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The Philology of Roman Epigraphs: Some Thoughts, Some Examples*

Abstract: The author reviews the various and conflicting attempts at restoration of a fourth century metric epigraph from Shumen (CLEMoes 41), offers an observation of his own, and briefly discusses possible implications.

Keywords: Monumental writing, Latin verse inscriptions, Restoration of epigraphic text.

The title of this contribution implies that inscriptions, or at least Roman inscriptions, have a philology of their own. Now the immediate question is: if by philology one means recension and interpretation of ancient texts, isn't 'the philology of epigraphs' just a circumlocution for epigraphy—a discipline which is all about what the inscriptions read and mean?

The answer to this would perhaps be affirmative in an ideal world. In reality, though, the main interests of an epigraphist tend to lie in social, economic, or political history, whereas the wording of the epigraphs, including their linguistic and stylistic features, is usually felt to be a subsidiary (albeit relevant) issue. Indeed, the classical languages themselves sometimes remain on the outskirts of an epigraphist's expertise.

On the other side of the divide many classical philologists aren't really familiar with classical epigraphy. Those who are usually appreciate the fact that the inscriptions, unlike most ancient texts, haven't gone through the vicissitudes of written transmission but occur as unmediated pieces of ancient writing. This is what makes them particularly suitable for some types of linguistic study, including historical phonology and (especially in the case of Latin) inquiry into regional variation. While many scholars have worked in this field, the scope of the study, the methods applied, and the value of any results, have all been subject to different views and conflicting judgments.¹

Undeniably, though, facts of linguistic usage are facts about the society in question. The language and style of an inscription tells as much as the quality

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¹ See especially ADAMS 2007, 5ff and 624ff.

of the stone or the level of craftsmanship in a monument. Some Latin epigraphs, for instance, are characterized by the presence of vulgarisms:² wherever these are found—be it in a public inscription, an official or dignitary’s tombstone, or the modest dedications and graves of the common people—they represent notable facts of both linguistic and social history. Certain epigraphs, chiefly verse inscriptions, have also received attention from a literary point of view. Often seen as paraliterary compositions³ or indeed the most substantial corpus of evidence concerning paraliterature in the Roman world, the *carmina epigraphica* bear witness to the infusion of what high poetry had to offer in terms of conception, expression, or imagery, into the discourse of the wider society.

Every epigraphic text, despite its immediate presence, has had a transmission of its own, making part of the history, or rather pre-history, of any inscribed monument. It is about what happened to the text of a future epigraph during the period between its composition and its being actually set in stone. Typically, if not always, this included serial reproduction, starting from the handwritten exemplar which we may cautiously call the autograph. Being copies of text, the epigraphic monuments as we see them are liable to critical examination. It turns out that drawing up an inscription and committing it to a stone wasn’t always a smooth operation—some epigraphs contain clear signs of error in the process. The notorious *error lapicidae* is but the simplest type; in other cases we find indices telling us that the actual text was edited more than once by more than one person and still contains traces of its own antiquated versions.

But the compelling reason to apply criticism to epigraphs is that mutilated texts require restoration, and any restoration pertains to criticism. Surely, for the epigraphist to restore an inscription based on common formulas is often a matter of routine, but not all types of inscriptions admit of the treatment.

This brings us back to the *carmina epigraphica*: the philologist who first published a substantial collection of Latin verse inscriptions more than a century ago, Franz Buecheler, was an all-round virtuoso of textual criticism. Buecheler applied philological knowledge to the restoration of mutilated epigraphs on a scale never seen before or since, and with such authority that, outside epigraphy but still within classical studies, many a publication has appeared in which one sees Buecheler’s conjectures cited alongside actual readings with no sign, or even idea, of a distinction between the two.

*

² This very term has fallen out of favour with many scholars today, mostly owing to its lack of precision (which, again, is due to its being abused by many earlier scholars). I use it specifically to denote language features that betray the speaker or writer’s lack of education.

³ COURTNEY 1995, 9f; WOLFF 2000, 57.

Work on Latin verse inscriptions has of course continued after Buecheler, one incentive lying in new findings that need to be read and published, restored and interpreted. As I aimed to present here a specimen of this post-Buechelerian work and went through a number of presentable cases, my choice fell on an epigraph which is kept at Shumen in the Museum. It is a large fragment of an inscribed marble slab coming from the nearby village of Voyvoda. It was first published in 1927; today Courtney's anthology has it as no.34 and the Cugusi collection (CLEMoes) as no.41. This can serve as a prime example of how, in the absence of Buecheler's authority, differences will remain even after every effort is made to reach stable conclusions. Despite the fact that the preserved part of the monument bears a substantial amount of text, not even the type of the inscription has been agreed upon, with several hypotheses emitted. Supplements of the lost parts vary accordingly. At first glance there isn't much to restore, but whatever *is* restored becomes vital to the sense of the whole.

According to the first publisher, Katsarov, the inscription dates back to the 3rd century, and the carmen is about a man who once suffered a shipwreck but managed to reach the port, maybe Odessus, only to deplore his ill-fated voyage and later succumb to another casualty, the nature of which cannot be known as the end of the epitaph is too damaged to yield sense:

ve]nerat ad portum vitata pericula cred[ens	
am]issam classem saepe in statione defl[ebat	
i]ncusansque deos talia est fortasse [locutus	
q]uid pelagi trucus profuit evasis[se procellam	5
---] mihi in portu pelagus naufragia [---	
ha]nc cladem inspiciens, factis nomen [maculatum	
exso]lvit miseris objectaque scrup[is fata	
vertera]t in melius hanc Eusebi curae [---	
---]en amissum et reddidit us[---	10
--- pos]teritas ne haec oblivisc[atur ---	
---]mansurus[---	

(KATSAROV 1927, 105f)

According to Salač and Škorpil, the epitaph was dedicated by a Eusebius (v.9) to a man who seemingly had killed himself after an ignominious accident, and the monument may have been a cenotaph:

---]quam rate[---	
ve]nerat ad portum vitata pericula cred[ens	
a]missam classem saepe in statione defl[evit	
in]cusansque deos talia est fortasse [locutus:	5

Q]uid pelagi trucis profuit evasis[se tumores
s]i mihi in portu pelagus naufragia [fecit?
Ha]nc cladem inspiciens, factis nomen [maculatum
exs]olvit miseris objectaque scrup[ula mentis.
Vert]it in melius hanc Eusebi cura; b[eavit 10
no]men amissum et reddidit us[que sepulcro.
Invida pos]teritas ne haec oblivisc[atur maligne,
stat lapis ---] mansurus i[n aevum.

(SALAČ & ŠKORPIL 1928, 64f)

According to Niedermann, the carmen is no epitaph at all, and the inscription must have originally stood in a port city like Odessus; Eusebius, whose name tells a Christian, was a craftsman who once repaired the damage caused by a shipwreck and later hired a poetaster to commemorate his deed and glorify his craft. Niedermann also dated the inscription to the 4th rather than the 3rd century; his dating has since become universally accepted:

ve]nerat ad portum vitata pericula cred[ens
a]missam classem saepe in statione defl[ebat
i]ncusansque deos talia est fortasse [locutus:
Q]uid pelagi trucis profuit evasis[se furorem 5
s]i mihi in portu pelagus naufragia [parat?
Ha]nc cladem inspiciens factis nomen [maculatum
cond]oluit miseris objectaque scrup[ea navi.
Flex]it in melius hanc Eusebi cura [jacturam,
regi]men amissum, et reddidit usu[i vela. 10
Invida pos]teritas ne haec oblivisc[atur inique,
stet lapis, aeternu]m mansurus i[n aevum, perennis.

(NIEDERMANN 1942, 6f)

According to Stroux, the carmen is an honorific inscription set up by the authorities of a port city, possibly Odessus, for a benefactor, Eusebius, who paid for the reparation of a harbour wall whose dilapidation had caused accidents. Stroux's reading and interpretation was fully accepted by Beševliev in his corpus of late inscriptions:⁴

--- frag]ilem [po]stquam rate[m ---
ve]nerat ad portum vitata pericula cred[ens
a]missam classem saepe in statione defl[ebat

⁴ BEŠEVLIEV 1964, no.74; cf also BOYADŽIEV 2008, 95 (for the latter reference I thank Professor Mirena Slavkova).

i]ncusansque deos talia est fortasse [locutus:
 Q]uid pelagi trucis profuit evasis[se furorem 5
 s]i mihi in portu pelagus naufragia [pergit?
 Ha]nc cladem inspiciens factis nomen [superavit,
 cond]oluit miseris objectaque scrup[ea tollens
 rettu]lit in melius hanc Eusebi cura r[uinam.
 Urbi no]men amissum et reddidit usu[i portum. 10
 Munera pos]teritas ne haec oblivisc[atur inique,
 stet lapis hic longu]m mansurus i[ndex in aevum.

(STROUX 1944, 206)

Courtney, too, agrees with Stroux in almost every detail, offering a new solution for the perceived difficulty in supplying the proper verb to accompany *naufragia* in the sense of ‘cause a shipwreck’ (rather than *facere*, *parare*, or *pergere*, he proposes *patrare*):

--- frag]ilem [po]stquam rate[m ---
 ve]nerat ad portum vitata pericula cred[ens
 a]missam classem saepe in statione defl[ebat
 i]ncusansque deos talia est fortasse [locutus:
 Q]uid pelagi trucis profuit evasis[se furorem 5
 s]i mihi in portu pelagus naufragia [patrat?
 Ha]nc cladem inspiciens factis nomen [superavit,
 cond]oluit miseris objectaque scrup[ea tollens
 rettu]lit in melius hanc Eusebi cura r[uinam.
 Portui no]men amissum et reddidit usu[i portum. 10
 --- pos]teritas ne haec oblivisc[---
 stet lapis hic ---] mansurus i[---

(COURTNEY 1995, no.34)

Di Stefano Manzella points out that remains of an ancient harbour wall as well as shipwrecks dating back to Roman times have been found in the sea near Varna, which looks a suitable setting for the scheme Stroux proposed; Eusebius would have been a late-antique maritime magnate, a *dominus navium*,⁵ while the carmen itself would have been commissioned from some Odessitan *grammaticus* who may not have been a native Latin speaker; and, not to leave the mutilated text alone and forgotten, further possibilities would need to be considered for the supplements:

ipse, agi]lem [po]stquam rate[m agens per litora nota
 ve]nerat ad portum, vitata pericula crede[ns,
 a]missam classem saepe in statione defl[evit

⁵ DI STEFANO MANZELLA 1999, 95. Cf. not only CIL 14.4142 (Ostia, AD173) but also *Dig.* 27.1.17.6.

i]ncusansque deos talia est fortasse [locutus:
Q]uid pelagi trucis profuit evasis[se furorem 5
s]i mihi in portu pelagus naufragia [fecit?
Tu]nc cladem inspiciens, factis nomen [superavit;
cond]oluit miseris objectaque scrup[ea dempsit.
Rettu]lit in melius hanc, Eusebi, cura r[uinam:
sarsit li]men amissum et reddidit usu[i navium. 10
Munera pos]teritas ne haec oblivisc[atur, stet
hic lapis aeternu]m mansurus i[n aevum inscriptus.

(DI STEFANO MANZELLA 1999, 84)

Cugusi & Sblendorio Cugusi put back on the table the idea that Eusebius was the dedicator of the inscription; they also point out that Odessus is not the only port city of which one may think of, given the circumstances; in what concerns restoration of the text, they recommend caution and show skepticism but also propose a couple of supplements of their own:

--- frag]ilem [po]stquam rate[m agens ---
ve]nerat ad portum vitata pericula crede[ns
a]missam classem saepe in statione deff[ebat
i]ncusansque deos talia est fortasse [locutus:
Q]uid pelagi trucis profuit evasis[se pericla 5
s]i mihi in portu pelagus naufragia [pergit?
Ha]nc cladem inspiciens, factis nomen [superavit,
cond]oluit miseris objectaque scrup[ea tollens
transtu]lit in melius hanc Eusebi cura r[uinam.
---] . en amissum et reddidit usu[--- 10
Invida pos]teritas ne haec oblivisc[at inique,
stet lapis hic ---] mansurus l[onge per aevum.

(CLEMoes 41 (CUGUSI / SBLENDORIO CUGUSI, 95ff))

Between all these hypothetical readings of the Shumen inscription I can neither decide nor emit another hypothesis now. What I can do is point to a detail that will make things even more intricate than they already are.

Courtney thought the metre of this poem was “so defective that analysis of its faults is pointless”.⁶ This estimation may be somewhat exaggerated; or worse, it may rather apply to some of the restorations than the preserved portions of text. In fact, the anomalies are easily specified:

⁶ COURTNEY 1995, 257. A similar judgment by Niedermann (1942, 2 and 4) was rightly questioned by BOYADŽIEV 2008, 96.

v.3 *děfl*;

v.4 *tālia* ^e*st* as an anapaest, or maybe *talja* ^e*st*, a spondee;

v.5]*uid pelagí trūcís prōfūit ēvāsís*], a very faulty hexameter;

v.6 s] *í mihi tūn*, a hiatus tolerated;

v.9 *Eusebī*;

v.10 scansion unclear, with either a hiatus left, *ámissum tet réddidit*, or a caesura lacking, *amíss^{um} et réddidit*;

v.11 either an awkward elision, *n^e haec óblivisc*], or a hiatus soon followed by a wrong quantity, *ne thaéc óblivisc*].

Now as far as the worst of these defects is concerned, the faulty hexameter in v.5 almost reaches perfection as soon as a hyperbaton is restored: *quid pelagí prōfūit trūcís ēvāsísse* eqs.⁷ And another small intervention would also normalize v.4: *tale est fortasse* [*locutus* (in place of *talia*).⁸

Both in v.5 and in v.4 the present state of the text may have arisen through banalization, which was the kind of error that could easily creep in as the text was being transmitted from the autograph to the stone. This would mean that, beside the uncertainties regarding the lost parts of the inscription, the question arises whether the *carmen* had been degraded even before it was carved into stone.

Let me illustrate this possibility with a parallel—another example of banalization, and, I hope, a rather straightforward one. It's from the epitaph CIL 2.7.478 (Corduba, AD31–70):

*Mussia Agele. | Bis denis Agele florentibus annis | et specie et vita femina prima fuit. | Hunc sortita locum miseræ sunt ossa puellae, | hic raptam matri conso-
ciavit humus: | sedibus aeternis, Agele, non laesa quiescas, | et bene composita sit tibi terra levis. | | Mussia | (mulieris) l(iberta) Rosia | hic, s(it) t(ibi) t(erra) l(evis). | | L(ucius) Postumius Barnaeus | (mulieris) l(ibertus) | hic, s(it) t(ibi) t(erra) l(evis).*

This epitaph occupies the left half of a nicely crafted marble plate. Under the name of the deceased a text follows whose lines coincide with lines of verse; the general impression is one of tidiness. The initial hexameter, however, is faulty, as it contains but five feet. Now this may be due to a last-minute revision of the text. It looks as if the original plan had been to start the *carmen* right away, with no line of text above: *Mussia bis denis Agele florentibus annis*; the name of the

⁷ The one flaw that remains, *prōfūit*, is probably there by analogy with *prōf-* in *profanus*, *proficisci* and a number of other words.

⁸ For the collocation cf. Plin. *Ep.* 4.11.12 *locutus est .. tale quiddam*; for the neuter singular in substantive use, Plt. *Men.* 112 *si mihi .. tale faxis*.

deceased was given in a hyperbaton which, either by necessity or for elegance' sake, marked the beginning of both hemistichs. One may say it was a job too well done. In a posterior intervention the text received the full name of the deceased at the very beginning: *Mussia* became *Mussia <Agele>*, to be carved in a separate line, in larger letters (matching the other two names which are in the right-hand half of the inscription), while the poem was left curtailed to a faulty opening: – ~ ~ *bis denis Agele* eqs. All this cannot possibly count as a mere *error lapicidae*, but another detail could: towards the end of the epitaph it seems that for reasons of syntax and metre *composita* should really read *compositae*, as the sense of this last verse is, “being adequately laid to rest, may the earth lie lightly upon you”, *tibi bene compositae sit terra levis*. The motive behind the mistake would again be a hyperbaton (*bene compositae .. tibi*) disregarded.

Back to the Shumen inscription, the hypothesis of a degraded autograph could hardly ever be deemed either proven or superfluous, but anyway, the possibility that the most important faults in the metre be due to something else than the presumed incompetence of the versifier would mean that, among the many conjectures concerning CLEMOes 41, those which include liberties taken with the metre—in fact, a sizeable fraction of all the restorations that have been proposed—should be squarely regarded as less probable.

We are ending, then, on a wavering note, as it often happens with Latin verse inscriptions. After a closer look, many old conjectures, pace Buecheler, are easily questioned, though not as easily replaced by more convincing ones.⁹ Indeed, in what regards the form and content of the *carmina epigraphica*, much of today's scholarship leads not to further certainties but to an ever rising level of skepticism.

⁹ One example—and a brilliant one—of radical departure from Buecheler will be found in FRINGS 1998, 96–98 (on CLE 523).

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Filologija rimskih natpisa: nekoliko misli i nekoliko primera

Apstrakt: Autor daje uvida u različite pokušaje da se dopuni jedan fragmentovan rimski natpis u stihu iz IV veka (CLEMoes 41, Šumen, Bugarska), iznosi jedno svoje zapažanje o tom tekstu, i kratko razmatra moguće implikacije.

Ključne reči: monumentalni tekst, latinski natpisi u stihu, dopunjavanje fragmentovanih natpisa.

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