

## Voices from Below – An Epigraphic Approach to Teaching Petronius’ *Satyricon*

As a Roman archaeologist, I approach Latin through a material culture lens. When I started teaching Petronius’ *Satyricon* in 2015 as an intermediate level introduction to Latin prose, epigraphy offered a natural vehicle for combining textual and material evidence. Introducing epigraphy to a Latin classroom is not a new idea (e.g. Beasom and Kvapil 2007); however, language teaching generally continues to focus on grammar-translation or reading-first approaches applied to the traditional canon of Roman historical and literary texts (Carpenter 2006). Epigraphy offers a valuable pedagogical resource for developing language skills through the translation of original texts, increasing engagement through student-centered activities, and emphasizing the rich diversity of the Roman world through authentic non-elite voices. This paper outlines my methods for incorporating epigraphy as a core element in teaching Petronius with the aim of inspiring discussion on how a more interdisciplinary approach to language learning might benefit our students — and Classics programs more broadly.

The frequency and variety of contexts in which inscriptions appear in Petronius’ *Satyricon* reflect a rise in literacy and the development of the “epigraphic habit” in Roman culture during the 1<sup>st</sup> c CE, which offered marginalized groups like freedmen and slaves new forms of self-representation (e.g. Nelis-Clément & Nelis 2005; Beltrán Lloris 2014). The *Cena Trimalchionis* contains the largest number of references to inscriptions (No. 31), starting at Trimalchio’s front door where the narrator Encolpius views a plaque policing slaves’ movement (28.7). Just inside the entrance, a realistic painting of a guard dog with a *cave canem* warning meant to deter trespassers startles Encolpius (29.1). On his way through the house, the narrator inspects a series of fresco scenes *cum titulis* that record Trimalchio’s ascendant career (29.3) and, attached to the dining room door, he reads a slave’s honorific inscription to his master (30.2-3)

and a tablet gratuitously announcing Trimalchio's dinner dates (30.3-4). When the hors d'oeuvres are finally served, Encolpius notes that the silver dishes are engraved with their weight and owner's name (31.10) while the Falernian wine is conspicuously displayed in amphorae with inscriptions attesting to its incredible age (36.6). These texts within the text not only offer a convenient excuse to introduce students to Latin epigraphy, they are important for contextualizing and interpreting the themes in the novel.

Accordingly, I start the semester with an 'Introduction to Latin Epigraphy' lecture followed by a three-week grammar and syntax review that incorporates practice inscriptions from M. Hartnett's *By Roman Hands* (2012) to build confidence in translating epigraphic texts. When we arrive at the "Table Talk" section (*Sat.* 41-46) in G. Lawall's *Petronius* (1995), I assign students an original epigraphic text commissioned for or by freedmen/women in Rome in the 1<sup>st</sup> c AD when the novel was likely composed. Using an epigraphy resource packet of my own design, students are responsible for expanding, translating, and analyzing their text. The assignment exercises language skills, but also requires the student to consider how freedmen's epigraphic self-representation compares to Petronius's depiction of this group (and their epigraphic habit) in his text, balancing the author's elite viewpoint with authentic voices from below. In the process, students are encouraged to reflect on the anxieties caused by clashing social groups and upward social mobility that underlie Petronius' work. While translating "Trimalchio's Tomb and Funeral" (*Sat.* 71-78), students design tombstones complete with a Latin epitaph in the rhetorical style of Trimalchio's character. While the composition challenges them to consider Latin grammar and syntax from a different angle, they must also demonstrate basic epigraphic skills. Like Roman freedmen in text and society, students - who enjoy the

hyper-personalization of the assignment - are invited to actively engage epigraphy in the construction and promotion of their own social identities.

Encouraged by the success of this approach, which is reflected in students' evaluations and diagnostic scores, I have started integrating epigraphy into our broader Latin curriculum. I now introduce epigraphy earlier in my elementary Latin courses and this spring I will be offering a Latin epigraphy workshop for advanced students for the first time.

#### Bibliography

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