

From Scavenger Hunt to Scholarly Resource:  
Constructing a Database of Latin and  
Greek Inscriptions in Sewanee

The University of the South—colloquially known as Sewanee, after the name of the small Tennessee town in which it is located—boasts a long tradition of engagement with Classics, both inside the classroom as well as out. From epitaphs in the university cemetery, to honorary dedications in Convocation Hall, to quotations from the Bible in the chapel and from Virgil in a fraternity house, an extensive number of inscriptions in Greek and Latin is to be found all around campus. As can be imagined, one comes across these *disiecta membra* in a rather haphazard way. The purpose of the project which is the subject of this talk is to collect and catalogue this assortment of inscribed texts into an online database, with the goal of transforming what has been something of a local scavenger hunt into a legitimate scholarly resource of epigraphical material.

To a certain extent, this work has been underway for some time: in 1972, a graduating Classics major named Forest Dillon published a small pamphlet entitled *Latin and Greek as Used at Sewanee* in which a number of these older inscriptions were assembled and translated. It is worth noting that, around the same time, a catalogue of this sort had been carried out by classicist Mason Hammond for the Latin, Greek, and Hebrew inscriptions at Harvard University. Thirty years later, Reginald Adams would do the same for Oxford. Our project consists not just in digitizing the substance of Dillon's work for Sewanee and supplementing it with newer inscriptions, but also in adding high-resolution pictures as well as explanatory material and further commentary. (An introduction to the website, with reflection on the inspiration for his original work, has been written by Dillon himself, now in his seventies). Although hampered by

the Covid-19 pandemic and lock-down, the process of cataloguing, recording, and commenting on Sewanee's Latin and Greek inscriptions has been ongoing now for several years, as numerous students in introductory and intermediate language classes worked on specific on-campus inscriptions. During the summer of 2023, the collection of this vast number of individual efforts was overhauled and remodeled as an accessible digital resource.

Our talk will describe the challenges of imposing a coherent design onto this accumulated set of materials and devising a user-friendly style of presentation. We will also demonstrate how the website works, as well as discuss some of the advantages of going from a print source to a digital format. In addition, we will highlight particular inscriptions from the collection that demonstrate the nature of Sewanee's particular "epigraphic habit," to use the phrase of ancient historian Ramsay MacMullen: this runs the gamut from the ubiquitous use of the university motto, *Ecce Quam Bonum* (from Psalm 133/132 Vulgate), to a rather learned depiction of a Linear B tablet in one of the stained glass windows of All Saints Chapel, to the comic invocation of the fake Latin maxim *illegitimi non carborundum est* in the gymnasium and the graveyard.

Finally, we plan to outline some larger ambitions for this digital humanities project, both as a way of illuminating the use of Greek and Latin in our local setting as well as providing a template for the online display of inscriptions as found on other college campuses. We hope to raise larger questions about the uses to which such Classical inscriptions in American academic culture have been put, and how they communicate exclusivity, in both negative and positive senses of the word. With these ambitions in mind, we see our database as elevating the consideration of local epigraphy from the level of idiosyncratic curiosity to a tool for investigating a particular area of Classical reception.

## Bibliography

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