

FOCUS CLASSICAL SOURCES



ROMAN LIVES

Ancient Roman Life
as Illustrated by Latin Inscriptions

Brian K. Harvey

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as Illustrated by Latin Inscriptions**

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Cover Image: Tombstone of three members of the freedman family of the Vibii
(CIL 6.28774), Vatican Museums, Rome. Scala/Art Resource, NY

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PREFACE

An extremely diverse population inhabited the Roman Empire. As with any complex society, ancient Rome functioned with a wide-ranging group of inhabitants, from the highest-ranking political leader to the humblest salesman on the street. Too often, in the study of Roman history and literature, the focus remains on the Roman elite, and the student loses sight of other members of society.

The limited picture of Roman society provided by extant literary sources can be balanced by examining other sources, however; in particular, we are fortunate to have a wealth of evidence for the lives of the ancient Romans in the form of inscriptions (the study of inscriptions is called epigraphy). An inscription is any carved, scratched or painted document that has been preserved directly from antiquity on some kind of durable material like stone, metal or terracotta. Inscriptions had a wide range of functions. Government documents were generally inscribed on bronze tablets and posted in the towns and cities of the empire to make the law or act known to the population. Public (and, less frequently, private) buildings were adorned with dedicatory inscriptions which commemorated the circumstances of their construction as well as the building's sponsor. A milestone marked every mile of the famous road system of Rome in order to tell the traveler the distance to the nearest town in either direction, as well as the name of the emperor who funded that particular road.

Because such a small percentage of the population was literate (perhaps only 5%), the Romans designed their inscriptions to be "readable" by as many people as possible. The Latin on tombstones is relatively simple and formulaic when compared with literary texts. The preponderance of personal names and titles of offices also make them easier to understand. Many also included images of the deceased or things important to him or her. The words themselves embodied a kind of power. Decrees and documents conveyed the wishes of the central government, and their placement in public places served as a constant reminder of the authority of the rulers. Similarly, a lengthy imperial name or aristocratic career inscription

could give even an illiterate reader or observer a sense of the importance of that emperor or aristocrat.

Rather than examining imperial inscriptions, however, we will focus here on inscriptions which preserve the individual memory of a diverse range of Roman people. For example, city and town governments honored certain members of their communities by erecting statues to them with an accompanying inscribed base which not only stated the person's name, but also an account of their career and deeds. Another much more common type of inscription is the tomb inscription (also called an epitaph). Although law prohibited burial within the confines of the city itself, tombs were nonetheless highly visible to the city inhabitants and visitors, as they were placed along the roads leading out of the city. In anticipation of their death, families eagerly purchased plots of land along the road; alternatively, they could choose to be buried in a nearby catacomb or necropolis (e.g. the still extant "Isola Sacra" necropolis near Ostia, the ancient port city of Rome). Tomb monuments came in all shapes and sizes. Some housed only a single person; others had space for not only the immediate family, but also the family's freedmen and freedwomen.

Also common were burial clubs (*collegia*) organized around military units, professional societies and mercantile guilds. Members paid money to the club who then took care of the burial of its deceased members.

The inscriptions, or epitaphs, on these monuments included more than just the names of those buried inside and their ages at the time of their death. They tell the reader more about the people themselves. As with statue bases, tomb epitaphs attempted to preserve a certain memory of an individual by describing what the person did in life. In most cases, this meant stating the person's occupation, the military unit in which they served, or the posts they held during their political careers. Often, however, the writers included details of their lives such as how they died, what activities they enjoyed during their lifetimes, or how they felt about the members of their families. One soldier, in fact, does not mention himself by name, but believes that his actions in life will remind people of his identity. Unlike the majority of aristocratic literary and historical texts, inscriptions, especially tomb epitaphs, preserve the words and lives of a wide range of social classes, ages and genders. As such, epitaphs are useful and interesting, even if they are poignant and difficult to read at times. Nevertheless, they offer us a privileged glimpse in the lives of the ancient Romans which is not preserved elsewhere.

The current work collects a number of inscriptions that exemplify the people who inhabited the ancient Roman Empire during the first two centuries AD. The catalog of people and occupations is by no means complete, but is intended, rather, to reflect and represent the hundreds of thousands of inscriptions which have been discovered and published over the last several centuries. Inscriptions were chosen which tend to reflect the great diversity of Roman society. Most are tomb epitaphs, but a few examples of statue bases, building inscriptions and ancient graffiti are also included.

The texts in this collection have been organized into some broad social

categories. First are examples of members of the senatorial, equestrian, and municipal aristocracies. Texts illustrating various types of priests and religious attendants follow. The next chapter contains numerous examples of men in the military: common soldiers, non-citizen auxiliary soldiers, centurions, and equestrian officers. The next two chapters illustrate the institution of slavery through inscriptions of slaves and freedmen first from the aristocratic households and then from the household of the emperor. A tremendous number of people were required for the day-to-day running of the imperial palace and bureaucracy. The focus then turns to families and private citizens. First are given examples of Roman families celebrated on a single tombstone. Tombstones of children follow. The next chapter includes epitaphs and dedications exemplifying the virtues and occupations of women. The final two chapters illustrate occupations held by members of the lower classes. First there are inscriptions celebrating the lives of entertainers: gladiators, actors and charioteers, followed by texts demonstrating the types of occupations held by members of the lower classes.

SLAVES AND FREEDMEN

The institution of slavery was well-established, accepted and widespread in ancient Rome. For the Romans, slave labor was economically advantageous because, after the initial purchase, masters only had to provide room and board for their slaves and did not have to pay wages (although some did give their slaves an allowance, called the slave's *peculium*). Slaves could be of any race, gender or age, as long as they could perform the desired task.

Roman slaves have been divided into two categories: rural and urban. Rural slaves generally had a difficult life of hard labor in the fields of the large agricultural estates, which were owned by the aristocracy. Chain gangs and poor



Tombstone of Cornelia Frontina, wife of an imperial freedman in charge of the main gladiatorial barracks in Rome (CIL 6.10164; ILS 5153), National Museum of Rome at the Baths of Diocletian, Rome (courtesy of the Ministero per i Beni e le Attività Culturali, Soprintendenza Archeologica di Roma).

quality food and lodgings characterized the life of a rural slave. In comparison, urban slaves had a much better life. They were generally associated with the urban villas of the aristocracy. These urban households could be very large, with slaves numbering in the hundreds. The slaves often had very specialized jobs (for example, doorkeeper or cook), which usually gave them more freedom and leisure than their rural counterparts. Also, because they generally lived in closer proximity to the master, urban slaves had a better chance of developing a personal relationship with him or his family, making manumission more likely (although such proximity also exposed them to harsher treatment in the case of a cruel master). By the first century AD, rural slaves declined in number, as the aristocracy now preferred exploiting freeborn tenant farmers, rather than large numbers of unskilled agricultural slaves. While slaves had to be purchased (or be born into slavery) and supported at the master's expense, tenant farmers worked plots of land belonging to the landowner, and gave the owner a significant share of the crops. Such farmers were not purchased and were relatively self-sufficient.

The Romans enslaved people for various reasons, and some were born into slavery. The Roman army would capture slaves following a victory in a foreign war or after quelling a provincial revolt. Such wars, however, were often sporadic and generally gathered uneducated prisoners who were sold as slaves to work on large, rural estates. Piracy, brigandage and even voluntary enslavement provided many urban slaves. Slave traders also reportedly collected children exposed at birth, and raised them as slaves to be sold when they were ready to enter the workforce. Some people, called *vernae*, were born into slavery.

In Roman law and culture, slaves were considered to be sub-human and remained completely within the control of their master. Despite the lowly status of slaves in the Roman world, however, their treatment gradually became more humane. The agricultural chain gangs began to disappear. In the urban sphere, the emperors passed laws prohibiting masters from mistreating and arbitrarily killing their slaves. Also, manumission, by which a slave received his freedom and Roman citizenship, was very common. In fact, a study of the names of the commoners of Rome indicates that the city was heavily populated by freedmen (*liberti*, manumitted slaves) and their descendants.

Few inscriptions about slaves exist, and those that do are for urban slaves. Thus, the inscriptions in this section illustrate urban slaves belonging to wealthy aristocratic masters. They not only document the lives of urban slaves, but also illustrate the high degree of specialization within large, aristocratic households. Some slaves were even literate (e.g. Grapte the secretary, Carpinus, who was in charge of household expenses, and Urbana the pedagogue). Some slaves attended to the physical appearance of the family members (Psamate the hairdresser, Zethus the barber, and Italia the dressmaker), others served as household staff (Mithrodates the baker), and others as property managers (Cero the caretaker, Bathyllus the steward, Museaeus the *ianitor* (doorkeeper), and Philologus the butler). The relationship between slave and free could be friendly, as illustrated by

an inscription of a number of slaves who dedicated an inscription to an imperial freedman. Another inscription records the monetary provision for public slaves, who served the local government officials.

Household Slaves

49.

Grapte, Secretary

CIL 6.9540; ILS 7397

Tombstone

Rome

1st Century AD

Grapte was a secretary whose primary duties would have been to take dictation from her mistress or to make copies of previously written notes and letters. Her inscription, a small marble slab (*cippus*), was found on the *Via Appia*.

DIS • MANIB
GRAPTE
EGNATIAE • MA
XIMILLAE
A • MANV
CONIVGI • KARIS
SIMAE • C • EGN
ATIVS • AROGVS

* * *

Dis manib(us); Grapte, Egnatiae Maximillae a manu, coniugi [c]arissimae; C(aius) Egnatius Arogus.

* * *

To the spirits of the dead; Grapte, secretary of Egnatia Maximilla;¹ Gaius Egnatius Arogus dedicated this to his very dear wife.²

- 1 Egnatia Maximilla was the wife of Glitius Gallus, one of the people banished following the conspiracy of Calpurnius Piso against Nero. Tacitus (*Ann.* 15.71) mentions that she was very rich, but that her fortune was confiscated after she accompanied her husband into exile.
- 2 Grapte's husband's name indicates that he is a freedman of the Egnatius family, the same household to which Grapte belongs.



Tombstone of the ornatrix Gnome Pierinis, another slave hairdresser like Psamate (CIL 6.9730; ILS 7419), National Museum of Rome at the Baths of Diocletian, Rome. Photo courtesy of the Ministero per i Beni e le Attività Culturali Soprintenza Archeologica di Roma.

50.

Psamate, Hairdresser

CIL 6.9732; ILS 7420a
Tombstone

Rome
1st Century AD

PSAMATE • FVRIAE
ORNATRIX • V • A • XIIIX
MITHRODATES • PISTOR
FLACCI • THORI • FECIT

* * *

Psamate, Furiæ ornatrix, v(ixit) a(nnos) XIIIX; Mithrodates, pistor Flacci Thori, fecit.

* * *

Psamate, hairdresser¹ of Furia, lived 18 years; Mithrodates,² the baker of Thorius Flaccus,³ made this.

- 1 Presumably the equivalent of a *tonstrix* (a female barber). There were also male *ornatores* who took care of their master's hair.
- 2 Mithrodates (perhaps a mistake for "Mithridates") is possibly her husband. If the Furia and Flaccus Thorius mentioned in the inscription were husband and wife, then Psamate and Mithrodates may have been from the same household.
- 3 Governor of Pontus and Bithynia under Augustus.

51. *Carpimus,
in Charge of Household Expenses*

CIL 6.33912; ILS 7391
Tombstone

Rome
1st Century AD

Carpimus was the slave of Pompeius Macer, a name shared by two important senators of the early Julio-Claudian period. This tombstone, a small marble stele, was discovered outside the city, between the *Via Salaria* and the *Via Pinciana* in the northern part of Rome.

CARPIMO
POMPEI • MACRI
SVMPTVARIO

* * *

Carpimo, Pompei Macri (servo), sumptuario.

* * *

To Carpimus, slave of Pompeius Macer, slave in charge of monitoring household expenses.

52. *Zethus, Barber*

CIL 6.9939; ILS 7414
Tombstone

Rome
1st Century AD

ZETHO • A • PLAVTI
TONSORI

* * *

Zetho A(uli) Plauti (servo), tonsori.

* * *

To Zethus, slave of Aulus Plautius,¹ barber.

1 The man who led the invasion of Britain for Claudius in 43 and served as its first governor.

53. *Urbana, Pedagogue*CIL 6.9758
TombstoneRome
Unknown

The pedagogue was a slave who was in charge of the children of aristocratic families. Pedagogues accompanied children to and from school and took care of them in the household. Most were men, but this inscription records a female pedagogue. This marble tablet was found just outside the city on the *Via Ostiensis*. It was originally from a *columbarium*, a large tomb in which members of the household (especially the slaves and freedmen) were buried (see below for other *columbarium* inscriptions).

VRBANA
PAEDAGOGA
V • AN • XXV

* * *

Urbana, paedagoga, v(ixit) an(nos) XXV.

* * *

*Urbana, pedagogue, lived 25 years.***54. *Italia, Dressmaker***CIL 6.9980; ILS 7428
TombstoneRome
2nd Century AD

ITALIAE
COCCEIAE • PHYLLIDIS • VESTIFICAЕ
VEIXSIT • ANNEIS • XX
ACASTVS • CONSERVOS • PRO
PAVPERIE • FECIT • SVA

* * *

Italiae, Cocceiae Phyllidis vestificae, v{e}ix{s}it ann{e}is XX; Acastus conservos pro pauperie fecit sua.

* * *

To Italia, dressmaker of Cocceia Phyllis,¹ lived 20 years; Acastus, her fellow-slave, made this because of her poverty.

1 Her name indicates that she was probably a freedwoman of the emperor Nerva.

55. *Burial Society for the Slaves of the Household of the Statilii*

CIL 6.6215, 6216; ILS 7360, 7360a
Tombstone

Rome
1st Century AD

This and the next two inscriptions come from the *columbarium* of the Statilius family. Funeral clubs and large households often buried their dead in a building called a *columbarium*. These *columbaria* (dovecotes) were places for group burial of the members of a burial club or family. Each person or couple had their own niche (*nidus*, pigeonhole), in which their funerary urn or urns were placed. Below each urn was a small plaque recording the person to whom the urn belonged. A number of *columbaria* are known throughout the Empire, especially in Rome and Ostia.

The *columbarium* of the Statilii is outside of the city limits, near the *Porta Praenestina*. The Statilii were an important Julio-Claudian family, several of whom were consuls (in 37 BC, 26 BC, AD 11, 16, 44 and 45); they were even related to the imperial family. Their *familia* (slaves and freedmen in their household) was very large. This *columbarium* has space for hundreds of people. This first inscription to the freedwoman Statilia Ammia was dedicated by a number of property managers for the Statilii.

STATILIA • AMMIA • HIC
SEPVLTA • EST • QVOIVS • SEPVLT
CVRAM • EGERVNT • CONLEG
COMMORIENT • CERDO • INS[VL]
VIR • EIVS • BATHYLLVS • ATRIENS[IS]
MVSAEVS • OST • EROS • INS • PHILOCAL[VS]
VNCTOR

* * *

Statilia Ammia hic sepulta est, [c]u{o}ius sepult(urae) curam egerunt conleg(ae) commorient(es): Cerdo ins[ul(arius)] vir eius, Bathyllus atriens[is], Musaeus ost(iarius), Eros ins(ularius), Philocal[us] unctor.

* * *

Statilia Ammia is buried here, whose burial the funeral club¹ took care of: Cerdo, the caretaker of the apartment block² and her husband, Bathyllus the steward of the house, Musaeus the janitor, Eros, the other caretaker of the apartment block, and Philocalus the masseur.³

- 1 Funeral clubs were associations that provided for the burial of members of their club. Members were required to pay a fee upon entering the club. Many such clubs had their own *columbaria* or cemeteries.
- 2 Looked after the apartment building for the wealthy owner, probably a member of the Statilii family.
- 3 An odd addition to the staff of an apartment building, but it is possible that he served in the house of the owner of all of the slaves listed.

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SERIES EDITOR

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A source book of Roman inscriptions which reveal, not only the daily lives of the average Roman, but the way scholars infer the facts of Roman civilization from non-literary records. For courses in Roman civilization at all levels.

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