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## CONTINUITIES IN LATE ANTIQUE LITERACY: THE EVIDENCE FROM NORTH AFRICA AND GAUL

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*Abstract:* In this article I reconsider the evidence for ancient literacy from late antique North Africa and Gaul in order to reassess how the end of the “epigraphic habit” in the third century may have changed the popular contexts and notional associations of writing. Analyzing evidence for the Christian “epitaphic habit,” as well as for the production of legal and economic documents between the third and sixth centuries CE, I propose that late antique uses of writing attest to numerous continuities with their early imperial counterparts, including an interest not only in the pragmatic but also the performative character of ancient literacy.

*Keywords:* literacy, epigraphic habit, late antiquity, Gaul, North Africa, epitaphs.

Since Ramsay MacMullen’s seminal 1982 article on the rise and fall of the so-called “epigraphic habit” – the custom of setting up Latin inscriptions to document life and death in the Roman Empire – historians of ancient literacy have studied the details of why these highly publicized practices of writing became so popular in the Augustan era and how they lost their steam in the third century CE.<sup>1</sup> MacMullen’s observation was partially based on a study by András Mócsy, in which he connected the growth in epigraphic output with the general trend toward Romanization in the provinces in this era; he saw in these literate practices an acquired taste, one heavily shaped by Roman power, across much of Western Europe, Latin North Africa and the Danube provinces.<sup>2</sup> The thesis about the appearance and disappearance of the epigraphic habit has since gained wide popularity, and recent studies now focus on the reasons why inscriptions spread in various parts of the empire in both West and East.

The popularity of the habit was first associated with high levels of Romanization; in a study of epitaphs Elizabeth Meyer pointed out that both Gaul and North Africa, the two highly Romanized locations I focus on here, offered par-

<sup>1</sup> R. MacMullen, The epigraphic habit in the Roman Empire. *AJPh* 103 (1982) 233-246. See already S. Mrozek, A propos de la répartition chronologique des inscriptions latines dans le haut empire. *Epigraphica* 35 (1973) 355-368. For a history of the reception of the idea see the concise summary in J. Bodel, *Epigraphic evidence: ancient history from inscriptions*. Routledge 2001, 6-7.

<sup>2</sup> A. Mócsy, Die Unkenntnis des Lebensalters im römischen Reich. *Acta Antiqua* 14 (1966) 387-421, esp. 419-421.

ticularly marked examples for the custom of setting up public inscriptions.<sup>3</sup> On Meyer's reading the epigraphic habit in these provinces was motivated by a desire to claim and express the status gained within the imperial system, which at this point did not distinguish between public and private forms; rather, these Romanized modes of expression pervaded the landscape of these provinces just as the custom pervaded the minds of the people who inhabited the empire. In a key response to Meyer's arguments, Greg Woolf emphasized the prominence of names, significantly including non-Romanized names, in Latin inscriptions from Gaul and connected their popularity to the anxieties of ancient imperial subjects to preserve their status in a changing world.<sup>4</sup> Woolf has especially emphasized the spread of public uses of literacy as a process of "monumentalizing" status and practices, which he related to social and legal obligations characteristic of Roman life, for example in terms of rights of inheritance in this period. Whether focusing on Romanization, monumentalization, Roman social and legal obligations, or a combination thereof, these scholarly interpretations suggest that imperial uses of writing imply something other than the basic ability to write and make use of written texts. In fact, it appears that in these studies a new, wider understanding of early imperial literacy is emerging which sees the epigraphic habit as part of a larger social and historical context and focuses on the associations of literate practices *beyond* the fact of writing itself.

Following up on these studies which have expanded our view of Roman imperial literacy, I intend to investigate here whether we can get any sense of these wider contexts and associations of literacy *after* the epigraphic habit itself declined in the Roman Empire. Did some contexts and associations of writing, popular until the third century, survive after the decline in the public uses of inscriptions? Could these earlier contexts and associations of writing contribute to an ongoing reliance of writing in certain areas of life? My interest here is especially in trying to identify some social contexts in which writing had and continued to have significant influence after the third century. My discussion consists of two parts: first, I will examine the relatively quite visible custom of setting up funerary inscriptions in later Roman times, the so-called "epitaphic habit." Then, in the second part of my paper I turn to the generally less visible reliance on literacy for legal and economic documents. Examining these uses of writing and the emergence of model books with writing samples for both epitaphs and legal documents in the sixth century CE, exactly at the time when many uses of writing began to undergo major changes, and some even disappeared, I ask whether the sixth century may have marked a more significant

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<sup>3</sup> E. Meyer, Explaining the epigraphic habit in the Roman Empire: the evidence of epitaphs. *JRS* 80 (1990) 74-96.

<sup>4</sup> G. Woolf, *Becoming Roman: the origins of provincial civilization in Gaul*. Cambridge 2000.

transformation in literacy than did the disappearance of the epigraphic habit in the third century.

#### Part I: The “epitaphic habit:” Continuities in funerary epigraphy

It is well established that the number of Greek and Latin inscriptions fell sharply across the Roman empire in the first half of the third century. Whether this meant that the wider associations of writing had also undergone a transformation is less clear, however, even if it has been sometimes suggested in scholarship. Thus Elizabeth Meyer connected the fading popularity of the inscriptional practice to the grant of citizenship by Caracalla in 212, and proposed that the newly widespread reach of citizenship may have weakened the desire to commemorate status and the related interest in setting up inscriptions.<sup>5</sup> Others sought to explain the decline of the epigraphic habit as part of a wider transformation, in which the deterioration of civic institutions may have challenged the very social values with which Roman literate practices were traditionally associated.

However, whether the third century would have seen the final disappearance of interest in inscriptional practice should remain an open question. In a new study of epigraphic evidence from late antique Gaul and Spain, Mark Handley suggested that in fact there was *another epigraphic boom* to follow shortly, with a rise beginning in the early fourth century, peaking in the sixth century and falling off, somewhat dramatically, in the early seventh century.<sup>6</sup> Handley’s work builds upon that of Carlos Galvao-Sobrinho, whose study of Christian funerary epigraphy led him to suggest that even if the epigraphic habit did not continue unbroken into late antiquity, Christians had their own “epitaphic habit,” a particular interest in commemorating their new-found Christianity.<sup>7</sup> Handley’s explanation for the development of this apparently Christian epigraphic habit, and especially funerary epigraphy, is different and is not based on matters of religion, but rather on the chronology of this rise in inscriptional display, which corresponded to the decline of the supra-regional order of the empire – a situation that both offered an opportunity and created a need among local elites to compete for social power and prestige through public display, especially in funerary epigraphy.

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<sup>5</sup> So Meyer, *op. cit.*

<sup>6</sup> M. A. Handley, *Death, society and culture: inscriptions and epitaphs in Gaul and Spain, AD 300-750*. BAR International Series 1135. Oxford 2003, 11-14.

<sup>7</sup> C. Galvao-Sobrinho, *Funerary epigraphy and the spread of Christianity in the West*. Athenaeum 83 (1995) 431-466.

In Gaul, where there are some distinctions between north and south, there is a uniformly robust trend to commemorate the dead in inscriptions from the early fourth century on, and in particular in local centers, such as the imperial capital Trier, as well as the military towns of Cologne and Mainz where status markers were frequently used early on even on Christian epitaphs.<sup>8</sup> Handley may well be correct in connecting this second epigraphic boom with local elites, possibly Peter Brown's late antique sub-elites, whose more secure stand, including inter-generational continuity significantly improved by around 600 – exactly the time when the new epigraphic habit (but not Christianity) appears to decline.<sup>9</sup> However, in identifying the main use of literacy in securing status through monumental display, Handley's thesis also connects at least some practices of late antique writing to the interests of earlier Romans in pursuing their own epigraphic habit.

No comparably comprehensive chronological study exists for late antique North Africa, but a summary by Noël Duval suggested a similar trend in Christian epitaphs here, with a definite rise by the early fourth century and a boom in the sixth century.<sup>10</sup> Another recent study pointed out that even though Christian funerary inscriptions rather uniformly arrived starting in the late third century and continued into the sixth century, there was quite a bit of regional variety,<sup>11</sup> besides, we have a relatively large group of Christian epitaphs in mosaic form that survive from late antique North Africa.<sup>12</sup> The interest in funerary display is even more significant because of what we cannot find: not all areas of epigraphy continued to thrive invariably. As civic building inscriptions in general declined,<sup>13</sup> commemorative building inscriptions of Byzantine fortifications offered a more limited sphere for euergetic epigraphic expression.<sup>14</sup> But for the context of funerary epigraphy it seems relevant that the cult of martyrs grew with its dedications of relics preserved in inscriptions in North Africa – a trend that only strengthened through the Vandal and Byzantine periods in the fifth and sixth centuries.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Handley, *op. cit.*, pp. 53-56.

<sup>9</sup> P. Brown, The study of elites in Late Antiquity. *Arethusa* 33 (2000) 321-346, 341.

<sup>10</sup> N. Duval, L'épigraphie funéraire chrétienne d'Afrique: traditions et ruptures, constants et diversités. In: A. Donati (ed.), *La terza età dell'epigrafia: Colloquio AIEGL-Borghesi* 86, Bologna, ottobre 1986. Roma 1988. *Epigrafia e antichità* 9, 265-314, p. 267.

<sup>11</sup> P.-A. Février, Paroles et silences (à propos de l'épigraphie africaine). *Africa Romana* 4 (1987) 167-192, esp. 185-189.

<sup>12</sup> For which now see the publications in the *Corpus de mosaïque de Tunisie*.

<sup>13</sup> W. H. W. G. Liebeschuetz, *Decline and fall of the Roman city*. Oxford 2001, 15. Cf. also G. Sears, *Late Roman African urbanism. Continuity and transformation in the city*. BAR International Series 1963. Oxford 2007, 118, but also his individual case studies, such as Cuicul, pp. 55-58.

<sup>14</sup> J. Durliat, *Les dédicaces d'ouvrages de défense dans l'Afrique Byzantine*. Rome 1981.

<sup>15</sup> For a full study see Y. Duval, *Loca sanctorum. Africae: le culte des martyrs en Afrique du IVe au VIIe siècle*. Roma 1982, esp. pp. 464-474.

The differences between Gaul and North Africa in terms of their political histories seem significant enough to place in doubt the possibility of a singular explanation for the rise and fall of this second epigraphic boom, even if we must recognize how the similar periods of uncertainty may have contributed to the changes in inscriptional practices in both locales. Yet it seems significant that in this particular area of social life, epigraphy continued to serve as an important and publicized marker for the care of the dead. One particular aspect of this interest in creating inscriptions that would perform well in the larger social context is the apparent reliance on models when carving epitaphs. Models were likely already used in the earlier Roman empire, but now we find certain uses of them suggestive of an interest in using epitaphs without necessarily fully comprehending the original formulation. Thus an inscription from Hippo Regius, Africa, reads:

*Hic corpus iacet /  
pueri nominandi /  
o Benedicte puer /  
paucis te terra /  
diebus infantem /  
tenuit c(a)eliqu{a}e /  
in regna remisit /  
propterea et /  
nat(at)us ut ca /  
peres tanta /  
renatus.<sup>16</sup>*

In this inscription the formula *pueri nominandi* in line 2 should have been replaced by a name just like *Benedicte* in line 3, an unusual mistake suggesting that someone rather blindly copied the first lines just as they copied the poetic language in the later lines.

Beyond the general interest in poetic epitaphs, such as those composed by Venantius Fortunatus, the Merovingian poet of the 6<sup>th</sup> century, there were also likely poetic collections of inscriptions that could preserve the best of this epitaphic habit and serve as models in late antiquity. While we can identify only rarely an actual instance of someone using such a model like in the above example, the use of model books is well attested for sixth-century Gaul, and a poetic collection of epitaphs survives as part of a ninth-century manuscript in Paris, which also includes some other, later epitaphs.<sup>17</sup> Interestingly, in Gaul,

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<sup>16</sup> AE 1931, 112 = J. W. Zarker, *Studies in the Carmina Latina Epigraphica*, Princeton 1958, nr. 48, cited by M. Handley, *Epitaphs, models, and texts: a Carolingian collection of late antique inscriptions*. In: A. E. Cooley (ed.), *The afterlife of inscriptions. Reusing, rediscovering, reinventing and revitalizing ancient inscriptions*. London 2000, 47-56, p. 54.

<sup>17</sup> Handley, *op. cit.*

we also have other model collections related to different areas of literate life, such as epistolography, in the sixth-century *Epistulae Austrasiacae*.<sup>18</sup> I do not have the space here to fully explore how epistolography and the custom of setting up epitaphs may have compared with one another, other than to note that the “epitaphic habit” may arguably be seen as participation in a wider cultural custom in contrast to the potential individualistic literary ambitions involved in composing letters. But I do want to emphasize that unlike the interest in epistolography, which we can see as a revival of classical models after a period of lapse, the model handbooks of epitaphs emerged *at the end* of a long period of widespread use of inscriptions to commemorate the dead. The appearance of these handbooks thus coincided with the end, rather than the beginning, of the custom of setting up epitaphs, and thus offers indirect evidence for the end of the “epitaphic habit” in the sixth century.

## II. Writing practices in economic and legal life

The custom of committing economic and legal transactions to writing is both chronologically and culturally less circumscribed than the habit of setting up inscriptions for funerary commemoration. Yet, to my mind, it offers a wider context of literate practices in both the period of the Roman empire and that of late antiquity – a context which is less monumental, but is all the more suggestive in terms of what it can tell us about the associations of writing. It seems significant that we will also encounter the emergence of model books for producing economic and legal documents in the sixth century, but the discussion of the path from the earlier to the late empire in this case must first include a consideration of the bureaucratic functions of the state, which underwent a major transformation between the early and later empire.

In discussing how the bureaucratic functions of the late antique government were transferred to the army, William V. Harris quotes the late fourth-century Latin military writer, Vegetius: “Since there are many offices in the legions which require educated soldiers, it is appropriate that those who test the recruits should examine the stature, physical strength and mental alertness of all of them; but in some cases skill in note-taking (*notarum peritia*) and practice in arithmetic is selected” (*De re militari* 2,19).<sup>19</sup> This increased role of the military in bureaucratic functions did not necessarily mark an increase in the amount of writing produced, as Harris observed, yet we may wonder if interactions with

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<sup>18</sup> I. Wood, Administration, law and culture in Merovingian Gaul. In: R. McKitterick (ed.), The uses of literacy in early medieval Europe. Cambridge 1990, 63-81, pp. 68-69.

<sup>19</sup> W.V. Harris, Ancient literacy. Cambridge, MA 1991, pp. 313-315.

such a bureaucratically run army may have shaped the associations of literacy among those who had to work with this bureaucracy, especially concerning legal and economic matters.

A key piece of evidence comes from some thirty-two ostraka from Carthage, which can be dated to around 373 CE. These were found on the Ilôt de l'Amirauté and apparently concern the distribution of olive oil, an area centrally controlled by the late antique Roman state. Jacqueline Godfrey has suggested that the paleography of these ostraka corresponds to a subtype of New/Later Roman Cursive that has been primarily associated with late antique military contexts, which would suggest a possible military connection in the production of these clearly standardized, regularly shaped, and uniformly red Latin ostraka. It was Robert Marichal who first suggested that late antique papyri may distinguish, in fact rather carefully, between a number of distinct script stylizations or varieties. The distinctions are not paleographic, but rather concern size and elaboration, thus, for example, the governor's office would use not only more carefully written letters, but also larger and more decorated letter-forms. The Codex Theodosianus preserves a rescript of the emperor Valentinian I (364-375) to the proconsul of Africa (IX.19.3), which distinguishes between the *litterae caelestes* (reserved for the imperial court) and the *litterae communes* (allowed to be used by the provincial chancery). The suggested social hierarchy behind letter-forms confirms not only the ideal of the social and institutional boundaries to be maintained in writing but also the difficulties in maintaining that boundary – likely due to the shared contexts in which writing was learnt and experienced in this period. Recent ostrakon finds from late antique Meninx, possibly related to the purple dye manufacture there, seem to strengthen the argument that imperial control of economic production could encourage the use of literacy among those involved in the larger production and trade processes.<sup>20</sup>

It is most remarkable that here we encounter a custom of relying on literacy not primarily for its pragmatic relevance for all of those involved in the transaction: we know that the association of writing with certain economic transactions did not equal literacy among businessmen in late antique North Africa. In the early fifth century, Augustine could preach to his community in Hippo Regius: “For we know that certain traders, who since they do not know letters, need literate men hired to help them; and though they themselves do not know letters, they make enormous profits with others writing their accounts.” (*Sermo* 303.2)<sup>21</sup> Similarly, in a newly Visigothic Gaul, Paulinus of Pella described the

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<sup>20</sup> R. Bagnall, Zs. Várhelyi, Sites, stratigraphy and materials: ostraka. In: A. Drine, E. Fentress, R. Holod (eds.), *Studies on Jerba*. Portsmouth 2009, 330-340.

<sup>21</sup> *Novimus enim aliquos negotiatores quin cum litteras non noverint, requirunt sibi mercenarios litteratos; et cum ipsi litteras nesciant, aliis scribentibus rationes suas ingentia lucra conquirunt.*

ownership of his property lost yet he himself was still bound “*sub conscripta condicione*” under a written contract, yet it is unclear what role this written quality fulfilled in his legal claim.<sup>22</sup> The Albertini Tablets, a collection of thirty-four documents from the region of Djebel Mrata, North Africa, dated to the 490s CE, offer some intriguing details.<sup>23</sup> Most of these texts concern purchases of land and tend to be legal in nature; characteristically, they include precise dates according to the regnal years of the Vandal king, Gunthamund (484-496) – likely a custom that originated in the Roman era. The documents were produced by scribes rather than the parties involved, and the scribes in fact are often identified by name on the tablets, suggesting a sort of professional writing duty and possibly even training. Finally, there is a rather unusual characteristic of these documents, as Jonathan Conant observed, namely that the wooden tablets show evidence of earlier, scraped-away documents written under the current text.<sup>24</sup> It is not clear why such reuse occurred, especially only after a few years’ time; some legal requirement necessitating registration of the transaction in writing seems quite likely. Yet the reuse of the wooden tablets is suggestive of what writing was supposed to achieve for the documented transaction, and it seems more likely to be connected to the process of the transaction (such as modern receipts important for tax returns) rather than a desire to make the ownership somehow everlasting by relying on the written word.

In a recent study Shoichi Sato argued that twenty-eight accounting documents from Tours and dating to the second half of the seventh century were likely only the tip of an iceberg from the complex administration of the monastery, even though only a small number of actual documents survived.<sup>25</sup> While it seems of limited use to speculate about percentages in this context, it is interesting to note that these documents were working sheets for collection agents for the annual dues of the abbey of Saint-Martin, implying a highly pragmatic

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Cited by *J. F. Conant*, Literacy and private documentation in Vandal North Africa: the case of the Albertini Tablets. In: *A. H. Merrills* (ed.), *Vandals, Romans and Berbers: new perspectives on late antique North Africa*. Aldershot 2004, 199-233, p. 199.

<sup>22</sup> Eucharisticus 572-577: *cunctaque ipsa etiam, quae iam tenuatus habere / Massiliae potui, amissa iam proprietate / conscripta adstrictus sub condicione tenerem, / emptorem mihi ignotum de gente Gothorum / excires, nostri quondam qui iuris agellum / mercari cupiens pretium transmitteret ultro...* “...and all the very things even, which I could hold on to, impoverished, in Massilia, I held bound under written contract with the ownership having already been lost / you summoned a buyer unknown to me, who, desiring to buy the small farm that once belonged to me, gave me the price voluntarily.”

<sup>23</sup> *C. Courtois – L. Leschi – C. Perrat – C. Saumagne* (eds.), *Tablettes Albertini. Actes privés de l’époque vandale*. Paris 1952.

<sup>24</sup> *J. P. Conant*, op. cit., pp. 212-213.

<sup>25</sup> *S. Sato*, The Merovingian accounting documents of Tours: form and function. *Early Medieval Europe* 9 (2000) 143-161.



use of writing, including the shorthand Tironian notes, for accounting purposes at this time. Significantly, these documents postdate the collections of model documents from Merovingian Gaul, namely the Formularies of Angers and Marculf from the sixth and seventh centuries respectively, which included exactly the kind of formulaic legal language – pertaining to sales, gifts, dependence and manumission – one would use to produce such a text.<sup>26</sup> The earliest examples in these collections can be shown to date to the 520s, and we can be certain of the continuity of late Roman practices of documenting economic and legal transactions to these *formulae*. The Tours documents appear to belong to a new pragmatic trend in literacy that *followed* the appearance of these model books, marking, again, a change in association with the codification of examples in the formularies.

### III. Tentative conclusions

In both areas that I examined above, the sixth century saw the emergence of model collections in which the language of widespread uses of writing, such as epitaphs or legal and economic documents, was codified. Whether we might choose to see the model books as marking either the end of ancient literacy or the transformation of literacy from the ancient to medieval world, they seem to suggest a boundary in the uses of writing between later Roman and medieval times and thereby emphasize potential continuities in between the earlier and later Roman periods. My examination of the popularity and uses of literacy in North Africa and Gaul between the third and sixth centuries bears out this connection. In fact, it appears that even as the historical contexts in which epitaphs or legal and economic documents were used underwent significant changes in the third century CE, writing, at least in certain areas, maintained a role that was possibly not simply pragmatic but also had a performative character. Based on this particular characteristic of writing I want to propose tentatively that some uses and notional associations of writing that may have contributed to the popularity of the epigraphic habit in the earlier empire could have survived to the later Roman empire and that making comparisons between these two periods may help us understand better the uses and contexts of ancient literacy, possibly not only in North Africa and Gaul, but also elsewhere in the ancient Mediterranean.

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<sup>26</sup> A. Rio, *Legal practice and the written word in the early Middle Ages*. Cambridge 2009.