The communal art of Roman poetry – CARMEN, an innovative training network

Marietta Horster, Sabine Lefebvre
Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz &
Université de Bourgogne

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Figure 1: Verse inscription of a bath building with parts in marble praising the recreational potential for the users because of its cooling water (Cerne salutiferas s[plendent]i marmore 'Baias' …). CIL VIII 25362 (CLE 1754; 2039; ILBardo 423). © Bardo National Museum in Tunis, S. Lefebvre.

North Africa's 'poetic' Roman past

Poems, or at least versified half-sentences, can be found inscribed on pretty much every object you can think of. Preserved are, for instance, poetic vows of love on rings, tearful farewells on gravestones that often evoke the injustice of premature death, and pious Christian mosaic inscriptions in the Greek and Latin languages in churches.

By contrast, architectural inscriptions in verse from the Roman imperial period are rare. Most of the readers of this article who have already been to Rome will be familiar with one of the most famous Latin inscriptions, that on the Pantheon: *M. Agrippa L. f. cos. tertium fecit*—"Marcus Agrippa, son of Lucius, consul for the third time, built it." Like most inscriptions intending to inform the passers-by who the builder was, this inscription on the Pantheon is written in prose and rather brief; it is meant to make it easy to get the key information at a glance. The message is obvious: a generous donor like Agrippa erected or renovated a building. In other such cases, not a benefactor but the city's public authorities took matters and money into their hands and provided the community with the useful and magnificent building that bears the inscription. It is obvious to us today, as it was to most inhabitants of the Roman Empire in the imperial period, that such basic information was not presented in verse.

Before we continue with examples of such versified poems from North Africa as a way of self-fashioning the person(s) involved, we will put our short presentation into the context of the CARMEN project. Additionally, we will take the historical context of Roman Africa into account. It is one of the regions in the Latin West where a considerable number of inscriptions, including many versified ones from the imperial period (first–third century CE), have been preserved.

In our **C**ommunal **A**rt **R**econceptualising **M**etrical **E**pigraphy **N**etwork (CARMEN), three doctoral students are working on Latin *carmina epigraphica* (verse inscriptions) from North Africa (Figure 2). Giovanni Naccarato at the Université Bourgogne in Dijon analyses the social composition and regional preferences of funerary inscriptions in North African provinces (thesis title: *Staging Death: Making a Difference)*, Francesco Tecca and Michele Butini, both at the Universidad de Sevilla, focus on one province (Mauretania Caesariensis, today parts of Algeria: Tecca) and one city, the capital of the provincial *Africa proconsularis* (Carthage, today in Tunisia: Butini), editing, translating and commenting on the inscribed poems.

Supervisors of some of the doctoral students within the CARMEN project and authors of this contribution, Marietta Horster and Sabine Lefebvre, are experts on epigraphic landscapes; Lefebvre is also a specialist in the study of Roman Africa. Understanding and appreciating inscribed texts involves contextualising them physically and conceptually in their environment. Therefore, we will first outline the historical space of northern Africa (except for Egypt) in Roman times before offering a very brief insight into the cultural richness of Tunisia and Libya—more of an appetiser than a starter. The 'main course' will be the results of our doctoral students, who will publish their monographs open access in 2024 and 2025.

After the battles against the Carthaginians, including Hannibal in the Second Punic War (246–201 BCE), and the destruction of Carthage (146 BCE), the Romans brought a part of North Africa under their rule, the agriculturally productive north-

Figure 2: F. Tecca and G. Naccarato (CARMEN), S. España Chamorro (La Sapienza, Roma) and H. González Bordas (CNRS/Ausonius) in Bulla Regia, Tunisia, during a field trip, 14 Dec. 2022 © S. Lefebvre.

CARMEN

east of modern-day Tunisia. At the end of the Republic and with the victories of Octavian (later named Augustus), the Romans established direct control over most of North Africa. In addition, they collaborated with a loyal ally and client king, the Berber Juba II of Mauretania (modern Morocco and Algeria). However, after the assassination of Juba's son in the year 40 CE, his kingdom also fell to the Romans, who then possessed the whole of northern Africa from Egypt to Morocco as provincial territories.

Enormous cultural differences characterised this large area; parts had flourishing urban landscapes, while others were mountainous and barren or rural and fertile. Egypt and *Africa proconsularis* became the wheat granary of Rome. An epitaph is preserved from present-day Tunisia, giving us an idea of the harsh realities of life, though written by a poetry-loving, hard-working harvester who became a wealthy peasant and landowner (*CIL* VIII 11824 = *ILTun* 528, Mactar). In his versified text, he presents the story of his social advancement and his family. This example gives us an idea of the insights we can potentially gain from such verse inscriptions. It shows how a confident middle class (though the terminology is sociologically inaccurate) fashioned their own image in such publicly exhibited poetic texts.

Many of us in the CARMEN ITN are concerned with exactly these kinds of questions: the social background and status of the protagonists and the value of education as well as certain ways of communication in written form for these people. After all, CARMEN has taken up the cause of investigating this very special 'communal art'. In this context, the cultural phenomenon of the rare versified building inscriptions (Figure 1) of Tunisia and its neighbouring countries presents us with a particular challenge.

The versified building inscriptions from this large area reflect the extraordinary social background of their authors or the people who paid artisans to make the inscriptions. In the following, we will present texts from modern Libya (the ancient Tripolitania region). The societal status of their protagonists is soldiers or, rather, officers. There are many of them, just as there are many farmers and harvesters. We usually don't get any more detailed information on individuals from this group, and above all, we don't often learn about their poetic abilities. However, our farmer from Mactar is already an exception; the *centurio* of a Roman legion and 'author' of the versified inscription you will learn about in the next paragraph is another.

The following inscriptions date from the late second/early third century and stem from Roman military installations located south of the oasis of Bu Njem on the edge of the Sahara in Libya, about 100 kilometres inland from the sea. Gholaia was a Roman military camp in the so-called *Limes Tripolitanus*, a system of forts and military posts marking the border. It was designed for a garrison of around 500 soldiers. Around 200 CE, a construction team of the legion was dispatched from the legion's main camp, Lambaesis (modern-day Algeria), to build this new inland fort. We hear of some of these construction measures, but by no means in a standard military text (*IRT* 918 = *AE* 1987, 993; *CLEAfr* 4; identical with two additional lines: *IRT* 919). One of the texts (*IRT* 918) is inscribed on a limestone block (45 x 108 x 14 cm), which was embedded in the wall of one of two cold-water basins in a bathing facility in the camp. Its content and the aim of its messages have been discussed intensely (see C. Hamdoune, in: Parure monumentale et paysage dans la poésie épigraphie de l'Afrique romaine, Bordeaux 2016, 47–53; cf. Figure 1 with another such carmen praising a cooling bath in hot Tunisia). The author or commissioner of these 36 lines is a certain Q. Avidius Quintianus, a centurion of the Third Legion and current construction team leader, it seems. In his poem, he presents the soldiers' bathing facility as financed by him with his own money and based on his own idea, and he showcases his piety and devotion to the goddess *Salus* (health). He wants her to preserve the health of all those who believe in her, and may this text and the building itself offer all those who use it the opportunity to remember him, the noble and public-spirited centurion:

> So, for as long as there are devotees of Salus, I have given back here, as best I can, its sacred name, and to all I have offered waters that truly give health, while the fires of the south wind are raging, blowing in gusts over these hills that are nothing but sand, so from the flames of the sun, the bodies are soothed, swimming peacefully.

For those not familiar with the name of the noble donor, only recognisable when combining the first letter of each line (acrostic style), there is a small addition in the second inscription. Here, his status is revealed like in any other military building inscription (*IRT* 919, 37-38): *Centurio / [[leg(ionis) III Aug(ustae)]] / faciendum / curavit* (the above named Q. Avidius Quintianus), "The centurion of the Third Legion Augusta was responsible for the realisation." In these last lines, he is presented as an officer who has carried out his task as ordered. It is obvious that the baths were built under his supervision and financed by the provincial treasury. Against the background of this military building inscription, it becomes clear that Avidius had not even financed the pool where his poems were placed but that his contribution consisted of nothing more than furnishing niches and adding statues of the goddess *Salus* and perhaps also a small *sacellum* (chapel) in her honour. The two surviving inscriptions not only served to honour his memory but also intended to uphold the religious and spiritual morale of the soldiers working in the merciless heat and sun.

In the fort of Bu Njem, whether inspired by our centurion Avidius or not, the joy of poetry seemingly became a kind of trademark. Twenty years after the two *Salus-carmina*, an inscribed poem recorded construction works during the renovation of four camp gates (*AE* 1995, 1641 = *CLEAfr* 5). It is even possible that Avidius, the centurion, had been inspired by a visit to one of the major cities nearby, Lepcis Magna (but this is a poor guess as there is no indication that he ever set his foot into the vibrant and highly attractive centre of Tripolitania). The dedication with the donation of two elephant tusks by a certain Pudens, in gratitude for the promotion of his son to the tribunate due to a personal intervention by the emperor, is documented in a verse inscription from Lepcis (198–209 CE, *IRT* 295 = *CLEAfr* 1), dating to the time when Avidius was active in Lambaesis and Bu Njem.

However, we need far more than regional contexts to understand a soldier's motivation for choosing poetic language for self-expression in or outside his military environment. Our understanding of the choice and nature of such poems of a military background will certainly be improved by another doctoral student of our CARMEN ITN, Penelope Faithfull, University of Vienna, whose thesis title is: *"War and Peace. Military Lives and Identities in Latin Verse Inscriptions"*.

Then and now: diversity in modes of communication

Awareness of cultural differences in communication patterns of social groups, regional communication preferences or professional groups or genders, for example, is part of our ITN research and is an important aspect of the network training, too. For further information on the CARMEN project, see M. Horster, *Project Repository Journal*, 17, 2023, pp. 58–61. doi: 10.54050/PRJ1720281.

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, 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 de Bourgogne (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.

PROJECT CONTACTS

Dr Erika Fischer & Laura Kopp-Zimmermann
JGU Mainz, Historisches Seminar
Welderweg 18, 55122 Mainz, Germany
Carmen-itn@uni-mainz.de
https://carmen-itn.eu/

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