

## The Epigraphic Culture(s) of Late Antiquity

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### *Introduction*

Recent decades have been marked by a profound re-evaluation of the history and archaeology of Late Antiquity. Archaeological excavations, the reinterpretation of texts, as well as a more vigorous engagement with theoretical and methodological debates, have greatly improved our knowledge of different aspects of the late antique world. These developments have led to important attempts at synthesis, proposing new interpretative models and frameworks, and contributing to a renewed debate about the very nature and specificity of the late antique world. Our knowledge of late antique epigraphy has also experienced important advances, from the enthusiastic adoption of new technologies to the incorporation of new questions and research agendas. Although these developments have made a significant contribution to the scholarly understanding of the period, there is still a need for a comprehensive assessment of their impact on our understanding of late antique epigraphy in itself, as a specific field of enquiry.

The aim of this workshop was to discuss, from an interdisciplinary perspective, the epigraphic culture(s) in Late Antiquity, considering the physical, historical, and cultural context of late antique inscriptions. The editing and publication of inscriptions is often concerned with one single monument or text, sometimes with a small group, and the issues raised by these documents do not usually lead to a broader perspective. This conference sought to address the need for such a wider approach, from the point of view of epigraphists, historians, and archaeologists.

### *Papers*

The first section was dedicated to general overviews of the epigraphic habit in the later

Roman Empire, in the East and West. The papers were concerned with quantitative and qualitative issues concerning late antique inscriptions, as well as with the problem of how to define „late antique“ epigraphy as different from „early imperial“. The session was opened by CHRISTIAN WITSCHER (Heidelberg). As the author showed, there were enormous differences among the provinces of the West, with areas where the epigraphic habit did continue in the 4th and 5th centuries in a highly visible (though changed) fashion (such as Africa or southern Italy) and others where it had virtually vanished (as in parts of Gaul). And yet, even among such diversity there was a general trend towards smaller numbers of inscriptions. Such decrease in numbers should not obscure the fact that quantitative analyses pose a number of methodological problems, most crucially that of dating inscriptions (especially funerary monuments). Besides, it is possible to observe the development of different epigraphic cultures in different provinces of the Empire. The rise of Christianity was also a fundamental development, as it fostered new contexts for the display of tituli like churches or Christian cemeteries. Similar issues were tackled by CHARLOTTE ROUECHÉ (London), who approached the topic from a more conceptual point of view. The establishment of late antique epigraphy as a field of studies was a relatively late development, and it was directly connected to the publication of photographs of epigraphic texts. This is because the visual aspects of inscriptions were one of the defining elements that characterised it as late antique. Late antique inscriptions were only a small part of the urban epigraphic landscapes of the East, as these are dominated by early imperial texts. Although still important, inscriptions played a different role in late antique urban life, and in order to understand this role we must consider both differences in what they have to say as well as in how they say it (as in verse inscriptions, for example).

The second section aimed at discussing inscriptions in their physical and social contexts. The re-use of inscriptions was one of the features identified in the first session as characteristic of late antique epigraphy, and CARLOS MACHADO (São Paulo/Heidelberg) re-

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turned to this question in his paper. The practice of dedicating statues remained important in Italian cities until the mid and late 5th century, and many of these monuments were erected bases which had been produced in previous periods. This involved all types of dedications, and in some cases the dowel holes on top of the bases (where bronze statues were fitted) suggest that the statues were not changed. This practice indicates important changes in the relationship between the inscriptions and the monuments they referred to. The political and institutional context of inscriptions was discussed by DENIS FEISEL (Paris). The epigraphic record of eastern Roman cities attests to the vitality of municipal institutions and offices for a large part of the late antique period. *Curatores* and *defensores civitatis* are attested to in different cities, and the same is true for the case of the new institution of the *pater civitatis*. The case of Maximus of Stratonicea is particularly instructive with regard to local benefactors. The relationship between official function and inscriptions was the subject of the paper „*Discorsi su pietra: oratoria ed epigrafia nel Tardo Impero*“ by SILVIA ORLANDI and MARA PONTISSO (Rome). The continuity of older features of honorific inscriptions, such as the emphasis on the *cursus honorum*, the variety of honours, as well as social and political values celebrated, is well exemplified by a titulus recently discovered during inventory works at Palazzo Venezia, Rome. Continuity, in this case, was accompanied by important changes, be it the language or the style of the message. The context for the setting up and display of inscriptions (especially mosaic inscriptions) in churches was approached in a comparative way by RUDOLF HAENSCH (Munich). Church inscriptions are a prominent example of late antique epigraphy, not only for their Christian content, but also for their ecclesiastical setting. There were important similarities but also noticeable differences between this practice in Italy and in the East, especially in terms of the language employed.

The third section consisted of regional studies: JUDITH VÉGH (Heidelberg) discussed the relationship between epigraphic cultures and Christianization in late antique Spain. With regard to the diffusion of Christian in-

scriptions within Spain there was a wide geographic diversity, with a few regions (especially in Baetica and Tarraconensis) and cities (provincial capitals) producing the majority of the *tituli*. Christianity played an important role in the late antique epigraphic culture of Hispania, be it in terms of the language of these inscriptions, physical setting, or content of the message. The same can be observed in the case of late antique Gaul, especially Gallia Narbonensis, analysed by LENNART HILDEBRAND (Heidelberg). In this case, the quantitative decline from early imperial times was quite pronounced (although not as strong as in Aquitania): We have 621 inscriptions late antique inscriptions, i.e. approximately seven per cent of the number of *tituli* known from the high imperial period. This decline was almost total in the case of „civic inscriptions“, at a time when funerary epigraphy took the lion's share. The evidence available is however biased by the fact that some cities (like Vienne) were more extensively excavated than others. IGNAZIO TANTILLO (Rome) considered the late antique epigraphic habit in Africa. Inscriptions have played a major role in modern discussions of late Roman Africa, especially since the work of Claude Lepelley on the late antique cities. Building inscriptions, for instance, give the clear impression that there were strong continuities in the upkeep of the urban infrastructure, and the same is the case with dedications of statues. A large number of late antique inscriptions comes from the well excavated city of Lepcis Magna which enables us to see *tituli* in their original context. In this case, it is possible to notice the widespread practice of re-use of older inscriptions and statue bases, as well as the disappearance of members of the local elite from the epigraphic record in favour of governors and emperors. The case of the East was studied by STEPHEN MITCHELL (Exeter) and LEAH DI SEGNI (Jerusalem). In the case of Asia Minor, the evidence is too scattered and poor to allow us to reconstruct a clear and coherent picture of the epigraphic culture of the whole area in late antiquity, although it is clear that there was an important break in terms of numbers of dedication around 300 A.D. In the case of Palaestina and Arabia, although

the area shared a common cultural and political history in Late Antiquity, its epigraphic record again shows remarkable regional diversity. There are a few trends that can be observed in general, however: the (comparatively high) number of Greek inscriptions peaked in the 6th century, at a time when its number was decreasing in most other parts of the East. Epitaphs represented a large proportion of all the inscriptions available, especially east of the Jordan. And yet, church and civic inscriptions remained important, especially when compared with other parts of the Empire. Another important trend was the shift from cities to villages as main focus of epigraphic activity.

As the regional studies showed, there was enormous diversity of epigraphic cultures (as well as material culture in general) within the limits of the later Roman Empire. This diversity was chronological as well as geographic. The quantitative decline that can be observed for the Empire as a whole did not take place in all provinces in the same way or rhythm. It is crucial to consider qualitative aspects as well, and perhaps the most important factor in this respect was the advent of Christianity and the development of new epigraphic articulations inspired by this religious change. CLAIRE SOTINEL (Paris) therefore addressed the question of „How Christian is Christian Epigraphy?“. Most studies assume a divide between Christian and traditional epigraphy. It is important to consider, however, that the two did not exist in isolation. In many cases it is not possible to tell from the outset whether a given *titulus* should be regarded as Christian (and in what sense) or not. It is thus not easy to define „Christian epigraphy“ as a specific genre, and even if it were this terminology would not be very useful. Inscriptions set up by Christians should be considered as part of late antique epigraphy in general, and not as a separated subset. Inscriptions set up by Christians in specifically Christian contexts could perform the same functions as more traditional honorific inscriptions, as LUCY GRIG (Edinburgh) observed in her paper. Members of the late Roman elite adopted metrical inscriptions as a particular medium for self-display. They asserted the cultural capital and identity of

these men, in a way that was shared by members of the clergy, Christian aristocrats and pagans alike.

#### *Conclusion*

As the papers presented in this conference have shown, late antique epigraphy should be considered as a field of study of its own, with its specific contexts, materiality or techniques of carving inscriptions. Roueché argued for the importance of the use of photographic records in the development of late antique epigraphy, even in the possibility of identifying an inscription as late antique. This is particularly important when we consider the use of non-verbal signs associated to texts, and especially the widespread practice of re-using materials such as statue-bases, discussed by Machado. This makes it all the more important to adopt strategies of online publishing, such as the Inscriptions of Aphrodisias and initiatives such as EDH and Epigraphic Database Rome (EDR) which combine the text of inscriptions with detailed information on their material, design and content and also provide a photographic documentation. Collections of these kind allow scholars to form a comprehensive picture (including a quantitative analysis) of late antique epigraphy, a point argued in Witschel's overview of western inscriptions. Contextuality is another key issue, as is particularly visible in the case of Lepcis Magna (Tantillo). Regional and chronological diversity as well as different spatial and physical contexts are among the elements that mark these late antique epigraphic cultures as different from their early imperial counterparts (a point discussed in the papers of Végé, Hildebrand, and Di Segni, among others).

The publication of new and old inscriptions should be pursued with due consideration of the wider context in which these monuments were produced, both locally (Orlandi and Pontisso) and in a wider sense (Haensch). Late antique inscriptions are also a crucial source for administrative structures, as Feissel showed in his analysis of civic institutions in the Greek East. The general decline in numbers of inscriptions, however, represents an important limitation for our understanding of late antique history and society (a point emphasized by Mitchell). However, although

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quantitative issues must remain important, it is to qualitative issues that we must turn if we want to understand the specificity of late inscriptions. Form, support, and context are in this case of crucial importance. Changes in mentality and especially the advent of Christianity also played an important part, redefining the very message and meaning of these texts. Sotinel and Grig reaffirmed the importance of abolishing the modern divide between „Christian“ and „secular“ epigraphy, in favor of a more coherent and comprehensive view of the epigraphic cultures of Late Antiquity.

**Conference overview:**

*I The Late Antique Epigraphic Habit in the Western and Eastern Parts of the Roman Empire – Quantitative and Qualitative Aspects*

Christian Witschel (Heidelberg): „Spätantike Inschriftenkulturen im Westen des Imperium Romanum – ein Überblick“

Charlotte Roueché (London): „Late Antique Inscriptions in the East: Evidence and Problems“

*II Late Antique Inscriptions in their Social and Physical Context*

Carlos Machado (São Paulo/Heidelberg): „Dedicated to Eternity? The Re-Use of Statue Bases in Late Antique Italy“

Dennis Feissel (Paris): „Elites et magistratures municipales dans l'épigraphie proto-byzantine“

Silvia Orlandi and Mara Pontisso (Rome): „Discorsi su pietra: oratoria ed epigrafia nel Tardo Impero“

Rudolf Haensch (Munich): „Zwei unterschiedliche epigraphische Praktiken: Kirchenbauinschriften in Italien und im Nahen Osten“

*III Regional Studies*

Judith Végh (Heidelberg): „Inskriptenkultur(en) und Christentum im spätantiken Hispanien“

Lennart Hildebrand (Heidelberg): „Die Entwicklung der spätantiken Epigraphik Südgalliens – Inschriften als Indikator für

gesellschaftliche Veränderungen?“

Ignazio Tantillo (Rome): „Some Observations on the Evolution of the Epigraphic Habit in Late Roman Africa (with special reference to Tripolitania)“

Stephen Mitchell (Exeter): „The Epigraphy of Asia Minor in Late Antiquity“

Leah Di Segni (Jerusalem): „Late Antique Epigraphy in the Provinces of Palaestina and Arabia: Realities and Change“

*IV The New World of Christian Epigraphy*

Claire Sotinel (Paris): „How Christian is Christian Epigraphy?“

Lucy Grig (Edinburgh): „Cultural Capital and Christianization: the Metrical Inscriptions of Late Antique Rome“

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