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“Light on the history”: epigraphy in a changing world

Delivering the opening speech of an International Congress is a great honor - and I would like to thank the organizing committee for that – but also, as you can easily imagine – a great responsibility. In fact, it is a chance not only to speak about a theme of general interest, as some of my predecessors did, but also to present a general picture of our discipline, in the historical moment we are living. It’s on this latter aspect that I would like to focus my attention, reflecting on the role that epigraphy and epigraphers play in the study of the ancient world and in civil society more generally.

In my opinion, this role is well represented by one of the images entered, in 2015, in the photographic contest “Wiki Loves Monuments”, sponsored by Wikimedia, which rewards, every year, the best photos of our cultural and environmental heritage, put on line by participants. It shows the Arch of Augustus in Rimini, with the dedicatory inscription mentioning the restoration of the via Flaminia, and its title is “Light on the history”. I’ve chosen this photo – and this title – not because it was the winner of the contest, but simply because it is my favourite one, since it represents – as immediately as an image can do – what, according to me, is the key-role of epigraphy: to throw, indeed, “light on the history”.

In fact, ancient history, as an imperfect but rigorous science, is largely based on the study of sources of different kinds – archaeological, literary, documentary – and the most significant progress in this field comes from the possibility to have new sources available. New data come every year from archaeological explorations, but also from information about climate, cultivations, migrations of men and goods. These data come from disciplines like physics, palaeobotany, palaeomedicine...; the discovery and publication of new papyri constantly enrich the number of private and public documents and of literary texts at our disposal, as in the exceptional case of the new fragments of Dexippos. But nobody can deny that a large number of novelties in the field of ancient history come from epigraphy and its constant contribution of new studies and new texts. New texts that not only allow, but force us to update and revise our proposals and hypotheses. I would like to illustrate this aspect with some examples of brand new inscriptions discovered or published in the last 5 years, since the last International Epigraphic Congress, held in Berlin in 2012.

A significant example comes from the inscribed bronze rostra of the Punic and Roman ships sunk in the Sicilian sea during the Egadi battle: some of them were presented in the past years in different

venues, including the last edition of this Congress. But new exemplars are always coming to light, like the one published few months ago by Jonathan Prag, and those that are still in the deep sea, waiting to be rescued by the Soprintendenza del Mare. Every piece adds a new tessera to our knowledge of Roman republican magistracies, of the palaeography of III century inscriptions, and the mosaic is becoming more and more complete and interesting.

Moreover, there are inscriptions that were able to confirm historical facts that we used to know only from literary sources, sometimes considered doubtful just because they still lacked material evidence. That's the case of a dedication to Caligula, found in 2011 in the Capitolium of Brixia, and published in 2014 by Gian Luca Gregori: here we have - for the first time in an epigraphic monument - the epithets *princeps optimus* and *pater exercituum*, known, until now, only from the *Vita Gai* by Suetonius. In the same inscription we also have the fifth imperial acclamation for Caligula's military campaign in Britannia, which didn't end in a real victory, as we know from Cassius Dio.

Not in Cassius Dio, but in Tacitus we read about an event that occurred soon after the death of Augustus. In 23 CE, Livia and Tiberius, respectively widow and successor of the dead emperor, but actually both his adoptive children, put a dedication to the deified Augustus near Marcellus' theatre. Here, as Tacitus explicitly says, Livia (now Iulia Augusta) *Tiberii nomen suo postscripserat*. Only a powerful woman like her could be allowed to break the rules of a society as formal as the Roman, by not mentioning the ruling emperor first in a public document. Did Tacitus exaggerate? Is this detail not to be trusted? No, if I'm correct in proposing the reconstruction of a new inscribed fragment found some years ago just in the area of the Marcellus' theatre, and to be published in the coming days in a volume edited by Paola Ciancio Rossetto. If we put the new fragment on the left side of another marble block with the same characteristics - already known, but with a different interpretation - we have the hypothetical reconstruction of a text in which the dedication *Divo Augusto patri* is followed by the names of Iulia Augusta - that is Livia after her adoption - and Tiberius, just in the same order mentioned by the angry Tacitus.

Jumping to a completely different chronological and geographical scenario, once again it's thanks to an epigraphic source that the identification of the tomb of Philip the apostle was confirmed, a tomb cited by different ancient writers like Eusebius of Caesarea as the destination of pilgrimages and identified by the archaeological mission directed by Francesco D'Andria in Hierapolis. In fact, a series of devotional graffiti in Greek, covering the walls of a room near the place where the bones of the apostle were buried, mention many times the name of Philip and confirm the interpretation of the place already proposed since its discovery, in 2011. The inscriptions are still going to be

published, but they have already been presented in different places, and have received due attention from the press, as well.

The contribution of epigraphy is even more significant when the new discoveries don't confirm our ideas but rather integrate the gaps in our documentation and therefore our knowledge, giving us information about events, institutions and historical character unknown or only partially mentioned in other kinds of sources.

The publication of the Fasti from Privernum, where one can read *M. Valerius Messalla magister equitum designatus ut cum Lepidus paludatus exisset iniret*, allows us to reconstruct in a different way the events of the year 43 BC, which are described rather confusedly in the literary sources, in particular Cassius Dio. The *magister equitum* designated by Caesar to replace Lepidus once he would have reached his province as magistrate with *imperium*, was actually the Messalla that was consul in 53 BC, not Octavius, the future Augustus, as some ancient authors seem to suggest, and most modern scholars thought until now, starting with Attilio Degrassi, who integrated the name of Octavius in the Fasti Capitolini. In fact, the young Octavius was designated to this magistracy only for the following year, but he never assumed it due to the death of the dictator: an important detail in the reconstruction of the events of those crucial years, for which the contribution of a little piece of stone, of less than 30 cm, was fundamental...

Let's also think about an exceptional document like the bronze lex from the municipium of Troesmis, wonderfully published by Werner Eck, after years in the limbo of antiquarian commerce. Rescued in 2012 by the Romanian office that deals with the illegal export of antiquities, it is now displayed in the National Museum of the History of Romania in Bucarest. It testifies, for the first time, the creation of a *municipium*, between 177 and 180, near the camp of the *legio V Macedonica*, in the eastern part of the province of Moesia Superior.

The fragments of another bronze table, found since November 2014 in the military camp of Brigetio, in Pannonia, and cleverly recomposed by Laszlo Borhy, have led to the discovery of the text of an unknown provision by the emperor Philip the Arab in favour of the troops and the veterans. The bronze table is the *exemplum* of the *sacrae litterae* that was originally displayed in the most important place of the legionary camp (the *principia*), and probably dates to between 247 and 249, after Philipp the Arab led the expedition against the Carpi and placed his son Marcus Iulius Philippus on the throne: in fact, in the last lines of the inscription there is probably an acclamation for two emperors (*dii vos servent*).

Interesting discoveries in Greek epigraphy have been no less abundant, as is testified – just to give a couple of particularly significant examples - by an epigraphic discovery made by our colleagues at the university of Haifa.

In the last months of 2016, the website of the university of Haifa announced that during the underwater exploration of the site of Tel Dor, a Greek inscription was found. It is a statue base set in honour of a Roman senator of the age of Hadrian, Gargilus Antiquus, already known from other sources. Now we know that, at the beginning of his career, he was also governor of the province of Iudaea.

Another exceptional epigraphic discovery, made in Laodicea by the archaeologists of the university of Pamukkale, is going to be published by Francesco Guizzi, but has already been announced on the AIEGL website at the end of 2015: a big marble block, more than one meter wide, that preserves the text of a long “water law”. This text is linked to a similar provision made by the Roman *proconsul Asiae* Aulus Vicirius Martialis in 114, and known from another inscription from Ephesus. The new text will add new details to our knowledge of the prosopography of the age of Trajan and of the complex water administration of the Roman empire.

We must admit that new epigraphic discoveries, as important as they are, are not always able to fill all the gaps in our documentation and to answer all scholars’ questions, and some historical problems remain unsolved even in presence of new, beautiful and interesting inscriptions.

The archaeological site in the Spanish town of Los Bañales, for example, thoroughly investigated by the team led by Javier Andreu Pintado, has recently provided epigraphical documents of great interest, like the text from a statue base in honour of Lucius Caesar, published in 2016. The new pedestal is very similar to another one, dedicated to Caius Caesar, found nearby in 1982 and now displayed in the Museum of Saragozza. It illustrates the way in which this part of the Tarraconensis took part in the Augustan propaganda, but doesn’t reveal the ancient name of the *municipium* where it was found, which remains unknown.

On the other hand, important contributions to our knowledge of historical events and characters have come, in recent years, not only from new discoveries: new drawings made possible by digital technologies have allowed new readings and new reconstructions and interpretations of inscriptions already known for decades or even centuries. I’m thinking, for example, just to cite a particularly significant case, of Patrizia Fortini’s new archaeological investigations in the area of the Lapis Niger, in the Roman Forum, and the related 3D scan of the so-called cippo del Foro. The opportunity to observe previously inaccessible details has led to a complete revision, both linguistic

and juridical, of this document, fundamental for the archaic history of Rome, in the framework of a multidisciplinary research that involves, among others, Elena Tassi and Giovanna Rocca.

Even in a landscape as different as Carthage in the mid- to late-imperial period, a recent photographic campaign has allowed Salvatore Ganga and Attilio Mastino to propose a new reconstruction of the two inscriptions carved on the monumental architrave of the Roman Baths. I would like to thank them for allowing me to preview their images, which will give us a new awareness of the shape and the context of the building, both in the phase of Marcus Aurelius and during the time of Valentinian II.

But above all, epigraphy can give us an idea of the practical and material aspects of administrative provisions and institutions that we normally know from sources that don't have the same immediacy.

The law of Pompeius Strabo, which in 89 BC instituted Latin colonies in the Transpadana giving the *ius Latii* to the *incolae* of that region, for example, finds an interesting parallel in a brand new epigraphic document. It confirms that to be included in the Roman administrative system these *incolae* had to be first recorded as landowners. Among the exceptional discoveries of the last few years there is, in fact, the bronze “*forma*” found in the cryptoporticus of the Capitolium in Verona, to which we must add another document of the same kind found in the same place some years ago. It is a fragmentary bronze table on which there is carved a schema of the cadastral map of the territory surrounding Verona, where one can read the names of the owners and the precise extension of their properties. Although it was found in 1999, the new fragment was published in 2015 by Giovannella Cresci Marrone and a team of scholars that analysed the text from different viewpoints (archaeological, juridical, economic, linguistic). This multidisciplinary approach confirms that even a document apparently very poor in information can be very important for the history of Verona and of northern Italy more generally. In fact, the new “*forma*” belongs to a still imperfect phase of Romanization, when names that are clearly of celtic origin were used at the same time as a language, alphabet and measurements that are definitely Roman. The choice to carve this document on a bronze table displayed in a public place is also typically Roman. It served as guarantee of a declaration of property, something that the Romans documented, supervised, and protected almost obsessively.

Speaking of the material reality “photographed” by the epigraphic documents, hundreds of lead *tesserae* found in the Sava river give us a look inside the everyday life of the harbour of the Roman city of Siscia, in Pannonia. They were published in two splendid volumes and are currently involved in an interesting project of “shared” digital publication, in collaboration with the

Archaeological Museum in Zagreb, and the Centre for Digital Culture in Pisa. These “tesserae”, although their texts are very short and difficult to read, document with immediacy and richness of information the commercial routes and activities of the harbour of Siscia. They tell us the names of the persons involved in these activities and the type and the value of the goods transported, and confirm how even humble texts can be really useful and valuable for our knowledge of a place.

With this quick survey of brand new discoveries, I don't want to give you the impression that only exceptional findings are really important to throw light on history. The “unique object” catches the attention – and sometimes the envy – of the academic community and, if it is mentioned by the press, also of the broader public. But, as historians, our attention shouldn't end with the news of a discovery, as, for example, in the case of a journalist scoop in the Huffington Post last January, announcing the finding of a Roman tombstone unearthed near New York. Upon more careful reading, what could seem “the first inhabitant of New York” turned out to be a piece of a collection of antiquities, hosted in a building – now demolished - in Westchester, not far from New York. It was bought by the widow of Josiah Macy, a partner and collaborator of Rockefeller, but it was actually found in Rome, since the authors of the CIL saw it in Villa Borghese at the end of XIX century.

This rather funny episode is useful to remind us that our goal is always to analyse a fact, a period, or an institution, starting from an interpretation, as correct as possible, of the documents we have at our disposal, exceptional or not.

In fact, a fundamental contribution for the knowledge of the history of towns and areas often doesn't come from single objects, but from a systematic collection of all the epigraphic documents, including not only big inscribed monuments, but also dozens of funerary, so called “common” inscriptions, and even fragments, that deserve to be studied with the same care and attention. Let's think about, for example, the different parts of volume II of the CIL, edited by Géza Alföldy, including the inscriptions of Tarraco and its territory, or the last volumes of the series *Supplementa Italica* and *Iscrizioni Greche d'Italia*, or the ongoing publication of the *Corpus Inscriptionum Iudaeae et Palaestinae*, to name only the collections published in the last few years.

I have discussed only a few cases, and I don't presume – as I've said since the beginning – to illustrate all the most important epigraphic discoveries, studies and projects of the last five years. Anyway, they are enough to demonstrate the fundamental and not accessorial role of this kind of document in historical research and, therefore, their importance as primary sources for the comprehension and reconstruction of our past.

But inscriptions, like all other archaeological monuments and, more generally, like all of our cultural heritage, are also very fragile, and are exposed to both man-made and natural dangers.

We all still have in our eyes the images of the monuments of Palmyra deliberately destroyed by terrorists, and I think that some of us have also thought – at least for a moment – that part of those monuments were inscribed... I can't even think about how many cities in Syria have, during these years of war, paid their tribute not only in human lives but also in cultural and epigraphic heritage, with damages and loss that will be difficult to repair. And there are also, unfortunately, theatres of war outside the Middle East, not to mention the heavy indirect consequences of this complex international situation, since the fighting is supported partly through the illegal sale of archaeological objects, including inscribed artifacts.

But war is not the only threat to inscribed monuments.

To paraphrase the table of contents of Michele Stefanile's book "Andare per le città sepolte", besides the inscriptions "buried by weapons" we can also have those

- Buried by nature
- Buried by time, and
- Buried by crisis

Sometimes, nature can be a harsh mother. This is, unfortunately, well known by the people living in Lazio, Umbria and Marche, regions that were struck by the earthquake in 2016. They have seen not only houses and factories destroyed, but also churches, monasteries, historical buildings, and museums full of ancient artworks. Nobody will give them back the loved ones they have lost; time will help them – we hope – to rescue and recreate the goods that have been destroyed, and some wounds in the cultural heritage of this area will remain for a long time, but at least the loss of epigraphic documents is only partial. The inscriptions of this region are, in fact, still reachable – though only virtually reachable – thanks to the hard work in the past years of our colleagues at the university of Perugia and Macerata, who have completely digitized texts and images of places like Reate, Nursia, Firmum and Tolentinum.

But sometimes, it's not a matter of traumatic events. Cultural – and epigraphic – heritage can also be damaged by heavy weather, pollution and simple atmospheric agents. These factors are making inscriptions preserved not in closed spaces, but – as it often happens – in open places less and less readable. Let's think about the number of *tituli picti* that could be read in Pompeii at the beginning of the XIX century, and the incredible amount of information that has been lost because many of them are not preserved anymore. Not by chance, the European project STORM, involved in the

preservation of monuments endangered by climate changes, includes even the inscriptions displayed in the Chiostro di Michelangelo in the Roman National Museum.

And sometimes, when nature wouldn't have been enough, our cultural heritage is put in jeopardy the hands of the men, with thefts and vandalisms that not only destroy the artistic beauties, but also compromise access to primary sources of historical research. Inscriptions, like many other archaeological materials, can be stolen and damaged, and this is probably, at least in part, inevitable. But I think that this is also caused by a lack of awareness of the importance that inscribed monuments have for our history. And this lack of awareness is a result of a crisis that involves many aspects of our everyday life: from the rules of living together in a civilized way, to the educational system at all levels, where the study of ancient history is considered less and less important.

The damages made by time, men and nature can be opposed not only with words and lamentations, but also with actions and effective measures. Many initiatives currently seek to preserve and protect the jeopardized cultural heritage, to reconstruct what has been damaged, and to rescue what has been stolen and sold.

All these initiatives are definitely valuable and positive. But documenting an inscription is not enough. Even the most accurate and informative archive is not enough. Because, as Derrida used to say, an archive exists only for what is outside the archive. If the archived material is not analysed and interpreted, it makes no sense. And giving sense to an inscription means, first of all, publishing it.

As Géza Alföldy stated in the closing lecture of the International Congress of Rome in 1997, "our main role, that nobody else can play, is and will be, until new texts will be found, the publication of inscriptions". This "publication" can be of any kind and any format. In recent years, for many different reasons, we are going towards a more and more widespread use of digital publication, meaning both traditional editions made available digitally, and editions conceptualized and created digitally. But even if this will be the future of epigraphy, I wouldn't underestimate the value and the resistance of paper publications. They are less flexible and often more expensive, but they necessitate a slow and meditative reading. And this brings us back to the time and care that research requires, even in a moment when its goal seems only to be the quick collection of information, information that is easier to reach than ever before, but not always verified and reliable.

Finding all the known inscriptions online is a dream that maybe one day, not too far in the future, will come true, but the availability of the sources doesn't end the research. Only when an inscription

is read, if necessary, integrated, and, if possible, interpreted in its archaeological context can it become “a piece of history”, whether big or small. To do this, we must know Greek and Latin and ancient history, but it is not enough: special skills are needed to highlight the specific characteristics of epigraphic language and communication, a historical and philological knowledge that doesn't exclude more technical skills. A kind of knowledge that can be learned not only in front of a blackboard or sitting in a library, but also working in a kind of workshop, in the everyday direct practice with materials. A kind of knowledge that is going to be lost, and in some cases has already been lost, thanks to the growing rarity of university chairs specifically dedicated to Greek and Latin epigraphy all over the world.

The crisis or, better, the attack that in these years has affected the humanities in general, and the study of history in particular, involves above all the disciplines that are viewed and portrayed as less connected to the modern world, like ancient history and, even more, the sciences traditionally considered auxiliary, like papyrology and, of course, epigraphy.

In this scenario, I think that the role of epigraphers should be first of all to continue to cultivate, practice and teach a specific and valuable kind of knowledge, one that correctly reads and interprets primary sources and makes them available in historical research on ancient societies. A role not easy to play within the limits of the university systems and given the not very high consideration that epigraphic studies sometimes receive among the academic community. But a role that deserves to be defended despite all difficulties, given the importance that, as I have tried to show in these past minutes, epigraphic evidence has for scientific research and historical memory. A role that we must play with no sense of inferiority, but with passion and creativity and, above all, the certainty that neither the errors of the past nor the difficulties of the present will prevent us from taking the responsibility to dream about the future.