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Putting Roman inscriptions in the limelight.

This article draws on my experience in using inscriptions to introduce a television audience to the everyday life in ancient Rome and the world not of the upper echelons of the elite, but of the “ordinary Romans”, male and female, young and old. This was in the context of a three part series, *Meet the Romans*, commissioned by BBC 2 (through Lion TV), first broadcast in 2012, and attracting an audience of just under 2 million viewers. It was later shown in many countries worldwide, including in Italy under the title *Ti presento I Romani*. One aim of the series was to share the excitement of Roman epigraphy with a wide general public and it raises questions about the presentation of epigraphic texts not only on television but also in museums and more widely.

In a sense, of course, my title should be “Putting Roman inscriptions *back* in the limelight”, because the truth is that 150 years ago there was an active general interest in inscribed texts from the ancient world, and in the city of Rome itself they were a tourist highlight and an established part of the souvenir trade.

Nineteenth-century guidebooks, for example, expected their readers to be interested in the columbarium inscriptions behind the sculpture in the Capitoline Museums (indeed they expected readers to know that they *were* columbarium inscriptions). And in English at least, phrases drawn from inscriptions were used as the chapter headings of Victorian novels. The phrase *domum servavit, lanam fecit* from the famous Republican epitaph of Claudia (*CIL* 1.2, 1211) is not only Italian shorthand for a virtuous housewife. By parading them at the top of one of the chapters of *The Abbot* (1820), the prolific novelist Walter Scott made the words common knowledge in Britain too. In fact, he slightly misquoted them (as *domum mansit*), which makes it very easy to identify which later quotations have picked the words up from Scott, and not from the published text of the inscription. None of them can have seen the stone, which has been lost for centuries.

At the same period, some surviving inscribed texts acquired celebrity status. The most celebrated of all, perhaps, was the third-century sarcophagus, with epitaph, of Scipio Barbatus, from the Tomb of the Scipios, transferred to the Vatican Museums in the late eighteenth century. This was copied in many forms, notably as souvenir inkwells, which were turned out by the thousand in workshops in Italy and became one of the must-have accessories on the desk of middle class tourists. It also a must have design for those with the money to turn it into their own tombstone – from several in the non-Catholic cemetery in Rome to Highgate Cemetery in London and Philadelphia in the United States.

That charisma hasn’t *entirely* gone. The famous inscription from Isernia commemorating a plausibly or implausibly named couple of bar-owners, Calidius Eroticus and Fannia Voluptas (*CIL* 9, 2689) has recently been re-used by a local winery as a bottle label of a local winery (for two wines, one called Fannia, the other Calidio). But that is rare. For the most part, just to take museums as an example, galleries of inscriptions are empty. The refurbished Epigraphic Gallery in the Capitoline Museums is a careful presented and striking display. But few people stop to look at any of the stones. Many people walk through, as the gallery links the two sides of the Capitoline Museums, but almost none linger. And the slightly spooky music that is played there and the signs of the zodiac on the ceiling suggest that the designers felt that something more than the stones themselves was needed to capture the interest of visitors. Much the same is true in the Vatican Museums, where in contrast to the nineteenth century few people look at the texts on the walls – and the once famous sarcophagus of Scipio Barbatus is largely neglected. This is not only an Italian phenomenon. The

Epigraphic Gallery in the British Museum has what is euphemistically known as ‘restricted opening hours’; that is, it is mostly closed.

There are many reasons for this. It goes without saying that an increasingly rare competence in Latin plays a big part: who wants to spend time in a gallery full of texts written in a language they don’t understand? But there are other factors too. I suspect that we as an epigraphic profession bear some of the responsibility too – in forgetting just how gripping to outsiders some of our material is. That was the challenge of *Meet the Romans*. And the rest of this article will examine three short clips from the series, attempting to give a critical evaluation of our treatment of some particular texts, the successes and the limitations of what we managed to achieve. The first is the short epitaph of Ancarenus Nothus, now in Verona (*CIL* 6, 7193a).

CLIP ONE.

The limitations of this discussion are very clear to specialists. The implications of the name “Nothus” are left unexplored, and more important there is no mention of the fact that the text is written in verse – whose formal qualities must weigh against the apparent heart-rending spontaneity that my discussion assumes. Nevertheless the sequence worked for the audience on many levels. It made it clear that there was a way of accessing, in a vivid way, the experience and concerns of Romans outside the elite. Even though the verse form is not mentioned, we encourage viewers to face up to the unfamiliar Latin by pointing to words that can be made familiar, and we raise some aspects of the problems of reading inscriptions, both technical and more general. We introduce the standard abbreviation for the “ex-slave of a woman” (a detail that even those without any or much Latin could take away with them, and possibly apply elsewhere); and we are especially concerned to hint at the potentially unreliable voice of even an epigraphic text, and to remind viewers of the inevitably partial viewpoint of even the most austere texts. Perhaps most important of all, however, for exciting the audience is our stress on the *immediacy* and *accessibility* of the text *as an object*. The general public is often understandably confused or put off by the complicated history of the transmission of ancient literary texts. Classicists tend to forget that such shorthand phrases as “the letters of Cicero still survive” is very misleading to those outside the profession (in everyday terms the letters of Cicero do *not* survive, but only copies of copies of copies by what is to most people a tortuous and impenetrable route). Here by taking the text on my knee and handling it (as was allowed by the museum) without gloves I was underlining the physical, tangible survival of the text. This is something written by a real Roman, unmediated, no gloves to be worn.

The next clip looks explicitly at sex, women and family relations. It is the epitaph of Allia Potestas from the Museo Nazionale Romano (Terme di Diocleziano) (*CIL* 6, 37965).

CLIP TWO

It is clear again that some corners have been cut. There is no mention that this too is written in verse, still less that text is full of sometimes rather crude Ovidian allusions and semi-quotations. We also skate over the Latin rather more speedily than with the epitaph of Ancarenus Nothus, in part because it is simply far less legible. But we are successful, I hope, in convincing the viewer that epigraphic texts of this kind not only reach people outside the upper echelons of the elite, but also give glimpses of their most intimate domestic lives. More than that, they make absolutely clear that ancient lives were as messy and confused as our own (undermining some of the over-simplifications often conveyed by introductory histories of “*the* Roman family”). In this case it is even easier than with Ancarenus Nothus to point to the very loaded perspective of the text and to the complex “relativities” that affect our understanding of the domestic world in antiquity or now: it is not hard for anyone to see that Allia Potestas’ own view of this situation may well have been different.

The last clip focuses on a wonderfully legible epigraphic text with direct links to a well-known literary text (Pliny, *Letters* 5, 16) and to some identifiable Roman historical figures. It is the epitaph of Minicia Marcella, also in the Museo Nazionale Romano (Terme di Diocleziano) (*CIL* 6, 16631).

CLIP THREE

With this stone we are trading in part on the sheer legibility of the Latin (including the abbreviation *D M*, with which viewers would by this stage in the series be familiar), and using what they would also already know (for example, Roman numerals) to decode the stone. It is partly an attempt to encourage viewers to see that they themselves could work out what these texts are saying more easily than they imagine. But it is also an attempt to introduce people to some of the issues of demography that inscriptions can raise, even if at a very basic level. We say nothing of the misleading side of funerary evidence as demographic data. We are concerned instead to show that apparently routine pieces of information included in these texts (for example, age of death) may throw light on much wider questions of Roman social history – with a relevance to our own modern concerns too.

The epitaph of very well connected Minicia Marcella clearly links to the themes of the other funerary texts we examine, but it also begins to point away from the private world of the non-elite. One critical observation of our use of inscriptions in *Meet the Romans* would be that it was a rather too easy formula. To put it another way, getting viewers to engage with the troubles and domestic peculiarities documented by the loquacious epitaphs erected by ordinary (or “middling sort”) of Romans is not the same as getting them to engage with the more formal, complicated and less immediately heart-tugging texts that are the staple of epigraphy study.

That, in a way, is true. And it is partly for that reason that we have tried in the later programmes we have made (*Caligula* in 2013, and a forthcoming four part series on the Roman Empire) to broach inscriptions with more specifically political, elite themes. That is much less easy, but it is still possible to use some of the ‘tricks’, the come-ons and devices I have already discussed.

One of the major points of the forthcoming series on the Empire is the idea of Roman citizenship: we stress the Roman habit (and it was habit rather than policy) of incorporating outsiders and extending citizenship rights, first through Italy and then further afield. There are obvious and important modern resonances in this, with our own debates on migration and movement of peoples. One key document we explore is the so-called Table of Lyon (*CIL* 13, 1668), the bronze tablet recording part of Claudius’ speech advocating the admission of Gauls to the senate in 48 CE. It is in many ways a visually stunning document, surprising to viewers who are not used to inscriptions on bronze, and with very clear lettering. Even though it is hardly feasible to analyse even an individual sentence (the Latin is densely impacted, and full of abstruse Claudian allusion), it is possible to pick out key words, which resonate even in Latin: we home in, for example on *alieni* and *Romam migravit*. In a sense it is a superficial point; but the very long history of “aliens” and “migration” is much more vividly captured when we see those terms inscribed in first-century bronze.

In *Caligula*, we devote some time to the tombstone of his mother Agrippina the Elder, now in the Capitoline Museums in Rome (*CIL* 6, 886). This obviously takes viewers right to the heart of the imperial family, and to the exact words in which Caligula himself (presumably) decided to commemorate his mother, whose remains he had brought back to Rome after her death in exile. It is not difficult to draw attention, for example, to the emphatic word *principis* with which the text ends. But it is also an intriguing and memorable case of the long history of such inscriptions -- though sadly this point did not make it into the final cut of the programme. I had hoped to introduce viewers to the medieval re-use of this grand imperial epitaph as a corn measure, and then to the joke on the seventeenth-century inscription underneath the ancient stone itself, recording its entry into the museum. Referring to the tradition that Agrippina had starved herself to death, it notes how odd it was that a woman who died by depriving herself of *frumentum*, should see her tombstone later become a measure of *frumentum*…! But that joke, and the wonderful set of appropriations that the stone documents, must be kept for another programme.

What then are my broader conclusions?

First and most gloomily, I very much doubt that there is much to be done, outside Greek speaking cultures, to bring Greek epigraphic texts to a wide audience, whether on television or elsewhere. The audience’s engagement depends on the basic recognisability of the words on the stone or bronze. If the public even begin to pronounce the letters they see in front of them, there is little hope of making them engaging.

Second, and particularly in the context of museums, there is for most people something very dispiriting about rows and rows of epigraphic texts, all together. Inscriptions can best speak to a modern audience within a cultural (rather than a generic) context, and by careful selection. We would almost certainly see a rise in popular interest in epigraphic texts, if we selected just a very few and re-inserted them into more general historical galleries. Ancarenus Nothus, for example, would get his message across much better if his epitaph were to be found close to artefacts of daily life, and discussions of the experience of ordinary high rise living in ancient Rome.

But most important perhaps, as epigraphers we must be more confident about the potential appeal of our material and way that it can speak to a wider public. That is not true of all our material, to be sure; but a lot more of it than we tend to assume. The likes of Ancarenus Nothus, Allia Potestas and Minicia Marcella – not to mention Agrippina the Elder – have stories that many people are still keen to hear, if only we are prepared to open them up.