

## Maternal Mortality on Roman Inscriptions: The Absent Voices of Non-Elite Women

Maternal mortality in the ancient Roman world is receiving increased scholarly attention, with studies examining its impact on women and their families (Carroll 2018; Huebner and Ratzan 2021; Freidin 2024). Hemelrijk (2021) includes several inscriptions commemorating women who died in childbirth, and Kruschwitz (2015) has observed that traumatic narratives about maternal mortality could be controlled through poetic verse on inscriptions. The ways in which inscriptions present the perspectives of women when referencing maternal mortality deserves further study. This paper will analyze inscriptions that were written to incorporate the absent voices of deceased women (including women of lower social status) who died in childbirth or witnessed the dangers of birth firsthand. I argue that while these inscriptions draw attention to women's perspectives, they are also literary constructs, reminding readers of the painful absence of the genuine voices of the women commemorated on the monuments.

Several inscriptions begin with text in the first person that tells the woman's story, then shift to the voice of a third-person narrator who places her words in the context of the funerary monument. For example, an inscription honoring a woman named Veturia who gave birth six times and died in childbirth (*CIL* III 3572 = *CLE* 558; discussed in detail by Freidin 2024), includes text written as if it were in her voice along with a dedication by her husband. Dedicators employed conventions of the epigraphic habit, including usage of Greek to reflect the culture of the deceased on bilingual funerary inscriptions (Adams 2003), and the use of verse for content focusing on the character of the deceased followed by prose for particulars about their identity (Schmidt 2015). A switch from Greek to Latin, or from poetry to prose, breaks the illusion of the woman's voice, reminding readers of its absence. A bilingual Roman inscription begins with Greek text representing the words of a mother, who states that due to the will of the fates, she

and her affectionate daughter lie together in the tomb (*CIL* VI 10971 = *CIL* VI 34034 = *CLE* 442 = *CIG* 6285 = *IG* XIV 1983 = *IGUR* III 1147 = EDR108736). While the mother seems to accept her own death bravely in the Greek text, the Latin inscription that follows encourages the reader to reflect on the unfairness of the tragedy.

Another inscription includes a section in Greek verse written in the voice of a midwife, likely a freedwoman (Hemelrijk 2021), who says that although she saved the lives of many women, she could not escape from the fates (*IGUR* 1240). While this part of the inscription is written as if the honoree were speaking, the inscription then shifts to the perspective of her husband. As the husband remembers his wife, he commemorates her work to prevent maternal mortality, highlighting the danger that it posed to numerous women.

An inscription fabricating the voice of a slave who died in childbirth places more emphasis on how her death impacted the men around her (her husband, her master, and the son who survived her) (*CIL* VIII 24734 = *CLE* 2115). Verse written as if it were in her voice explains that her master had wanted to free her husband before she died but had not done so in time. It alludes to the grief of her husband and asks who will now care for her son. A prose narration then states that the deceased lived for twenty-five years. The lack of attention to the woman's own perspective in this inscription, partially written as if it were in her own voice, reflects her status as a female slave within a hierarchical and patriarchal society.

While the epigraphic medium provided a powerful way to raise awareness of maternal mortality, as women seemingly told their own stories, these monuments are clearly subjective and influenced by the perspectives of the dedicators. The absence of the true voices of the women who died in childbirth or experienced the dangers firsthand is a powerful reminder of how the perspectives of non-elite women are underrepresented in the epigraphic record.

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