

**THE LATIN INSCRIPTIONS OF NAISSUS:
A PHILOLOGIST'S APPROACH**

The point of this contribution lies outside its practicable scope. Talking philology usually means going into details, and the Latin inscriptions of Naissus would indeed be a worthy subject for a detailed treatment; but the present occasion is no moment for me to perform an analysis or present any results. Today I have the opportunity to make some remarks in the way of a prolegomenon, so let me do so and stay away from any technicalities that may be interesting to readers but tend to confuse listeners.

The epigraphic record of Roman Naissus, apart from being (unsurprisingly) decimated, has largely come down to us in the form of fragmented or otherwise badly damaged monuments.¹ These demand not only visual but also verbal restoration; in other words, our duty is to mentally bring the extant monuments *and* the texts back to their original condition. Sometimes the restitution of an epigraphic text can go even beyond the visual recreation of the monument. In some cases, though, the possibilities of textual restitution have remained unexplored by publishers and interpreters alike. This remark applies to a number of epigraphs everywhere, and it applies to some inscriptions from Naissus, too.

A century ago, in a world where almost every scholar was conversant with the classical languages, to always read ancient inscriptions with an eye on their linguistic and stylistic features was the most natural thing to do. To take a familiar example, Nikola Vulić, the man who discovered, published and discussed more inscriptions of Serbia and Macedonia than anybody before or after him, needed no philologist to consult or listen to: he had all the language skills he needed and was conscious enough of the power this gave him. Today, we typically acquire our Greek and Latin later in life, and we tend to specialize early. The modern epigraphist's main interests usually lie in social, economic, or political history, with the languages remaining on the outskirts of his or her expertise. Now the epigraphs of Naissus are part of an outstanding publication, *Inscriptions de la Mésie Supérieure*, a volume of which, IMS 4, contains material from what today is central and south-eastern Serbia. It is only fair to say

¹ See F. Papazoglou (dir.), *Inscriptions de la Mésie Supérieure*, vol. 4: P. Petrović, *Naissus-Remesiana-Horreum Margi*, Beograd 1979, 13–17, and П. Петровић, *Нису у античко доба*, Ниш 21999, 16–18.

that, upon the whole, the authors and editors of IMS have not been insensitive to questions of language or reluctant to restore texts by means of conjecture. Still, my impression has long been that several lemmata and more than a few commentaries in this excellent corpus could have been substantially improved by going deeper into philology. I propose, then, to take a look - a hasty one - on the benefits of the philological approach to epigraphs, with especial regard to the inscriptions of Naissus.

Let me begin with what is unlikely ever to be found in them, despite any hopes that may persist from an earlier period of classical scholarship. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries not a few philologists believed that Latin inscriptions on stone would yield precious evidence of regional variation within the language. Indeed, as most Roman sources showed nothing in this respect, the frustrating outcome of the quest for dialects was assigned to the Latin texts' being vagabond and volatile due to their transmission through less than perfect copies of copies in different media. The inscriptions, on the contrary, were thought of as reliable local informants: with them, all that was needed was thorough research followed by intelligent analysis, and local features would appear; distinct dialects of Latin would become a reality, each with a profile of its own; this new light shed on the development of Latin and the origins of Romance languages would transform historical linguistics. The dialect rush became the primary motive behind philological studies of many regional epigraphic corpora, resulting in a number of new insights, but ultimately failing to trace the profile or even prove the existence of any regional dialect of Latin throughout the Roman period. Today we may safely assert that this *perpetuum mobile* of Latin linguistics has turned out to be unfeasible.² That is why, as far as the inscriptions of Naissus are concerned, neither a Naissatic patois nor a Moesian dialect is to be scented behind the Latin of our material.

Fortunately, there is another field in which valid and fruitful investigation can be and has been conducted. Facts of language, or (to be more precise) facts of linguistic usage, are facts about the society. The language and style of an inscription, therefore, speak to us at least as much as the quality of the stone or the level of craftsmanship in a monument. For instance, some Latin epigraphic texts are characterized by the presence of vulgarisms, i.e. language features that betray the speaker or writer's lack of education.³ When these are found in public inscriptions, or in such private monuments as tombstones of imperial officials or local dignitaries, or in simple dedications and modest graves of the common people, each of these situations requires comment from the point of both linguistic and social history. Vulgarisms in the inscriptions of Naissus, as in almost any collection, include many substandard spellings that either exemplify phenomena which are relevant for the evolution of the low sociolect of Latin and ultimately the development of Romance, or disclose features which once

² For details and the logic of this amazing impossibility a chapter by J. N. Adams, *The Regional Diversification of Latin 200BC-AD600*, Cambridge 2007, 624-683, will be consulted with the greatest profit.

³ That is what I assume to be a good working definition of vulgarism; for a discussion see B. Недељковић, *Увод у проучавање вулгарног латинитета*, 1: *Феноменологија и извори*, Београд 2012, 71-86.

had been vulgar but later won general acceptance. In addition to this commonest type of evidence, the Naissatic corpus contains a number of items illustrating other aspects of vulgar or late usage: interesting details of Latin morphology, lexicology, and even syntax are to be found in relatively many instances.

The pursuit I have just referred to implies that we make use of epigraphic material for philological purposes. Another occupation may be viewed as a special contribution by philologists to the study of inscriptions. Textual criticism and editorial revision of ancient documents is traditionally thought to be the ultimate task of classical philology; and, while not every one of us can work on medieval manuscripts or produce editions of ancient literature, Latin inscriptions, extant by the thousand from almost every corner of the Roman world, offer legitimate opportunities for many to develop critical skills and exert their powers in this field. This is because epigraphs too, by virtue of being copies of text, are liable to critical examination.⁴ In most cases the need to apply criticism to an epigraphic text is not obvious, but it is there nevertheless, for at least two reasons. Drafting an inscription and committing it to the stone was not always a smooth operation; many inscriptions contain clear examples of error in the process.⁵ The other reason is even more compelling: mutilated texts require restoration, and any restoration pertains to criticism.

This necessity is, I think, acutely felt in the material from Naissus. Here some private inscriptions, especially ones of the more vulgar cast, tend to be verbose. Their authors were obviously not always acquainted with, or adhering to, epigraphic formulae, and on the other hand they were attached to popular clichés of thought and expression on subjects such as death, peace, loyalty, hope, family, friendship, etc. Most Roman inscriptions are supposed to be unoriginal, but these are so in a very particular way. Their lack of originality is not as much about rigid conventions as about hackneyed phrases, battered ideas and preconceptions. Being essentially stereotype, their content is more or less predictable; their wording, though, may be unexpected or unclear, which is usually due to either vulgarity or some sort of confusion, and in specific cases it is important to pinpoint the problem.

Philological knowledge and a critical mind are crucial for the twin task of interpreting extant portions of texts and finding ways to recover whatever is lost. To many philologists the work on the epigraphs of Naissus will seem a positive departure from the usual. The package of erudition associated with the authors and works of classical literature becomes a rather distant reference as we attempt to put ourselves into the mindset of provincial city dwellers, including those whom we may call province trotters,⁶ in order to understand and even mimic their usages.

⁴ Cf. the programmatic article by J. Marcillet-Jaubert, "Philologie et inscriptions", *Revue des études anciennes* 42 (1960), 362–382, especially 382.

⁵ J. Mallon, "Pierres fautives", *Libyca* 2 (1954), 187–199 and 435–459, and G. Susini, *The Roman Stonecutter*, Oxford 1973 are, each in its own right, classics on this subject.

⁶ For the population of Naissus as reflected in the inscriptions see Petrović in IMS 4 (see n.1 above), 33–36.

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О ЛАТИНСКИМ НАТПИСИМА НИША СА СТАНОВИШТА ФИЛОЛОГИЈЕ

Аутор сумарно излаже слику коју натписи римског Ниша дају у домену латинистике и нарочито вулгарнолатинских студија. Указујући на потребу за систематском филолошким радом на епиграфском материјалу, он опомиње на корист која из тога проистиче како за саму епиграфичку обраду нишких натписа тако и за њихово изучавање са различитих аспеката.