MAGISTER DISCIPVLIS H F: Using Funerary Epigraphy
with Intermediate Students of Latin

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The title of this paper should probably have been "How to kill a student's interest in Latin," or perhaps "Requiem for a would-be classics major." Many of my students when asked their opinion of my first epigraphy lessons would agree to that. Over time, however, these lessons developed into a parallel curriculum that brought unforeseen successes and joys to my intermediate students. I have used funerary epigraphy in a variety of ways with both school-level students and university-level students who were not pursing majors in classics. What follows is how I came to use it in my classrooms, but I should also like to address how, through the development and implementation of these activities, I came to appreciate some of the greater challenges in teaching intermediate students: both challenges in the classroom, within the timeless transaction between student and teacher, and challenges that we as a professional community share. The more I considered these, the more I developed these activities in response. They became units, and eventually almost a supplementary text. Students took to these strange activities and took pride in their nascent exploration of this normally exclusive skill-set. My high school enrollments doubled and my third- and fourth-year retention was the highest among the foreign languages. My principal, who had assured me that Latin would not last at our high school, was of course pleased and impressed by the students' dedication.

In time I introduced some of these to my university-level students. Their reaction was less exuberant than that of the high schoolers, but their approach to reading the language, and their understanding of Roman culture, both improved, to a surprising extent.

There could be several reasons for this. Students who are no longer beginners but not yet intermediates are often weary of the routine of the textbook-driven work. The novelty of early grammar and vocabulary acquisition has long worn off. The work of the language is now work, Hesiodic toil. A change, a new challenge is welcome. I probably could have brought in recipes from Apicius or instructions on building a Roman *castra*, and new life would have appeared in my classes as it did. Or perhaps it was because my own interest in teaching was reinvigorated, as I myself was no longer a new teacher and sensing the potential for the professional acquiescence that perennial routine can often bring. Maybe the routine of the textbook was affecting me, too. Experienced teachers and instructors know that students will generally respond positively to any enthusiasm displayed. Sometimes we need to get ourselves out of a rut. Both of these are entirely valid in this case. But what I saw happening was, I believe, more.

I'll begin now with an account of how I came to incorporate this into the classroom. At this point it would be less than professional to continue without stating that introducing funerary epigraphy to students at this level was not my invention. In the *Oxford Latin Course*, which was my school-level text at the time, examples of funerary epigraphy appear suddenly in the exercises in the back of the book late in the *Course*, without direct reference to the

ongoing narrative (the mostly accurate account of Horace's life) and without any explanation of what epigraphy is or what funerary customs were. The assignment is an abrupt change from a routine that has been developing for almost two years (or nearly two semesters). Students wonder why it's there. The inscriptions are provided transcribed, without any illustration or photograph of the original *stelae*, and are heavily glossed. Students need only connect the glossed phrases, and they've done their homework. Students wonder why it's there. And so do I.

My first response was to give the students a lecture about the importance of epigraphy in classical scholarship. I decided to speak to them about some of the great contributors in the history of classical scholarship and their use of epigraphical evidence. So I spoke to them about Theodor Mommsen and Ronald Syme, but they seemed unimpressed. This did not instill in my students a respect for the ancillary disciplines as I had hoped. How we have come to learn what we have learned was a course of inquiry that was foreign to them. Epigraphy, the discipline as well as the *stelae*, did not mean anything to them. They had no reason to consider it further; it had no bearing on their world.

Students in public schools today have been socialized in a constructivist institution. Unfortunately, Vygotskian principles of scaffolding central to constructivist curriculum and the best principles of constructivism itself have been misappropriated or misunderstood in modern curriculum development. What remains is an emphasis on student-centered, activity-oriented education. This is the classroom in which they have been trained to be students. While I was able to effect a somewhat different environment in my Latin classroom, I was too often reminded of this well instilled pattern: students want to be at the center of their learning activities and want to be able to relate new material to themselves immediately. And so, if epigraphy was to have its day in my classroom, I needed an activity.

Without immediate access to the *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*, I was grateful to discover the U.S. Epigraphy Project (http://usepigraphy.brown.edu) an online resource that I came to value more than any "teacher-oriented" site. At first, my intention was to make up for the transgression of my lecture and do a little "show & tell" of some inscriptions. In between two 504 meetings and a fire drill, I still had enough time in my prep period to print out three JPEGs of funerary inscriptions and make some overhead transparencies. In other words, this was hastily planned, not extensively considered and void of any clear rationale. The overhead transparencies of the inscriptions were intended to generate, at most, a five-minute discussion, but I was only just putting the third inscription on the overhead when the bell rang; a full fifty minutes passed. The students were engaged in a way that I had never seen from them (these were second-year students in their second semester; I had taught them since Latin I.) They wanted to know everything about the inscriptions. Who were these people? Where did the *stelae* or slabs come from? Who found the *stelae*? Where are they kept now? Why is the lettering so different on each one? Why would they abbreviate words when there is enough space on the line? Why had I not showed them this before?

Many of their questions were beyond my ability to answer. I am no epigrapher. And, as I said above, I had prepared these transparencies hastily. But I was curious why they were so interested in something that even few graduate students pursue. After several days of preparing a few overheads for each class (it became something of a routine), and seeing just how much they enjoyed that time, it seemed clear to me that I should provide some greater structure to this, or at least find a way to incorporate it into the structure of my curriculum.

First, I tried to understand the role of funerary epigraphy in the schema of grammar acquisition that I had so carefully planned.

Grammatically, the first funerary inscriptions showed were well beneath what the students were practicing in the text. Each inscription begins simply enough: DIS MANIBUS (SACRUM) "to the spirits of the dead," followed by the name of the deceased in the dative case, then a relative clause saying, at least, how long the deceased lived, perhaps some more information about the deceased, then the name of the person who is dedicating the stela, slab or urn in the nominative case, often with some reference to the person's relationship to the deceased, and finished with the H F, *hoc fecit*, "has dedicated this." (To see an example, click **here**; to see this example with others, see the **Appendix**.) Students are well able to translate such sentences before the close of their first semester. But it provided a welcome, alternate review to approaching a Latin sentence for reading at sight. Even after a week of reading inscriptions, there was a noticeable improvement in reading more conventional exercises in the text, especially among the students who typically were always a half-step behind the middle of the pack, the B- to C- students. How was this happening?

Well, we all have seen students approach Latin sentences as a code to be cracked. Students hunt for the verb, then a subject, if expressed, and then they try to make sense of all else in the sentence. Latin teachers often debate whether we should allow this pattern to assume habitual status, because early student success and understanding is important, or should we strike down this approach in order to teach what the dative or the ablative *really* are, on their own terms. One of my professors in graduate school held that the dative case always meant the same thing, and likewise the accusative, etc. While this may oversimplify the finer points of an inflected language's syntax, there is an attractive elegance to the approach. Latin teachers would certainly like students to adopt some of that understanding in order to be able to read a sentence as it comes to them, as native readers and writers of the language understood it. But to do so challenges the very core of their cognition.

For speakers of English, especially for monoglot anglophones, the mighty inertia of linguistic determinism remains no small obstacle. Students will naturally attempt to make sense of Latin in the only way they know how to make sense of anything, through SVO-primary reception, receiving information according to the Subject-Verb-Object patterns of their first language. Even the concept of pro-drop constructions, i.e. omitting the subject, if appropriate, is difficult for emergent readers of the language. Latin, of course, is principally SOV. For most students there is a cognitive barrier keeping them from becoming better readers of Latin. (Some become swift decoders of the language.) To change a student's approach to reading a simple Latin sentence is to challenge the very pattern of their thought.

Funerary epigraphy proved to be a valuable tool for encouraging new patterns of reading and understanding. The rigidly formulaic nature of the inscriptions removed any need for students to scan the words out of order. These inscriptions are complete sentences, I would remind them, and there was a verb. Once the structure of funerary epigraphy was internalized, students were comfortable with "taking it as it comes," a common instruction in my classroom. In sight-reading one more complex inscription on the overhead, a student admitted that he was lost in the relative clause and forgot what the main verb was. Another student, who was beginning to appreciate his own swift improvement in reading Latin, counseled his classmate saying, "Don't worry about the verb; it's just the F word." While this brought an impressive uproar of laughter to the class, the remark demonstrated a new

approach to reading the text. Sight-readings of conventional prose confirmed this. Lag-times, i.e. the "ummm, ahhh" time during which students rearrange the information coded in the Latin sentence into intelligible English sentences, diminished considerably. Students were now talking their way through the sentences, no longer fearing "unchaperoned ablatives," early-occurring datives, and, most significantly, not growing anxious about the lack of a noun or noun-phrase in the nominative case. Prepared translations improved as well. All seemed to be going well, but I knew that I had to implement something new while building on what they had already practiced. What to do next?

This solution was in the inscriptions themselves. Students were often surprised by occurrence of Greek names or *stelae* for infants or children, or *stelae* for Christians. So, I incorporated social history. Lesson components in this unit addressed the ethnic and linguistic diversity of the *Imperium Romanum*. We discussed other social issues like public health, infant mortality, trade and trades, patterns of economy, and the role of religious and cultic practices in Roman society. Though the JPEGs of the inscriptions I was downloading from the U.S. Epigraphy Project (http://usepigraphy.brown.edu) came from a very small area, generally from Rome and central Italy, they awakened in the students and interest in Roman history that exceeded gladiators and imperial depravity. But, despite my best efforts to keep the almost-obligatory unit on "weird emperors" out of my classroom, I could not do so for much longer.

That was when I decided that it was a good time for a project. I offered the students the opportunity to research a famous Roman from a list of Republican and Imperial notables, write a brief paper, and compose a funerary inscription for them. They of course could not refuse this offer. They actually accepted the assignment readily and seemed to enjoy the work. Their papers and inscriptions surprised me. They generally focused on these Romans as administrators and politicians. The discussions on the sociology of Rome gave them a context in which they were able to base subsequent inquiry. And, for once, no one chose Caligula or Nero.

I have since had the opportunity to expand my funerary epigraphy unit into a better-structured replacement for the textbook. Supplemented with selections of unedited classical Latin prose, these inscriptions allowed me to teach more about Roman history and Roman culture than the text alone permitted. Roman culture became the focus of study; Latin became a tool to do that better. Reading comprehension and reading speed improved, and fear of sight-reading vanished. I was pleased and the students were proud. I also used this with my university-level students. The one principal difference in implementation was timing: as soon as they were able to read sentences with relative clauses, I introduced funerary epigraphy in order to affect a new practice sooner. With late-adolescent or adult learners, decoding speed will be swifter, which instructors often confuse for reading fluency. Yet, the barriers to a deeper understanding of the language are still there. The proof is in the sight-reading. My university students enjoyed reading the inscriptions and were able to treat unedited prose sooner than previous cohorts that I had taught.

Of course, funerary epigraphy is not the limit of this vast resource. More properly, I have limited my classroom readings to epitaphs (there are funerary inscriptions more complex than these, often with verse included). When there is a greater variety of authentic inscriptions than this, and authenticity was my goal, why did I limit myself to epitaphs? The level of the student, and the connection to their text. These exercises were composed for

second-year high school students, most of whom were freshmen and sophomores. At the time, I decided to develop fluency and familiarity with the material, focusing on skill development, rather than to impress upon the student the breadth and variety of material, a tendency of my earlier teaching, I admit. Funerary epigraphy entered my classroom through happenstance more than design, as described above. Once there, it proved a wonderful yet effective diversion from the routine of the text. In the broader context of vertical curriculum development, I would introduce other types of inscriptions, e.g. curse tablets, dedicatory inscriptions, legal inscriptions, etc., in third and fourth year, and I have, when concurrent units on the ancillary disciplines stand well with readings in unedited texts. For the advanced beginner, or early intermediate student, a prolonged, focused study of a more limited scope proved itself expedient.

There is of course no shortage of scholarship on L2 reading practices, and within the Latin-teaching community there are several popular approaches, some more novel than sound. Among teachers, there is no shortage of opinion. Ask any Latinist his or her preferred textbook, and ask him/her why. The camps tend to divide between the grammar-translation approach of Wheelock, Jenney, and *Latin for Americans* and the reading method approach of the *Oxford Latin Course*, *Ecce Romani* or the *Cambridge Latin Course*. (Curiously, texts of considerable merit like Henle and Ørberg are seldom discussed, or even Traupman's *Latin Is Fun* series.) Yet, even once staking a position in one of the two camps, few teachers rarely seem completely satisfied with the text they use, finding all texts somewhat ignorant of what the needs of the classroom are. By developing these units on funerary epigraphy, I like to think that I have avoided this debate, instead allowing the authentic materials to teach themselves. I can think of no better way for transforming students from diminutive recipients of learning into true students of the language and the culture.

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Appendix:

How to find examples of funerary epigraphy

and bring them into the classroom

Some teachers may share the good fortune of university-level instructors who have access to a research library with resources such as the *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*. Many teachers, however, have only the Internet. While the catalog of inscriptions available online at Brown University's U.S. Epigraphy Project (http://usepigraphy.brown.edu) is not as extensive as the *CIL*, it grows continuously. At the time of publication of this article, a simple search for Latin epitaphs found in Italy yields 505 results, considerably more than when I first found this resource several years ago. (From the home page of the U.S. Epigraphy Project [http://usepigraphy.brown.edu] click on "Search the Inscriptions," then under "Inscriptions," choose "Language: Latin," "Place of Origin: Italy," "Type of Inscription: epitaph." You may further limit your search by date, material, type of object, and several other criteria.) There are also other types of inscriptions available on that site, not just epitaphs.

Of 505 inscriptions, how do I narrow it down? I first choose inscriptions that are simple: fairly legible, (nearly) complete, and not excessively deviant from the basic syntax of epitaphs, described above. Above all, I choose epitaphs that can be treated in five to fifteen minutes and serve my instructional goals: to develop and to reinforce contextual reading practices while raising students' confidence. Below are some examples. NB: The examples represent the type of inscription treated at each increment of progression. In other words, I present however many inscriptions of the level/type of Example 1 are necessary until I feel the class is ready to move to inscriptions like the one provided in Example 2, etc. In my classroom, only one inscription is treated each day.

A note on catalog numbers: In this article, U.S. Epigraphy Project numbers (http://usepigraphy.brown.edu) are used. The pages for each inscription also provide *CIL* numbers, and other catalogue or reference information as appropriate.

Example 1: http://usepigraphy.brown.edu/view.php?textID=KY.Lou.SAM.L.1929.17.310 is the sort of inscription I would start with. It is complete, quite legible, and it fits the pattern (http://usepigraphy.brown.edu/Pictures/Images/KY.Lou.SAM.L.1929.17.310.jpg). To present the inscription in class, I printed the JPEG and photocopied it onto a transparency. For those with reliable digital projection capabilities, it is far easier to make slide show or a PowerPoint presentation (I do this in my university classroom). Students observe the lack of *h(oc)*, which is mildly troubling at first ("I thought you said it was a pattern, Magister."), but they soon move beyond. It comes out in discussion that FEC does not always represent *fecit*, but that context here leads the reader to *fecerunt*. Students learn to trust context, to trust the expectations developing as they read, rather than to rely solely on what is or is not written.

<u>Example 2</u>: Other inscriptions are chosen for their minor deviations on the formulaic norm, e.g. KY.Lou.SAM.L.1929.17.398:
http://usepigraphy.brown.edu/view.php?textID=KY.Lou.SAM.L.1929.17.398 .

In class, I would allow the students some time to transcribe what they see and put some thought to the inscription. New vocabulary (new for students in the *Oxford Latin Course*) is found in VERNAE and a new abbreviation in B M, which when found in the same clause as *fecit/fecerunt* represents *bene merenti(bus)*. Students will observe the position of FEC and the lack of a *h(oc)*. They may also observe the ruling and the general attention to symmetry.

<u>Example 3</u>: After the students have had some practice, I find it effective to introduce some inscriptions that are less legible (especially when transferred to an overhead transparency) and compel students to think critically about what may be expected in an inscription. NY.NY.NYU.L.25   (http://usepigraphy.brown.edu/Pictures/Images/NY.NY.NYU.L.25-Det.1.jpg) offers students a complete inscription, with less abbreviated abbreviations, but also the challenge of PLVS MINVS, which students often resolve without coaching. With inscriptions such as these, I find myself teaching in a more passive role, affirming what the students are beginning to find for themselves.

<u>Example 4</u>: I particularly enjoy watching students work through MD.Balt.JHU.L.24 (http://usepigraphy.brown.edu/view.php?textID=MD.Balt.JHU.L.24). On first sight, they observe the precision and apparent attention to detail and presentation. My first response is, "Looks can be deceiving." I remind them to transcribe the whole inscription before translating. Soon, the problem is isolated. "Magister, what case is EPAGATHO? Is that some weird Greek genitive?" I respond, "EPAGATHVS SERVVS is not a weird Greek nominative." And then we discuss erroneous attraction. ("A lot of people are doing it, *discupuli*.") Many students will then emend the reading of EPAGATHO to *Epagathi*. The experience of reading an inscription like this raises both their critical acumen and confidence.

<u>Example 5</u>: "Is KY.Lou.SAM.L.1929.17.338 (http://usepigraphy.brown.edu/view.php?textID=KY.Lou.SAM.L.1929.17.338) a complete sentence?"

What follows is an interesting discussion. Some students assert that it is not, for obvious reasons. Others argue that supplied context and precedent make it a complete sentence. Both *factiones*, appreciate each other's argument. I remind them that dialogue functions in a similar fashion, proceeding within a contextual framework and assuming an economy of expression. When presenting such inscriptions, I follow up with a class reading that contains dialogue. One student named this exercise the "Take it as it comes and don't hunt for the verb at the end anymore" day.

<u>Example 6</u>: To reinforce the point that the inscription in Example 5 is not the only one with an error, I present KY.Lou.SAM.L.1929.17.315

(http://usepigraphy.brown.edu/view.php?textID=KY.Lou.SAM.L.1929.17.315).   The
PETRONIo always draws a chuckle.

Example 7: After the experience of the above, students are ready to take on partial
inscriptions, such as KY.Lou.SAM.L.1929.17.557:

http://usepigraphy.brown.edu/view.php?textID=KY.Lou.SAM.L.1929.17.557.

Students note immediately that the *M* of D M is missing. They also note the new (to them)
variation of the dedicator's name preceding the name of the dedicatee. Students can
reconstruct GEMINIAE with little difficulty, after which I ask, "What other words would you
expect to find if it were complete?" I then instruct them to complete the inscription on their
own. Whatever fictional details they choose to add does not matter so long as they are in the
correct form and the word *filiae* or *sorori* is among them.

Example 8: Another largely complete epitaph that provides students more reinforcing
practice is MD.Balt.JHU.L.94:

http://usepigraphy.brown.edu/view.php?textID=MD.Balt.JHU.L.94.

Worthy of note are the –ABVS endings (not seen every day in the second-year classroom) and
VICTORIE for *Victoriae*. As above, I encourage students to complete the inscription.

The above examples comprise an introduction to funerary epigraphy. Further
exploration of the subject could treat epitaphs that differ from the standard formula, e.g.
soldiers' epitaphs and epitaphs for Christians, examples of which may be found at the same
website. There are also more complex epitaphs or epitaphs found in literary contexts. Of
course, after such an introduction to epigraphy, other types of inscriptions, or graffiti, may
be explored. This is only a beginning.

Additional Resources for further reading on Latin Epigraphy, online and in-print:

Online:

Introduction to Greek and Latin Epigraphy: An Absolute Beginner's Guide
(http://odur.let.rug.nl/~vannijf/epigraphy1.htm). It looks sparse, but click on the asterisks
for a range of topics to help the beginner and "remind" the Latinist who is not a specialist in
epigraphy.

The reference page on the website of the American Society of Greek and Latin Epigraphy
(http://asgle.classics.unc.edu/newlinks/ref.html#section139)   provides   an   annotated
collection of links to sites on topics ranging from help with abbreviations to bibliographies
of in-print resources and to tangent disciplines, e.g. onomastics and prosopography.

In-print:

Bodel, John, ed. *Epigraphic Testimony: Ancient History from Inscriptions.* Routledge: London, 2001. A well-reviewed collection of essays discussing the role of epigraphy in the study ancient history as well as some epigraphical methodologies.

Degrassi, Attilio, ed. *Inscriptiones Latinae Liberae Rei Publicae,* vols. 1-2. Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1957-1963. *ILLRP* is a standard fixture of the well-furnished library for classical research.

Dessau, Herman, ed. *Inscriptiones Latinae Selectae,* vols.1-3, in 5 parts. Weidmann: Berlin, 1892-1916. *ILS* is another standard. Dessau presents a representative range of Latin inscriptions in a form that is somewhat more accessible, and less complete, than the *CIL.*

Gordon, Arthur. *Illustrated Introduction to Latin Epigraphy.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983. A well-regarded introduction to Latin epigraphy that is often used in university courses on the subject.

Keppie, Lawrence. *Understanding Roman Inscriptions.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991. A handy aid for Latinists of all abilities, with inscriptions of various types discussed in their historical and social context (and abbreviations explained).