EPIGRAPHY IN ITALIAN HIGH SCHOOLS

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Abstract

The paper focuses on the possible uses of Epigraphy when teaching Latin to Italian High School students. Inscriptions (especially from the school's territory) make Latin "come to life" because even the simplest of texts is real. Inscriptions are an excellent tool to internalize declensions, but they can also broaden the horizons offered by the literary sources. The Eagle databases offer ready-to-use materials to teachers who are less familiar with the traditional supports.

Keywords: High School Education, Latin Grammar, Lexicon, Translations, EDR Database, Roman *Asisium*.

1. Introduction

High school students often feel that Latin is not a "real" language. Every attempt to use Latin as a modern language, by the creation of words from the contemporary world or by using it in a conversation, makes Latin seem even more artificial.

In this framework, for a Latin teacher the first two years of high school are the most challenging. This is when students have to acquire the grammar, but hardly see the point of learning so many rules by heart (even if the prescriptive approaches have now given way to descriptive linguistics). However, when students start studying Literature and reading literary texts, they generally realize that it was worth making the effort. Hence, one can imagine the frustration of *Liceo Linguistico* (Foreign Languages High School) pupils, who only do Latin for the first two years, and will never see the results of such hard work.

One could object that in the first two years teachers should mix grammar and culture: but with only two lessons per week, and classes with a high number of students, there would simply be not enough time.

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Moreover, the approach to unedited literary texts is arduous because they contain too many unknown structures and often need to be at least partially translated.

Inscriptions can be an effective solution to this problem: they make Latin authentic. They are often short and therefore quite easily readable. They exist in reality, they can be seen and even touched – which should never be forgotten in a society where visual communication is so important. Through epigraphy the Classics become, in a way, "multimedia": this is what scholars mean by the expression "words on stone". Even if generally, when visiting a museum, inscriptions are not of such interest as the statues or mosaics, they do strike students as something concrete and, in a certain sense, "alive". That is why they are a good tool to improve the ability to read, understand and translate Latin.

The use of local materials, which can be checked out personally, may more easily arouse the learners' attention. That is why in this paper I will mainly refer to inscriptions from modern Umbria (*regiones* VI and VII, from *Perusia*) and especially from *Asisium*, used at school during my experimental lessons. The local museum, best known as the "Foro romano", hosts a huge collection of inscriptions that were catalogued in 2008 by pupils of the *Liceo Properzio*, under my supervision, with details of the type of inscription, material, place of origin and chronology. Previously a booklet about Roman Assisi had been written,[1] both in Italian and English, comprising a page about the famous tetrastyle with a translation of the inscription on the base (CIL 11, 05372 = EDR025323, later inserted in the MediaWiki page), which recalls the official inauguration of the *aedicule*: at the time, as was the Roman custom, money was given to *decurions*, *seviri Augustales* and the common people. Thanks to these few lines, the class is taken on a journey to ancient *Asisium*, and gets a lot of feedback about religion, architecture, social life and economy in the first century A.D.

2. How to use inscriptions

Inscriptions in high school can be used in a variety of ways, but particularly in the following fields:

[1] http://www.liceoassisi.it/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=47:assisi-romana&catid=6:i-nostri-risultati&Itemid=34.

- elements of Latin grammar, syntax and linguistics;[2]
- culture and history;
- and also, to a lesser extent, lexicon.

2.1. Lexicon in context

Although the acquisition of lexicon is essential in order to access the conceptual categories of a culture, it is extremely difficult to learn words without using them actively, and it is a terrible mistake, often made by school textbooks, to provide long lists of terms, especially if de-contextualized and only based on the frequency with which they are used.

Many manuals, influenced by modern languages, offer lexicon in concrete fields (such as food, clothing or education), but this does not necessarily entail that the students will be more attracted by these topics. There is also the risk of reducing culture to anecdotes. Experience shows that with a limited amount of time and taking into account the selective memory of teenagers, you have to choose what your priority is. The main reason why a school-level student should do Latin is because of the deep impact of Roman cultural and linguistic heritage on our world: therefore, in my opinion, the words that students need to learn the most are:

- the ones that are relevant for their Italian derivates (e.g. *os, oris*);
- the ones that belong to the most significant semantic fields (always keeping in mind that some words are more important than others: for instance, knowing the difference between *bellum* and *pugna* helps to develop the comprehension of the two different categories; on the contrary, a non-specialized student does not need to know who a *primus pilus* was);
- the abstract ones that are fundamental to understanding the Roman way of thinking (e.g. *imperium, virtus, fas*).

Accordingly, a teacher should concentrate on those aspects of Roman society that are still pre-eminent for us: archaeology (Roman buildings, *domus*, theatres, roads), myths and religion, politics (Empire, war and

[2] Hartnett (2012); McCarthy (1992).

globalization). Inscriptions certainly offer a less varied lexical repertoire than a literary text, but can still help to give substance to these contexts.

In an inscription such as CIL 11, 05400 = EDR025350:

> *P. Decimius P. l. Eros / Merula, medicus / clinicus, chirurgus, / ocularius, VIvir. / Hic pro libertate dedit ((sestertium)) (quinquaginta milia). / Hic pro seviratu in rem p(ublicam) / dedit ((sestertium)) (duo milia). / Hic in statuas ponendas in / aedem Herculis dedit ((sestertium)) (triginta milia). / Hic in vias sternendas in / publicum dedit ((sestertium)) (triginta septem milia). / Hic pridie quam mortuus est / reliquit patrimoni / ((sestertium))*

not only does a student make contact with the technical lexicon of medicine and words related to building activities (*statuas ponere, vias sternere*), but he can also perceive the "evergetic spirit" of an ancient society: a physician was usually a freedman coming from the East, who could be very rich and spend his money for public utility; whenever a person obtained a priesthood, he used to pay a *summa honoraria*. The text can also be used for linguistic purposes (prepositions like *pro*; partitive genitive; deponent verbs).

This does not mean that inscriptions are not useful for seeing specific abstract words in their context: when talking about Roman virtues and *mos maiorum*, the famous *Clipeus* from Arles (*AE* 1952, 0165 = *AE* 1994, 0227) is a perfect complement to chapter 34 of the *Res Gestae* (formally an inscription, too):

> *Senatus / populusque Romanus / imp(eratori) Caesari / Divi f(ilio) / Augusto / co(n)s(uli) VIII dedit clupeum / virtutis, clementiae, / iustitiae, pietatis erga / deos patriamque.*

2.2. Grammar

One of the biggest problems in teaching Latin to young students is that they find it really difficult to understand declensions. In the preliminary lessons the sentences used are very simple and can be understood and even translated without really acquiring the syntactic function of the words.

For instance, if I say *Iulia rosas amat*, even an Italian who knows no Latin can get the meaning of the sentence. Problems are encountered when the texts to translate become more complex: only when it is too late

does an ill-prepared teacher realize that the class has not internalized the language system and the patterns.

In funerary inscriptions the value of cases is essential. The texts can be simple, but if you want to understand who is dead, who is the dedicant and what the relationship between them is, you have to distinguish dative and nominative cases. Moreover, the concordance of the different elements of the onomastics (especially *praenomina* and filiation) is good way to encourage (and, for a teacher, to test) the learning of declensions not in a merely mnemonic, but also in an active way.

Examples:

- CIL 11, 05501 = EDR025449:

  Noniae / Privatae, / C(aius) Propertius / ——

  You can use an inscription as easy as this one to revise first and second declensions, and at the same time to teach the structure of a Roman name.

- CIL 11, 05461 = EDR025411:

  A(n)noru(m) XIX. / Calventia / C(ai) f(ilia) Polla, / L(ucius) Vistinius vir, / Gavia mater / posuer(unt).

  This inscription offers the chance to get feedback about mistakes in the use of language, or to reflect on mortality and marriage.

- CIL 11, 05399 = EDR025349:

  P(ublius) Decimius P(ubli) l(ibertus) Eros / Merula VIvir / viam a cisterna / ad domum L(uci) Muti / stravit ea pecunia / ——

  With an inscription like this you can address different topics, both historical (the importance of freedmen, the imperial cult) and linguistic ones (indirect complements, uses of *is ea id* as an adjective and to introduce a relative clause that, in this case, has evidently been lost).

At the beginner's level, the sentences used for examplifications, exercises and translations are often fictitious and banal. They give a false image of antiquity: for instance, when you start with the first declension you get the wrong impression of a "female" world simply because the

masculine nouns are rare. Students are unimpressed; these sentences have no significance for them. Those provided by inscriptions may be equally easy and short (without any editing), but they are not banal because they are a mirror of a society, they offer a historical perspective; there is always a story behind them. Even the simplest ones can give us precious information.

Let us consider a famous inscription from the Cathedral in Assisi (CIL 11, 05390 = EDR025340):

> *Post(umus) Mimesius C(ai) f(ilius), T(itus) Mimesius Sert(oris) f(ilius), Ner(o) Capidas C(ai) f(ilius) Ruf(—), / Ner(o) Babrius T(iti) f(ilius), C(aius) Capidas T(iti) f(ilius) C(ai) n(epos), V(ibius) Voisienus T(iti) f(ilius) marones / murum ab fornice ad circum et fornicem cisternamq(ue) d(e) s(enatus) s(ententia) faciundum coiravere.*

The text is plain, especially with the abbreviations solved. Even so, many considerations can be made:

- for grammar: third declension nouns such as *maro* and *fornix*; complements of direction; gerundive to express purpose; subject/verb agreement; use of the form *-ere* in the perfect tense personal endings;
- for history: the use of the Latin language prior to the Social War, as proof of the intense Romanization of the area at the end of the II century B.C.;[3] the presence of elements in the names that are not Roman but of Umbrian origin;
- for archaeology: the building of terraces to create public spaces in a town like Assisi established on a hill; the identification of the area around San Rufino as the "acropolis"; the incorporation of the Roman wall into the left nave of the church (the inscription being still *in situ*).

Schoolbooks rarely seize these opportunities offered by inscriptions, so the main problem for a teacher is to access appropriate material.[4]

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[3] Coarelli (1991).

[4] See the observations made by Carpenter (2006). One of the most successful attempts to teach Latin through Epigraphy comes from the Anglo-Saxon area: LaFleur (2010).

Holding a PhD in Roman History, I am fortunate enough to already know many sources. However, a graduate may not have enough knowledge in epigraphy, may not be familiar with the *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*; that is why the EAGLE project can offer tools for further insights. It also goes without saying that the multimedia approach is very suitable to students.

Here are some examples taken from manuals where you can see the different attitude of authors towards the epigraphic material:

- Barbieri (2015, 39): the inscription of the architect *C. Vettius Gratus* (CIL 10, 03392) is merely a decorative element on the page, without any relation to the topic (phonetic changes from Latin to Italian);
- Domenici (2012, 40): *programmata* from Pompeii are introduced to explain the Roman naming system;
- Gambis et al. (2013, 269-270): *tabellae defixionum* are used for different purposes (demonstrative adjectives, functions of subjunctive); the subject (magic in the ancient world) may not be relevant in a school context (the possession of such knowledge is not required), but sounds very intriguing to students.

3. Translations

Translating inscriptions is a difficult task for everyone and especially for high school students.

First of all, they will not find any help elsewhere: every other Latin text can easily be found – even if not always correctly translated – on student internet sites and in blogs (such as *Splash Latino*). But we all know very well that the Internet still lacks many Italian translations of inscriptions.

Secondly, the style and the structures are different. Even when all abbreviations and integrations are explained (a teacher should at least show the meaning of round and square brackets but should not ask a pupil to solve an abbreviation, except the easy ones), the word order cannot immediately be reconstructed, especially in decrees and *carmina epigraphica*. School dictionaries are not intended for interpreting epigraphical lexicon: some words may not be present (such as *maro*, seen above), their meaning may not always be explained (e.g. *centonarius*, *sevir*). A lot of institutions and *formulae* which are clear to a specialist (e.g. *quattuorvir iure dicundo*) may be hard to understand or to translate.

It is, however, also the case that a teacher cannot dedicate too much time to introducing these words to the class because his ultimate aim is different; so it is better to focus on materials that do not contain much specific lexicon.

Examples:

- CIL 11, 04431 = EDR025160:

  > *[Inf]austo, levis umbra, tuo mihi flebilis hora / sorte tua certe tempus in omne fuit.*

  This funerary inscription from *Ameria* contains two verses, but the position of the words is tricky; *infausto* may be taken as an adjective (as it is most commonly) and its meaning is basically the same as *sorte tua*; students who are not used to poetry may not recognize the anastrophe *tempus in omne*.

- CIL 11, 04391 = EDR025123:

  > *Iuliae M(arci) f(iliae) Felicitati, / uxori C(ai) Curiati Eutychetis / IIIIvir(i), magistrae Fortu/nae Mel(ioris), coll(egium) centonarior(um) / ob merita eius. Quo honore / contenta sumptum omnem / remisit et ob dedic(ationem) ded(it) sin/gulis ((sestertios)) XX n(ummos) et hoc amplius / arkae eorum intul(it) ((sestertium)) V m(ilia) n(ummum) / ut die natalis sui (ante diem) V Id(us) Mai(as) / ex usuris eius summae epu/lantes imperpetuum divider(ent), / quod si divisio die s(upra) s(cripta) celebrata non / fuerit tunc pertineb(it) omn(is) summa / ad familiam publicam.*

  Specialists are well used to an inscription like this. A high school student may find unexpected difficulties in understanding the meaning of *magistra* (not teacher but priestess), but also *centonarius* or even *hoc amplius*; not to mention the Roman calendar system, which always takes too much time to explain!

Nevertheless, this kind of challenge is exactly what makes inscriptions the perfect tool to fully appreciate what the art of translation is.

The article published by F. Bigi in the Proceedings of the First EAGLE International Conference[5] includes many observations regarding the

[5] Bigi (2014).

problems that may be encountered, for instance when translating names and titles. In particular, I find the suggestion that round brackets should be used in the translations to provide further explanations about specific offices rendered with the technical derivative word, or for concepts omitted in the original Latin text, very useful. It might be worthwhile to provide a few more tips from personal experience:

- CIL 11, 04213 = EDR130908: *Interamna Nahars* should be further qualified as "Terni" to help those readers who are not familiar with Umbrian cities;
- CIL 11, 01925 = EDR142701: the names of the emperors *M. Aurelius Antoninus* and *M. Antoninus Pius Germanicus Sarmaticus* need to be explained (Caracalla and Marcus Aurelius) to avoid confusion. It should be noted that in my classes proper names, and not only those of emperors but also of other people, were generally translated into Italian, even if it is advisable to transcribe them in the nominative case;[6] the same thing was done with *cognomina ex virtute*, considering that they are intuitively interpretable for an Italian. We are also faced here with a case of nouns that do not exist in our language (*abnepos*, *adnepos*), which makes the translation less fluent than the original.

This type of activity works better with *Liceo Classico* (Grammar School) pupils, who do translations from Latin and Greek almost every day and who are more at ease with the use of dictionaries. However, there are still hurdles to overcome. The ministerial syllabus set out for the course focuses on Literature and culminates in a specific exam requirement, the translation of a piece of literary prose. Is this "epigraphical" activity helpful? Does it take up too much of the time which should be employed in translating the Classics? The answer to both these questions is "yes". On the one hand, as I said, students have to "jump into translating" without a net (the Net, in fact). On the other hand, if at the end of the final year pupils are required to translate a passage from certain authors, then clearly it would be more appropriate for them to concentrate on this activity as much as possible during the months prior to the exam. For this reason, epigraphy can only be a supplement to traditional assignments; the Italian national *curricula* are apparently very free, but at

[6] http://www.eagle-network.eu/wiki/index.php/Guidelines_for_Translators.

the same time they are very rigid. Yet, a few forays into epigraphy can be stimulating, because the class perceives them as an intriguing novelty, especially if not subject to assessment. After all, it would probably be too difficult to prepare a test with grades and scores on this subject and could deprive this activity of its extemporaneous and enjoyable aspect.

4. Inscriptions and Literature: a few samples

On a more advanced level, inscriptions may also integrate certain aspects related to the study of Latin Literature. The most typical example could be a comparison between the *Tabula Claudiana* (CIL 13, 01668) and Tacitus' account (*Annales*, XI, 23-24):[7] reading the original document is a privileged occasion to determine how reliable the historian is when using his sources.

Highly original suggestions have been provided by Mauro Reali, who is also the author of different school manuals, in a paper published online.[8] Being an expert on the subject, he offers a comparison between the "noble" form of the political-philosophical *amicitia* presented in Cicero's *Laelius* and the term *amicus* mentioned in inscriptions from the lower levels of society, such as CIL 05, 05300 from *Comum* (a funerary stela made by a freedman for Pliny the Younger) or CIL 05, 05923 = EDR124245 regarding a strange case of "friend deletion" long before the Facebook era.[9]

An interesting example from Umbria can be found in AE 1992, 0560-0561 = EDR150769 and EDR150784. The first gravestone recalls the acquisition of a tomb — which had previously been despoiled — by an heir of the founder, who then installed another *cippus* for 40 friends (*amicis meis*, i.e. freedmen probably belonging to the same association):

> *Viator, resiste et rogo / te et lege. Post annos XXVII ven[i] / Hispellum, in patriam meam. Scio / me oportere colere hunc locum / ubi ossa meorum requiescunt et mea / et amicorum meorum. Ex hoc sepulch[ro] / cippi perierunt duo et frontes duae. Sciun[t] / qui surupuit et acturi simus et legimus, / satis est testium etqs.*

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7 On which see Jahn (1993).

8 http://mediaclassica.loescher.it/nuove-e-%93vecchie%94-forme-di-multimedialita.n2799 ; see also Reali and Turazza (2015).

9 http://www.laricerca.loescher.it/lingue-classiche/327-un-amico-o-amicus-e-per-sempre.html.

As for the Augustan age, Reali suggests showing some monumental inscriptions of the *princeps* (he impressively goes so far as to compare the qualifications *Imperator Caesar Augustus* to a modern logo or even a *hashtag*). On this subject, the altars *Augusto sacrum* put up by *Perusia restituta* (CIL 11, 01923 = EDR142666, EDR142667, EDR142668, EDR142669), even with a simple text, offer the opportunity to deal with an aspect as crucial as the imperial cult. Traditionally, we read that Augustus was worshipped directly only in the Eastern provinces, but not in Rome and Italy. The inscriptions from *Perusia* testify that things are effectively more complex; these documents also offer remarkable information about the *restitutio* of the town, destroyed at the end of the *bellum* in 40 B.C. A few years later *Perusia* would become *Augusta*, as you can read on the city gates, especially on the newly restored Etruscan Arch (CIL 11, 01929 = EDR142706).

Teaching, as I do, in a school named after Propertius, I always stress the importance of reconstructing the origin of the poet through the epigraphical data of the *gens Propertia*, the greatest number of written documents of the family having been found in Assisi. For more than two hundred years, beginning with the *Vois(ienus) Ner. (filius) Propertius* mentioned among the Umbrian magistrates of the late II century B.C., this *gens* stands out in the town for its social influence and wealth.[10] It is always very exciting to combine the information on *Passennus Paullus Propertius Blaesus* given by CIL 11, 05405 = EDR025355 and that contained in two Letters by Pliny (VI, 15 and IX, 22). Pliny, showing great concern for his friend's illness but also great esteem for him as an elegiac poet, asserts that he is a descendant and fellow citizen of Propertius; the inscription (the front of an honorific base), providing the full name, with the tribe Sergia typical of the inhabitants of *Asisium*, is indirect, but clear, evidence that the Augustan poet was born there. The information provided by the inscription and the literary text integrates perfectly. Students find it fascinating to look for traces of the poet inside the town, especially when they read the following graffito on an interior wall of a Roman house underneath the church of Santa Maria Maggiore (EDR028769):[11]

[- - - I]o̱vino consulibb(us) (ante diem) VIII Kal(endas) Martias

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10 Forni (1986); Zuddas (2006).

11 Boldrighini (2014, 244-246).

domum oscilavi Musae.

This house was still visited in the fourth century A.D., which really supports the theory that it used to be the poet's residence, and remained an object of reverence for centuries. Through the stories of *Passennus Paullus* and *Sextus Propertius* macro-history and local history meet to make the past come alive in every corner of the modern town.

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