

# CARMEN: Communal Art – Reconceptualising Metrical Epigraphy Network

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## Is this poetry?

“Meat and pastries, fellow-townsmen, if you ask for them, will be distributed at noon. If you are too late or lazy (to ask at the indicated time) you will complain.” *Mulsum crustula, municeps, petenti / in sextam horam dividuntur horam. / De te tardier aut piger quereris.* (CLE 1506 = CIL X 5884) Is this poetry? The answer seems obvious; no! Neither my uninspired translation nor the content and rhythm of the Latin text have anything artful or ‘poetic’. The author of this rhythmic announcement, Lucius Pacuvius Severus, was a wealthy and educated man in Ferentinum, a medium-sized city in Italy in the second century CE. The name of the benefactor and the context of elections and offices is obvious from a second inscription on the same stone. However, it remains a mystery why he had not just chosen a prosaic announcement, like tapas at lunchtime, or free beer at noon, don’t miss it!

“Fortune promises many things to many people, but it keeps none. Live for the day and the hour, for nothing

is yours.” *Fortuna spondet multa multis, praestat nemini. / Vive in dies et horas, nam proprium est nihil.* (CLE 185 = CIL VI 24563) The Latin text is as rhythmic as the announcement above. It is part of an epitaph for a woman called Prima, who probably died young in the city of Rome. Texts like these could also be modern (a little depressing this one ...). They resemble folk sayings and proverbs. It makes sense that such texts are often formulated in verse, which increases memorability in all languages, modern or ancient.

The two ‘poems’ are not the most exquisite examples, but they are exemplary in terms of poetic quality and context. Especially funerary inscriptions are numerous in which relatives, friends or the deceased chose a poetic style. The project introduced in this paper bears the fitting acronym CARMEN (song, poem), abbreviating the title of “Communal Art: Reconceptualising Metrical Epigraphy Network”. A generous EU Horizon 2020 funding gives 11 PhD students and eight PIs the opportunity to spend time with many thousands of such texts. They give access to a world of social interactions

and personal preferences, of emotions and proud self-presentation not visible in most of the literary elite-dominated text compositions or the short, often formulaic documents as Latin and Greek inscriptions and papyri. The latter media have also provided us with private letters, which offer exciting insights into the lives of social classes and different groups; but unlike the metrical inscriptions that our innovative training network (ITN) examines, letters were not intended for the public, and thus did not carry the claim of wanting to please other readers as well—or at least to catch the eye of others. Our team is fortunate to work on and with the cultural heritage and material legacy of the ancient European world and that of the neighbouring countries of the Mediterranean. Many of these inscribed objects still exist, though often a bit damaged if not split into pieces. Some of them are exhibited in museums, and others are no longer extant but were seen, illustrated and described by scholars of the fourteenth to nineteenth centuries. The following presents a short overview of the objectives, the structure, the subjects and the methods of CARMEN.

## What is poetry?

Broadly speaking, poetry can be defined as a literary composition characterised by artful and rhythmic use of language. However, there is hardly a genre of Greek and Latin texts that has not spared the use of the metre—from epics about heroic deeds and hymns to gods and goddesses to agricultural guidebooks and medical recipes. In the Roman period, epic poems, love elegies or satires were the prevailing genres in metre. Vergil and Martial, Horace and Propertius and others like Ovid had been and still are guiding stars of poetry lovers. At least some of the verses of these authors are cited or recycled in the material we are researching. Rarely, versified inscriptions, such as the two cited previously, were written by professional poets. Most of the authors of the inscribed *carmina* in the Latin language (*carmina Latina epigraphica*) were amateurs who implemented the verse metre defined and refined by the professionals. They sometimes mastered alliteration, played with metaphorical expressions or even adapted the use of sound symbolism. More importantly, however, they created poetic styles of their own.

Modern societal discourses and debates about ‘wokeness’ have sensitised ancient historians, classical philologists and archaeologists have drawn attention to whether our perceptions, definitions and judgements about textual and visual art are shaped by ‘classical’ and exclusive, if not to say imperialistic traditions of our European past. Present-day insights into such effects have opened perspectives for the investigation of the past, including its poetic expressions. Among these are the Latin inscribed *carmina* constituting a corpus of some 4000 metrical texts and poems. Inscribed in public or on movable objects made of durable materials such as stone, these poems are the most important source for our understanding of communal art in the Roman world. They are attested in the Roman Empire from at least the early third century BCE to late antiquity in an unbroken tradition that continues into the early Middle Ages and beyond. This evidence of texts



captures not only the voices of members of the elites but also those of sub-elites and even more humble individuals who are mostly unheard. It covers the entire geographical extent of the Roman Empire and provides the earliest examples of local poetic expression in Latin for European and North African societies.

### Research on publicly exposed Latin poetry

Using the potential of our contemporary discourse on visual arts and poetry, our team applies the understanding of the values of diversity to those parts of ancient Rome's verbal expressions that were publicly exposed. This kind of poetry could be produced by many and consumed by (nearly) everybody, one of the important issues which greatly motivates our doctoral students (Early Stage Researchers = ESRs). CARMEN trains ESRs to face challenges in researching ancient and understanding modern popular culture, protecting cultural heritage and becoming aware of diverse forms of expression. Studying poetry in Latin epigraphy helps us to regain an eminent body of European folk-art tradition. This fascinating publicly exposed poetry (*carmina epigraphica*) combines verbal art forms and material manifestations of cultural expressions of a period of 1000 years. In doing so, CARMEN provides a training network of 11 ESRs, eight supervisors and many interested collaborators all over the world with a hermeneutical framework that will contribute to the understanding and knowledge of popular culture up to the present day.

### Our research objectives

Our innovative training network CARMEN has the following three research objectives:

- to identify the regional (ethnic, social, linguistic) specifics and conditions for the production and display of verse inscriptions in the Roman Empire and its immediate successors from c. 300 BCE to 600 CE

- to lay the foundations for an inclusive perspective of societal diversity based on a deeper understanding of the connection of Roman poetry with its visualised cultural expressions
- to start an innovative approach for the analysis of aesthetic standards in historical and contemporary contexts.

The CARMEN consortium supervises excellent young European researchers and comprises specialists of disciplines in the humanities focused on antiquity.

### Our approaches

The first ground-breaking editions of the nineteenth and early twentieth century (CLE - *Carmina Latina Epigraphica*, CIL - *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*) provide the backbone of our research. Since the 1980s, new and excellent editions of epigrams of some Italian regions and Roman provinces have laid firm foundations for systematic analyses, which seven of our ESRs are tackling: Penelope Faithfull (GB), Gabriël de Klerk (NL), Ana Lemes (Brasil), Eleonora Maiello (I), Giovanni Naccarato (I), Eleni Oikonomou (GR), Laura Sarli (I). By contrast, Michele Butini (I), Timo Eichhorn (D), Christin Rochlitzer (D) and Francesco Tecca (I) have set out to meet the challenge of each editing a specific *carmina*-corpus as their PhD theses. They will provide digital editions referring to all material aspects of these texts and monuments for Rome and some of the North African Roman provinces.

The analytical framework of CARMEN includes hermeneutics, reception aesthetics and other standard analytical techniques in the humanities.

Our research network will open new doors to a world of texts and monuments, social tensions and competition, small escapes and great revelations. These and other aspects have not been researched in depth, as modern theories of art production have not been incorporated into this field of study so far. The three objectives stated previously, with their

regional, social diversity and aesthetic categories, will force us to go beyond state-of-the-art research. The key to the success of the consortium, but especially those of the doctoral theses of our ESRs, will be the combination of cutting-edge digital, sociolinguistic, anthropological, social-theory and gender-theory related tools with the highest existing standards of epigraphic, historical, archaeological and philological research. These different approaches and methods enable the ESRs to cover the following topics: military lives and military identities; gender and emotions; pattern books of poetry and standardised formula of verses; episcopal authority; staging death in the North African epigrams; Christian perceptions and expressions of the loss of children; modern communicative and didactical strategies in the exposure and presentation of the cultural (Roman) heritage. Most of the ESRs have been working on their subject for two years, and their research is far advanced. The reconceptualisation of this particular aspect of our common heritage will be an important step toward understanding the heterogeneity of social and cultural performances and increasing the awareness of cultural diversity and the appreciation of popular art.

### Our innovative training network

The EU Horizon 2020 ITN format is unique and offers an attractive entry into the European job market. Our ESRs are committed to Europe, above all to a Europe made up of many different, inclusive and reflective societies. The awareness of cultural differences in communication patterns has been an important aspect of the training. It has an impact on the research performance and the outreach potential of our research. You will learn more about some of the ESRs' results in this journal over the following months.



## PROJECT NAME

CARMEN

### PROJECT SUMMARY

CARMEN explores Roman verse inscriptions as an important manifestation of communal art in Roman society. Our project helps to regain an eminent body of European folk-art tradition. The reconceptualisation of this heritage emphasises the diversity of social and cultural performance. Carmen-ITN enables 11 doctoral students to engage in academic research, issues of cultural heritage and knowledge transfer.

### PROJECT LEAD PROFILE

Since 2010, Marietta Horster has been holding the Chair of Ancient History at Mainz University. Her research focus is the organisation of Greek and Roman cults and religion, Roman imperial and late antique administration, organisation and prosopography, the transfer of knowledge and the transmission of textual culture in the ancient world.

#### Beneficiaries:

- Universidad del País Vasco (E)
- Université Bourgogne Franche Comté (F)
- Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz (D)
- Sapienza Università di Roma (I)
- Universidad de Sevilla (E)
- Generaldirektion Kulturelles Erbe Rheinland-Pfalz (D)
- Universität Trier (D)
- Universität Wien (A) and project partners all over Europe.

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