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Verses for Eternity: The Carmina Latina Epigraphica in funerary contexts

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IL VALORE DEI GESTI E DEGLI OGGETTI

Monete e altri elementi in contesti funerari

a cura di
Noé Conejo Delgado



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*Monete e altri elementi
in contesti funerari*

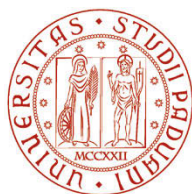
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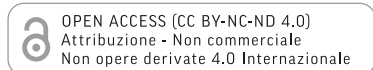
In copertina: dettaglio di una sepoltura con monete a Epinoy/Sauchy-Lestrée (Pas-de-Calais)
(foto Vincent Merkenbreack).

In quarta: dettaglio della tomba 19 della necropoli tardoantica dell'area degli Uffizi (Firenze)
(rielaborazione da foto Cooperativa Archeologica).

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18. VERSES FOR ETERNITY: THE *CARMINA LATINA EPIGRAPHICA* IN FUNERARY CONTEXTS

Abstract

With over 4,000 surviving documents, Latin inscriptions in verse are not only an important element of the Roman practice of epigraphy, they are also the sole poetic genre with a continuous attestation for over 1,000 years, from across the Roman Empire. Frequently produced by and for members of the lower social classes, they raise numerous questions regarding their production and reception, especially in relation to their prose counterparts. Since most of them are of a funerary nature (more than 80%), they are closely related to death and its contexts, being a popular option to commemorate the death of a loved one with a last farewell full of values and sentiment.

Keywords: Latin, epigraphy, Carmina Latina Epigraphica, poetry, Roman culture.

Resumen

Versos para la eternidad: la Carmina Latina Epigraphica en contextos funerarios

Resumen: Con más de 4.000 documentos conservados, las inscripciones latinas en verso no solo son un elemento importante del hábito epigráfico romano, sino también el único género poético con una atestación continuada durante más de 1.000 años en todo el Imperio romano. Producidos con frecuencia por y para miembros de las clases sociales medias y bajas, plantean numerosos interrogantes sobre su producción y recepción, especialmente en relación con sus homólogos en prosa. Siendo en su mayoría de carácter funerario (más del 80%), estaban estrechamente relacionados con la muerte y sus contextos, y eran una opción popular para conmemorar la muerte de un ser querido con un último adiós lleno de valores y sentimientos.

Palabras clave: Latín, epigrafía, Carmina Latina Epigraphica, poesía latina, cultura romana.

In Roman society, the life of the deceased continued in a certain sense if someone remembered them through what they called *monumentum* or *memoria* referring to the stone or the tomb, in a broader sense. The sepulchre and its epitaph could be so called using the same term that was used to define a 'memory' or to evoke the faculty of remembering something which was, in the end, the very purpose for which a funerary monument – a memorial – was made: to remain in the memory of future generations.

The same sense pervades Horace's verses *Exegi monumentum aere perennius*¹ where the author similarly condenses this idea strongly rooted in Roman culture. Horace was certain that his verses, his *carmina* turned

into a memorial, would bring him immortal fame as indeed has occurred after all.

The famous Latin poet lived in a society in which cities were literally full of things to read². Monuments and funerary ensembles were made to be seen and read, and as part of them, the inscription was essential to know and keep alive the memory of those who built them or were honoured by them. Such was the case with epigraphic verses in funerary contexts.

An epigraphic poem is strictly a poem engraved on stone. Latin poetry was a highly cultivated literary genre that based its compositions on metrical schemes that alternated long and short syllables. Latin prose epigraphy, on the other hand, was based from the outset on a highly effective system of communication that made the most of the limited space offered by the stone in order to inscribe as much information as possible on it. And as an intermediate point between literature and epigraphy, uniting stone and verse, the Romans also created the habit of commemorating their lives with epigraphic poems, a type of inscription that has brought them eternity.

When we refer to metrical inscriptions we speak of epitaphs, or funerary inscriptions, as these account for more than 80% of the examples we have preserved. Epigraphic poems were for a Roman a different and very special product, so that they do not account for more than 5% of the total of the more than 500,000 Roman inscriptions preserved in all areas of the Empire³. The words that compose them were selected to construct verses expressing deep emotions and feelings, just like a literary text. However, they have special and specific characteristics that make them a unique and original genre that has often, and not without reason, also been described as a literary genre halfway between the poetic and the epigraphic. As poems, they share many features with elegy and other Latin poetic genres. As epigraphs, they have characteristics that differentiate them from the rest. They are longer texts than prose epigraphs, with complex syntactic units, with all the formal structure necessary to meet certain requirements of a poetic text. They thus depart from many of the usual conventions of prose inscriptions,

¹ «I have built a monument more durable than bronze» (Odes III, 30, 1).

² Cf. McMULLEN 1982; HARRIS 1989; DONATI 2002; CORBIER 2006.

³ Cf. SCHMIDT 2014.

such as the use of abbreviations. Because of that, and in order to facilitate the reading – sometimes of a long text-, they use visual signs such as *apices*, ivy leaves or dashes dividing the verses. Saying things in verse was not always easy, so the ‘epigraphic’ poets strove to condense a lot of information into a few lines and even to fit content that is difficult to fit into a metrical scheme. And for this, as we can see, they also had their own resources⁴.

We do not know who the authors of the *Carmina Latina Epigraphica* were. They are generally anonymous poetry composed by writers whose names and surnames are unknown to us. This, together with the fact that it was a widespread practice, especially among the middle and lower classes, has led to it often being described as ‘popular poetry’. However, the content and composition of most of these verses is far from being ‘popular’ and relates directly to the work of the classical authors of whom they were contemporaries and from whose ideas and literary style they draw.

In a society in which inscriptions were on display for all to see, it is easy to imagine Virgil, Ovid, Propertius or Tibullus running their eyes over those epigraphic lines. One wonders to what extent this whole genre of ‘street literature’ influenced the work of these and other authors, for they could not remain unaware of a phenomenon that permeated their culture in this way⁵. Perhaps, in a way, one might think that his own compositions, sprinkled with fictitious verse epitaphs composed in the manner of real epitaphs, are indicative of his daily coexistence with this lapidary culture. Funerary inscriptions composed by poets for themselves, as in this case of Ovid⁶, Tibullus⁷ and Propertius⁸ have a long literary tradition⁹. The same tradition by which they also dedicate epitaphs to other characters in their works, as Ovid himself does in the *Metamorphoses* for Phaethon (II 327-328) and Cajetan (XIV 443-444).

Rarely do we find inscriptions that tell us who composed them, and they are all, in these cases, the product not of professionals but of family and friends of the deceased who wanted to pay a last tribute to

him with a different epitaph¹⁰. It must be noted that in almost all these cases the term *versiculos* – little verses – is used with a diminutive form that denotes a strong affective nuance and the non-professional character of the poem.

For the rest of the cases, there were professionals who composed epigraphic poems on commission who would remain forever anonymous. They could work either for an epigraphic office or simply independently for those who needed their services. Many would also have books of *formulae* or poems which they could use as inspiration and adapt to the requirements of their clients. The result of all these variants is a *corpus* of texts of uneven quality, with poems on a par with the best of poets, and others that simply remained an attempt to write something resembling verse.

As for the content of the poems, this is eminently funerary, given the nature of the great majority of these inscriptions, which are linked to this context. The amount of data they offer us on how the living lived and what the living felt in the face of this inevitable moment is as broad as the topics specific to these epigraphic poems. These are well studied¹¹ and are divided into categories which are formulated in very different ways in the inscriptions, but always with the same common ideas, which are, in general, the praise of the deceased (*laudatio*), the lamentation (*lamentatio*), the consolation (*consolatio*). These three main groups will be discussed in detail below.

Since they were made to remember someone, many of these *carmina* immortalise the deceased by praising their qualities, their character and the good things they did in life (*laudatio*). Thus, not only do we remember their name, but we imagine the person they were, keeping their memory even more vivid.

In the case of the *lamentatio* topic, perhaps the cliché that best reflects the grief of the relatives is that of the *mors immatura* – ‘the premature death’ – of the loved ones. The Romans believed in fate (*Fatum*) as an invisible force that manages our lives and a kind of lot that is assigned to us at birth. This lot is managed by divinities such as the *Parcae*, *Fatum* or Death itself, who control the threads of mortal life and so, fighting against the fate that awaits us is a futile task as no one can escape from that which is assigned to them and the time will come when our thread will also break. The departure of a child before its parents is a misfortune that upsets the natural order of life, and this is the idea reflected, with variations, in verses such as *quod par parenti fuit facere filiam, mors*

⁴ Cf. DEL HOYO 2002; LIMÓN 2014.

⁵ Cf. GÓMEZ PALLARÈS 1992 and 1993^a.

⁶ «Here I am buried, I, the poet Nason, singer of tender loves, I perished for my wit. And to you who loved, whoever you may be who pass this way, may it not cost thee not to ask that Nason's bones may rest softly» (Trist. III 3.73-76).

⁷ «But if now I have completed the years that fate has granted me, let a stone rest on my bones with this inscription: HERE LIES TIBULLUS, CONSUMED BY RELENTLESS DEATH, AS HE FOLLOWED MESSALA BY LAND AND SEA» (I 3.55-56).

⁸ «Then, when the flame burns below and turns me to ashes, a small urn shall receive my remains, a laurel tree shall be placed over my meagre grave, whose shadow covers the place of my burnt corpse. And there be two verses: THE MAN WHO NOW LIES IN HORRIBLE DUST, E WAS ONCE THE SLAVE ON ONE LOVE» (II 13.35-36).

⁹ Cf. GÓMEZ PALLARÈS 1995.

¹⁰ In tears these verses your parents wrote for you' (CLE 608), 'I, his father, have written these verses dictated by pain' (CLE 521), 'These verses were written by me, Cornelio, for my colleague and friend' (CLE 735). Cf. as well CUGUSI 1996, pp. 21-82.

¹¹ Cf. LIER 1903; LATTIMORE 1942; HERNÁNDEZ PÉREZ 2001.



fig. 1 – Metrical Epitaph for Eucharis (Image: M. Limón).

immatura fecit ut faceret infelix parens (CLE 165) – ‘what the daughter should have done for her parents, an immature death made the unfortunate parents do for their daughter’. Ideally, this idea should be used in the case of the death of children and young people, but the fact is that one is never old enough to die, and we find it also in the case of the death of adults. To express the grief of premature death, many inscriptions have resorted to the imitation of Vergilius (*Aen.* 6, 429) *abstulit atra dies et funere mersit acerbo*, the end of the famous passage dedicated to the premature dead in the description of hell and which, referring to the death in combat of the young Pallas repeated in *Aen.* 11, 28. This is the Virgilian verse most often imitated – often as a literal or quasi-literal quotation – in the *Carrnina Latina Epigraphica*¹².

Lastly, another of the typical *topoi* of these epigraphic poems is when the deceased addresses words of consolation to his relatives (the *consolatio*). The idea that death is the common destiny of all, against which we can do nothing is the most frequent consolatory argument in the inscriptions and has a long series of manifestations. Often, the deceased begs his loved ones to stop lamenting, using the argument of the inevitability and universality of death: ‘I gave back to Fate what was given to me. Stop mourning my misfortune, sweetest mother, here is our dwelling place, this alone we will dwell’ (CLE 2177). This is a *consolatio* of the type ‘do not weep, it is fate’ which focuses on the motive of the uselessness of lamentation, which is obligatory in the consolatory genre.

An inscription that sums up the abovementioned is the epitaph of Eucharis (CLE 55), a young freedwoman from Rome. It contains an *ordinatio* typical of the *Carmina Epigraphica*: the name of the deceased in the first line, in letters twice as large as the rest of the inscription, and with a deeper incision. Eucharis excelled as a dancer and probably as a mime, which conditions the content of the epitaph. This circumstance is so remarkable in the eyes of the dedicator that it is announced in the prose *praescriptum* itself.

EUCHARIS LICINIAE

L. DOCTA ERODITA OMNES ARTES VIRGO VIXIT AN. XIII.

HEVS OCVLO ERRANTE QVEI ASPICIS LETI DOMVM
MORARE GRESSVM ET TITVLVM NOSTRVM PERLEGERE

AMOR PARENTEIS QVEM DEDIT NATAE SVAE
VBEI SE RELIQVIAE CONLOCARENT CORPORIS

5 HEIC VIRIDIS AETAS CVM FLORERET ARTIBVS
CRESCENTE ET AEVO GLORIA CONSCENDERENT

PROPERAVIT HORA TRISTIS FATALIS MEA
ET DENEGAVIT VLTRA VEITAE SPIRITVM

DOCTA ERODITA PAENE MVSARVM MANV

10 QVAE MODO NOBILIUM LVDOS DECORAVIT CHORO
ET GRAECA IN SCAENA PRIMA POPULO APPARVI

EN HOC IN TVMVLO CINEREM NOSTRI CORPORIS
INFESTAE PARCAE DEPOSIERVNT CARMINE

STVDIVM PATRONAE CVRA AMOR LAVDES DECVS
15 SILENT AMBUSTO CORPORE ET LETO TACENT

RELIQVI FLETVM NATA GENITORI MEO
ET ANTECESSI GENITA POST LETI DIEM

BIS HIC SEPTENI MECVM NATALES DIES
TENEBRIS TENENTUR DITIS AETERNA DOMV

20 ROGO VT DISCENDENS TERRAM MIHI DICAS LEVEM

¹² Cf. GÓMEZ PALLARÈS 1993b.

The poem focuses on three fundamental aspects: 1. The *mors immatura* with the clichés and language associated with the subject such as *viridis aetas* (v. 5) or *properavit hora* (v. 7); 2. The eulogy of the deceased (*laudatio*) highlighting her artistic skills and her public dimension. Thus, for example, *quae modo nobilium ludos decoravi choro et graeca in scaena prima populo apparui* (vv. 10-11); this is particularly interesting in view of the catalogue of qualities usually praised in women, because her artistic ability becomes the focus of the poem, overriding other essential elements of the eulogy of women; 3. The inevitability of death and the consolation of her loved ones, emphasising her status as daughter and favourite ward of her father and patroness, respectively (vv. 11-20). The translation of the Latin text is as follows: Eucharis, freedwoman of Licinia, an unmarried girl who was educated and learned in every skill. She lived 14 years.

Ah, as you look with wandering eye at the house of death, stay your foot and read what is inscribed here. This is what a father's love gave his daughter, where the remains of her body lie gathered. 'Just as my life with its young skills and growing years brought me fame, the sad hour of death rushed on me and forbade me to draw another breath in life. I was educated and taught as if by the Muses' hands. I adorned the nobility's festivals with my dancing, and first appeared before the common people in a Greek play.

But now here in this tomb my enemies the Fates have placed my body's ashes. The devotion, love, praises, honour of my patroness are now silent by my burnt corpse and by my death. His child, I left lamentation to my father, though born after him, I preceded him in the day of my death. Now I observe my fourteenth birthday here among the shadows in Death's ageless home. I beg you when you leave, ask that the earth lie light upon me.'

The basic outline, then, of the composition with Eucharis' artistic skill as the central thread is¹³:

– *Praescriptum* in which this skill is announced along with the name and affiliation of the deceased and her age.

– vv. 1-4 the poem begins with the interjection *heus* demanding, in accordance with the topic, the attention of the passer-by and asking him to stop his hurried step, to contemplate her grave and read her epitaph.

– vv. 5-8: these four verses relate the circumstances of the death of the freedwoman, a *mors immatura*,

within the topic of death in the prime of life. The next two lines recall the injustice of the hasty fate that comes to truncate all these promises and whose mention could also be interpreted as a *criminatio* against destiny.

– vv. 9-11: in the centre of the composition the elements of the eulogy of the deceased (*laudatio*) – *docta erodita paene Musarum manu*, "taught as if by the Muses' hands" – are introduced, which will contrast in the following verses with the reality of her death. The following verses speak of the artistic abilities of the young woman, proud to have appeared on the public stage in Rome (*Graeca in scaena prima populo apparuit*).

– vv. 12-13: then the stark reality of death without return is revealed (*tumulo, cinerem, corporis, Parcae, carmine*) and the topic of the vain struggle against fate is introduced.

– vv. 14-19: the following verses focus on the helplessness in the face of a death that has taken away all the fame achieved in life, that has altered the order of nature and that has caused the father to weep (*lamentatio*). A carefully chosen lexicon is used for the mention of the father's misfortune and the age of the deceased, that has already been mentioned in the *praescriptum*, is reintroduced in a remarkable literary exercise.

– v. 20: the wayfarer is asked to wish Eucharis that the earth will not be burdensome for her. From a structural point of view, the poem is a circular composition that begins and ends by addressing the passer-by.

The *carmen* dedicated to Eucharis is composed in 20 correct iambic senarii¹⁴. Although it has long been dated to the late Republican period, Popova's work¹⁵ has proposed its dating to between the late 1st and early 2nd century because of a parallel in the last verse with Tibullus (II, 4, 49-50). Eucharis is one of few known ancient actresses to achieve fame and respect in her profession during the Roman Republic. She came to belong to the minority of ancient Roman actresses to be allowed to perform in prestigious theatres and performed roles in Greek plays in front of audiences of nobles. She achieved fame and recognition and respect for her acting ability and at her death she received an epigraphic poem as a tribute. Thus, although her life was short, her funerary memorial, like Horace's *monumentum*, has given her the eternal remembrance she deserved while she was alive. For this is, as we have seen in these pages, the ultimate purpose of epigraphic poetry in funerary contexts.

¹³ For an exhaustive study of this inscription, cf. FERNÁNDEZ 2010a, pp. 37-53 and FERNÁNDEZ 2010b, pp. 211-246.

¹⁴ MASSARO 1992.

¹⁵ POPOVA 1968, pp. 61-64.

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