

Alex's Alcaics: An Undergraduate's Perspective on Latin Poetry

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When Classical Studies major Alex DeSio of Chesapeake, Virginia took Latin 3004: Readings in Latin Literature in the Fall of 2007 with Associate Professor Andrew Becker, she discovered her interests in Latin meter could not be satisfied with the studies of only one semester. Prompted by the class' final project of formulating an acoustic commentary on one of Horace's Odes, DeSio decided such a commentary could not possibly be completed by the end of the semester.

Dr. Andrew Becker invites his students to embark upon a self-directed study of Latin meter and verse in each of his courses, and DeSio's project was exactly what Becker had in mind with this particular style of teaching. DeSio's interests began with a general inkling towards meter in an acoustic sense—beyond a literal translation of the Latin text. After spending numerous hours in Dr. Becker's office and holding informal reading sessions of the Latin, DeSio developed her own research project beyond that semester's acoustic commentary on one of Horace's Odes.

What DeSio developed is becoming a project far beyond what either she or Dr. Becker envisioned. Following her completion of that semester's acoustic commentary on one of Horace's Odes, DeSio began to think more generally about Roman verse and

language. She wanted to know more about the terminology Romans used to analyze their own poetry and how Romans viewed Horace's poetry in general. In order to do so, DeSio has placed herself right where the Romans were, beginning in and basing her research on the Grammatici Latini, the Latin grammar the Romans with whom DeSio has been trying to connect would have used.

Interestingly, DeSio spent the Spring of 2008 abroad participating in the Center for European Studies and Architecture's program in Riva San Vitale, Switzerland. The program, sponsored and directed by Dr. Andrew Becker and his wife, Dr. Trudy Harrington-Becker, provides students with the opportunity to live and study the art, culture, and language of ancient Greece and Rome in an Italian-speaking part of

Switzerland for a semester. DeSio used her time in Riva to craft her research project. Enrolled in Dr. Andrew Becker's Honors Colloquium on Poetry while in Riva, DeSio used Dr. Becker's long distance assignments to "really get into the poetry."

As she "really [got] into the poetry," DeSio decided she wanted to focus her research on the alcaic meter in Horace's Odes, a meter believed to have been developed by Alcaeus, a lyric poet from Lesbos, around 600 B.C. Such a meter consists of four-line stan-

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zas in which the first two follow the same metrical pattern and the last two each have their own. In contrast to the dactylic hexameter of Virgil’s *Aeneid*—with which DeSio (and many other students of Latin) had had a great deal of prior experience—she saw “such a greater possibility for malleability” in Horace’s alcaics, even though this “possibility” brought a great deal of difficulty and unfamiliarity along with it, including a challenge many Master’s students are not ready or willing to undergo.

DeSio’s source work, the *Grammatici Latini*, has never been translated into English, nor is there any commentary or notes accompanying the work. In describing her work with this source, DeSio describes the experience as an “interesting” one in which she “[has been] exposed to [a type of] lan-

guage [she] never would have before.” She notes how Romans—in describing their own poetry—used terminology markedly different from that we use today, “My work with the *Grammatici Latini* has helped me understand why Horace would use a certain meter for one poem and another meter for another poem. It has also helped reaffirm what I want to do with my life and how to get ready for it.”

Throughout this experience, DeSio has learned the importance and value of undergraduate research: as she puts it, “it will ease my transition to graduate school.” Without this experience, she would not have learned how to “find sources or cross-references or even how to begin researching.” As she continues to research Horace’s alcaics and use her original translation of the



Volumes of the *Grammatici Latini*





Dr. Andrew Becker and Alex DeSio analyzing the Grammatici Latini

Grammatici Latini in order to evaluate her research, she hopes to develop her work into an abstract for a conference presentation and eventually an undergraduate thesis.

While reflecting on the process as a whole, DeSio indicated how interesting it was to work with Dr. Andrew Becker while in Riva by participating in his Honors Colloquium taught at Virginia Tech. Because Dr. Becker allowed her to send him assignments through email, DeSio was able “to keep [her] hands in [English poetry] while [she was] gone [studying mostly Latin poetry].” She muses, “It was really neat to see how it [the English poetry] related and compared to the Latin poetry I was looking at.”

