</sup> I ) *Krohn* : a primo *codd.* | fiatque *codd.* : lietque *Krohn* | linteisque puris *ed. princ. (ex Plinio)* : cunctisque pluris *codd.* : centunculisque puris *Krohn* | γάνωσις *Welcker* : gnosis *codd.*<sup>72</sup>

In addition, Plutarch (*QR* 98 [287 c–d]) reports that the censors' first duty upon taking office was γάνωσις of the statue (of Capitoline Jupiter), allegedly because otherwise the red pigment with which old statues had been tinted would fade.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Text from Zehnacker 1983.

<sup>72</sup> Text and apparatus [adapted] from Liou–Zuighedau–Cam 1995.

<sup>73</sup> However, according to Plin. *NH* 33. 111–112 their duty consisted in painting it with red pigment (cf. 35. 157; Serv. auct. in *Ecl.* 6. 22; Serv. in *Ecl.* 10. 27), so some confusion lies here. Either Plutarch tacitly implies that painting preceded to coating with wax (thus Blümner 1884, III, 202), or γάνωσις is taken here in a more general sense and in fact refers to painting; cf. (ἐπι)κόσμησις in temple accounts that Blume-Jung 2021, 105–107, vice versa, shows to mean the same as γάνωσις in a narrow sense. In any way, it was an old terracotta statue (not a marble one), and colouring of the face with red pigment was associated exclusively with Jupiter and triumphators.

Vitruvius' *nuda* has been taken to imply that only the skin areas of statues were coated with wax.<sup>74</sup> Blümner draws from this that γάνωσις might have aimed at tempering the harsh brightness of the marble and giving it a resemblance to human skin;<sup>75</sup> Blume-Jung points out that in some Roman, and Hellenistic, statues, the skin areas were left marble-white, and that in the two cases where ancient wax was found on statues it was applied to the pure marble.<sup>76</sup> On the other hand, as Pliny and Vitruvius (possibly also Plutarch, but cf. n. 73 above) state that γάνωσις served to protect red pigment from sunlight and moonlight, one might suggest that the skin areas of the statues were painted with a reddish colour, and that these areas alone were then coated with wax.<sup>77</sup>

Meanwhile, *nuda* in Vitruvius is clearly suspicious: (1) *signa nuda* is not equivalent to 'bare parts of a statue' (*signi partes nudae*); rather, it would imply that only nude statues were treated with wax, whereas those depicted in garments were not; (2) more generally, it is easier to imagine that the entire statue was treated with wax rather than only selected parts of it.

Since the passages of Vitruvius and Pliny are cognate and coincide in details, with a close lexical parallelism, Pliny's words *sicut et marmora nitescunt* must correspond to *uti signa marmorea nuda curantur*; it is therefore tempting to assume that the problematic *nuda* is corrupt and the original reading should correlate with the paleographically close stem *nitid-*.<sup>78</sup> As a diagnostic conjecture, I suggest *nitidanda curantur*: the scribe failed to recognize the gerundive form of a rare verb, which led to haplography; subsequently a minuscule error occurred (*nitidāda* > *nitida* > *nuda*).

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<sup>74</sup> Blume-Jung 2021, 107 (cf. Blume 2015, I, 46): "The open question remains as to whether the treatment with wax was used solely on parts painted with vermilion (such as the walls), on all the painted parts (in general), or even explicitly on all parts without paint (if naked is meant as those parts free of colour)".

<sup>75</sup> Blümner 1884, III, 202.

<sup>76</sup> Blume-Jung 2021, 108–110; Blume 2015, I, 24–29. Cf. also Neri et al. 2021, 29–36 on traces of γάνωσις on the painted Roman head from Dougga in Tunisia (there the skin displayed yellow treatment).

<sup>77</sup> Reuterswärd 1960, 71–72 acknowledges both possibilities as valid.

<sup>78</sup> For the confusion between *nudus* and *nitidus* in manuscripts see examples in Watt 2000, 11; given the nearby corruption *cunctisque pluris*, a minuscule error of this kind is quite possible.

The term γάνωσις is mentioned specifically in relation to *nitidanda* (or a similar word), with emphasis on their etymological affinity: both words refer to brightness or sheen.

Two conclusions may be drawn from this emendation for the discussion of the polychromy of ancient statues:

– there is no reason to assume that only certain parts of statues were coated with wax;

– as regards the effect that γάνωσις had on statues, both Pliny and Vitruvius mention only its contribution to their sheen or, more generally, their festive appearance; the reference to protection of the red colour may pertain solely to the walls. There are no reasons to assume that its primary purpose was to preserve the red pigment, as was the case with exterior marble walls (cf. n. 73 above).

## *Appendix 2.*

### *Caespes and the Sacrificial Ritual in Prudentius*

In Rome, it was customary to sacrifice upon a piece of turf that covered a temporary or portable altar.<sup>79</sup> Lavarenne,<sup>80</sup> supported by Gniska,<sup>81</sup> maintains that Prudentius was unaware of this and understood the turf as a kind of votive offering that was burned along with incense or entrails. This surprising conclusion is drawn from the following passages:

*Perist.* 5. 50–52:

aut ara ture et caespite  
precanda iam nunc est tibi,  
aut mors luenda est sanguine.

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et caespite *codd.* : sospiti *Collins apud Cunningham*

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<sup>79</sup> Serv. ad *Aen.* 12. 119 *Romani enim moris fuerat caespitem arae superimponere et ita sacrificare*; *ThLL* III. 111. 26 ff. s.v. *caespes*; Nisbet–Hubbard 1970, 242 ad Hor. *Carm.* 1. 19. 13 and Courtney <sup>2</sup>2013, 457 ad Iuv. 12. 2–3, with literature.

<sup>80</sup> Lavarenne 1951, 75 n. 1 (with reference to Hor. *Carm.* 1. 19. 13–14 and 3. 8. 2–4, where *caespes* is mentioned along with *tus* in sacrificial context, allegedly misinterpreted by Prudentius); 223 n. 5 to p. 126.

<sup>81</sup> Gniska 2001, 7–8 = 1964, 56–57.

*Apoth.* 186

ridiculosque deos venerans sale caespitū.

*Perist.* 10. 186

ostende, quaeso, quas ad aras praecipis,  
vervece caeso fumet ut caespes meus?

The piece of turf is described here as smoking and is listed alongside incense and sacrificial flour as a part of a coordinated series. However, this does not imply that Prudentius thought it was burned together with the incense. The turf is smoking simply because the offerings are burned upon it. As for coordinated ablatives dependent on *venerans* and *precanda*, they can be explained instrumentally as referring to integral elements of the sacrifice (not all of which are offerings in the strict sense).

*Caespes* is often mentioned in sacrificial contexts as one of its main elements, and it is perfectly natural to say that one “prays” or “worships the gods” “with the help of turf and incense”.<sup>82</sup>

A slight difficulty lies in the fact that in both *Peristephanon* passages, the word *ara* is governed by a verb denoting sacrifice. This may cause confusion, since *caespes* itself functions as an altar or at least as its upper part; “to pray to an altar with an altar” does sound odd. (Perhaps this is why Collins deemed the text suspicious.)

Still, there is no irreconcilable contradiction here: if we take the *ara* as a portable altar metonymically representing the object of prayer, and the *caespes* as a disposable attribute to be provided for the sacrifice (along with incense and sacrificial flour), then Prudentius’ phrasing is satisfactory. There is no reason to suspect him of ignorance regarding the essential practices of pagan religion.

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<sup>82</sup> Cf., e. g., Stat. *Silv.* 1. 4. 130–131 *sed saepe deis hos inter honores / caespes et exiguo placuerunt farra salino*; Sen. *Med.* 797–798 *tibi sanguineo caespitū sacrum / sollemne damus* (here the boundary between locative and instrumental meaning is difficult to draw).



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The phrase *genua incerare deorum* in Iuv. 10. 55 is not related to the practice of attaching wax tablets with vows to statues of gods: (1) this metaphor would be far-fetched; (2) the tablets were attached to thighs, not knees; and (3) the tablets affixed to statues were sealed and contained secret vows, which does not fit Juvenal's context.

Instead, it refers to the praying gesture of clasping the addressee's knees: by analogy with waxing techniques, the verb *incerare* functions as a metaphor for rubbing, and with regard to the knees, ‘rubbing’ implies intensive touching: cf. *genua (con)fricare* in Pl. *Asin.* 670; 678. Prudentius' *genua incerare Dianae* (*Apoth.* 447) suggests the same interpretation.

Conversely, waxing images in Prud. *c. Symm.* 1. 203 and *Ham.* 404 is unrelated to Iuv. 10. 55, being connected instead to Iuv. 12. 88 (of the images of Lares). Chr. Gnllka's suspicion that Prudentius was ignorant of pagan cultic practices is unfounded.

*Nuda* in Vitruv. 7. 9. 4 is problematic and, in view of the close lexical parallelism with Plin. *NH* 33. 122 (*nitescunt*), should be emended to *nitidanda*.

Выражение Ювенала *genua incerare deorum* (10. 55) не объясняется обычаем прикреплять восковые таблички с обетами к статуям богов: (1) такая метафора была бы натянутой; (2) такие таблички прикрепляли к бедрам статуй, а не к коленям; (3) они запечатывались и содержали тайные обеты, что не соответствует контексту Ювенала.

На деле *incerare genua* указывает на практику обнимать или хватать колени адресата молитвы: по аналогии с техникой вождения, глагол *incerare* метафорически передает идею натирания, а применительно к коленям 'трение' подразумевает интенсивное прикосновение, ср. Plaut. *Asin.* 670; 678: *genua (con)fricare*. Так же следует понимать *genua incerare Dianae* у Пруденция (*Apoth.* 447).

Напротив, пассажи Пруденция о покрытии камней воском (с. *Symm.* 1. 203 и *Ham.* 404) не имеют отношения к Iuv. 10. 55, но соотносятся с Iuv. 12. 88 (о статуэтках Ларов). Мнение Хр. Гнилки о том, что Пруденций не был знаком с языческими культовыми практиками, необоснованно.

Чтение *nuda* у Витрувия (7. 9. 4) не дает удовлетворительного смысла и, учитывая близкое сходство с пассажем Плиния (*NH* 33. 122 *nitescunt*), должно быть исправлено на *nitidanda*.

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