

# Retrieving Texts from Intentionally Erased Roman Epitaphs from Augusta Emerita (Mérida, Spain)

A. Alvar Ezquerra (U. Alcalá), J. Edmondson (York U.), L. A. Hidalgo Martín (C.C.M.M.), H. Pires (U. Porto), J. L. Ramírez Sádaba (U. Cantabria)





Figure 1 - The erased epitaphs: 1) CCMM inv. 158-00-3 (*NEFAE* 63, in press); 2) MNAR inv. 677 (*AE* 1983, 494) and 3) CCMM inv. 1502-43-1 (*NEFAE* 183, in press).

#### The research project

Part of the epigraphic corpus that is the subject of the ongoing research project "The new edition of CIL II. Conventus Emeritensis. 1. Augusta Emerita: urban *tituli sepulcrales*" is composed of damaged inscriptions that present serious difficulties of reading. Of a total of c. 1350 epitaphs known from the urban centre of Mérida (c. 1100 Roman and c. 250 Early Christian), almost 100 are in this condition. Much of the damage has been caused by natural erosion but in a few cases texts were deliberately erased. To recover the original texts, the project's research team has successfully tested a novel spatial analysis technique, Morphological Residual Modelling (M.R.M.), which it is currently applying to the study of all the damaged inscriptions. This poster discuss the results achieved with this new technique in a set of intentionally erased epitaphs from this corpus. Example 1 (CCMM inv. 158-00-3 = NEFAE 63, in press).

A large unmoulded plaque with the erasure of its entire text, though at different levels of intensity (Fig. 1.1 and Fig. 3). M.R.M. helps us to restore the reading of almost all the text, but with increasing difficulty as the text advances. The act of erasure may be associated with the reuse of this plaque, originally used for an epitaph set up in the Flavio-Trajanic period, in the construction of a later tomb in the same burial zone known as "El Disco".

#### Example 2 (MNAR inv. 677 = AE 1983, 494).

Two sections of a late Julio-Claudian epitaph commemorating four members of an extended family were intentionally erased (Fig. 1.2 and Fig. 4). The whole of line 5 was very thoroughly obliterated, such that even with the aid of M.R.M. it is impossible to restore its contents. From the rest of the text, we can infer that the name of the dedicator of the plaque was originally inscribed here, when he set it up to commemorate P. Varius Q.f. Ligur, Licinia C.l. Thelis, his parents-inlaw (socero, socrui), P. Varius P.f. Severus, his brother-in-law (socerino) and his wife, Varia P.f. Avita (*uxsori*). The second half of line 7 was erased with less intensity. M.R.M. requires us to reject all previously suggested readings and to restore here instead the formulas *d.s.f.c.* and *s.v.t.l.* The motivations for the erasures remain unclear, but may have resulted from a failure on the dedicator's part to follow through in paying for the burial and commemoration of his wife and her natal kin. In a second phase, the name Iulia Q.f. Severa (possibly the daughter of Varia Avita and the presumed dedicator, Q. Iulius ...) was inscribed (line 8), as well as the formulas *h.m.s.s.e.h.n.s.* (line 9) and *d.s.f.c.* (first in line 4, which was then lightly erased for uncertain reasons, and then definitively in line 2). From this we may infer that Severa ended up paying for the tomb and ensuring that the memory of her mother and her maternal kin would remain alive, unlike that of her father whose unworthy actions fully merited the obliteration of his memory.



FÜR GRIECHISCHE

**VINDOBONAE MMXVII** 

Figure 2 – Hypothetical sequence of erasure procedures based on traces from the cases studied. The thumbnails show examples of each phase, comparing the M.R.M. results (right) to conventional photographs (left).





#### Understanding the erasure technique

The sample selected for this case study is composed of three epitaphs carved in marble that present different levels of intentional damage (Fig. 1). While in some cases letters were just barely touched, in others they have been thoroughly eliminated from the stone monument. The diversity of traces of erasure found in this small sample led us to discuss and propose a comprehensive hypothesis for the technical procedure of removing the carved texts that, at the same time, helps to explain the enhanced readings that M.R.M. has allowed. The sequence shown in Figure 2 synthesizes this process with four main levels of damage. The first two levels correspond to the destruction of the physical traces of carved letters from the stone's surface: first the most prominent edges (A), then the remaining traces of the letters, including their inner edges (B). The last two levels concern the masking of the cavities with a bushhammered texture along the erased strip of text (C) and, finally, the removal of all traces by carving a new planar surface at a deeper level (D).

#### Morphological Residual Modelling

This technique employs high resolution 3D scanning data to enhance the visualization of subtle traces of lettering that may go unnoticed when using conventional inspection techniques. The classification algorithm is able to contrast and discretize morphological anomalies at micro-relief scale.

The results achieved with M.R.M. have permitted us to retrieve original characters even where severe damage was inflicted on the carved

### Example 3 (CCMM inv. 1502-43-1 = *NEFAE* 183, in press).

A marble plaque reused in the 4th c. CE for the commemoration of a wife, Eugenia, by her husband, Do[natus?] (Fig. 1.3 and Fig. 5). Thanks to the application of M.R.M., it is clear that the final line emphasized her Christian faith by the inclusion of the formula *in I(esu) Chr(isto)* and

Figure 3 – M.R.M. results for example 1, in colour (above) and grey scale (below).



Figure 4 – M.R.M. results for the erased lines in example 2.



surface, as in the level C cases and, to some extent, in those of level D (Fig. 2). The most reasonable explanation for these results comes from a character-oriented approach used by the craftsmen who damaged these stones. Rather than defining an area around the text to be erased and starting to excise it systematically from one end to another, they first removed the physical traces of letters (the actual grooves) and then deepened the adjacent areas until the cavities were no longer visible. Even in the most damaged portion of this sample, the fifth line of example 2, some letter patterns are still identifiable which indicate the use of such an approach. The traces revealed by the M.R.M. results do not belong to the original letters; instead they are the remains of the cavities left in place of the letters.

a Chi Rho / Chrismon. Later someone decided to erase just the last part of the text (lines 5-7). Since the rest of the inscription was left almost intact, one may suppose that religious motivations lay behind the expunging of all of the Christian elements in the text.

#### Acknowledgments

This research was financially supported by the Spanish Government (Grant FFI2014-59393-P, Ministerio de Economía y Competitividad). The authors would like to thank the Consorcio Ciudad Monumental de Mérida (CCMM) and the Museo Nacional de Arte Romano (MNAR) for their kind support during the course of this research.



Figure 5 – M.R.M. results (right) compared to the high-resolution digital surface model captured with 3D scanning technology (left) for example 3.

<u>Kontakt | contact details:</u>
A. Alvar Ezquerra (antonio.alvar@uah.es)
Universidad de Alcalá
Dep. Filologia, Comunicación y Documentación
C/ Trinidad, 5 - 28801 Alcalá de Henares, Madrid



Historisch-Kulturwissenschaftliche Fakultät

## HOLZHAUSEN DERVERLAG



ÖSTERREICHISCHE AKADEMIE DER WISSENSCHAFTEN