A PORTUGUESE CONTRIBUTION TO 16TH CENTURY
ROMAN ANTIQUARIANISM: THE CASE OF AQUILES ESTAÇO
(1524–1581) AND ROMAN EPIGRAPHY

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One of the central features in Modern European Culture was the study of Classical Antiquity, in particular the material remains of the past: places, buildings and objects attracted the attention of scholars and erudite men, the so-called ‘antiquarians’. Furthermore, Roman epigraphy – texts worked in stone, bronze and other materials – was particularly attractive; an inscription was a text, a materialized message, it was evidence of the past and meant somehow the ‘living word of the Romans’.¹ For that reason, many humanists analysed, assessed and copied Roman epigraphy and nowadays we conserve many compilations of inscriptions – syllogai – written by humanists from almost every part of Europe. One of these first ‘epigraphers’ was Aquiles Estaço, Achilles Statius Lusitanus, a learned Portuguese scholar who contributed an important chapter to Portuguese intellectual history and embodies the phenomenon of antiquarian research in 16th century Rome.²

The Classical Scholar and Humanist Aquiles Estaço

A brief, marginal note in one of his manuscripts could almost be read as an auto-biographical sketch. Whereas Estaço mostly wrote in Latin, this is written in his mother tongue:

I was born in the year of 1524, on June the twelfth, in summertime, after three in the morning, in Vidigueira, in Church street towards the Castel on the right, in a one-storied house. Ines Soarezs was my godmother. António de Matos was the godfather of my mother Caterina Rodriguez, as well as Leanor Estevens, my aunt and his wife. Brother João do Monte. Domingos Isabel, Rufina Botas. Iulião Pereira, my nephew. Dom Vasco, Dona Maria, daughter of Count of Castro, was his wife.3

Estaço grew up in a family with a military tradition. His father, Paulo Nunes Estaço, was a renowned soldier who took part in Vasco da Gama’s campaigns in Brazil; he wanted his son to follow in his steps; he actually gave the child the name of a Greek hero – Achilles – and brought him to Pernambuco, in Brazil, for his training. However, according to biographers, Estaço showed more interest in letters than martial life and he preferred to study the languages of the indigenous people rather than take part in military training.4 Consequently, Estaço’s father took him back to his native Portugal and entrusted João Barros in Lisbon and then André de Resende in Evora with teaching him history and language.5 In these early days, Aquiles Estaço started learning about Ancient Rome and conceivably also epigraphy, largely due to de Resende, who is regarded as the first author of antiquarian

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4 The first biography of Achilles Estaço was provided by André Schott, Hispaniae Bibliotheca seu de Academiis ac Bibliothecis. Item elogia et nomenclator clarorum Hispaniae scriptorum (Frankfurt, haeredes Ioannis Aubrii: 1608) 483–490. Schott was followed by Estaço’s successor Gaspar Estaço, Tratado da Linhagem dos Estaços, naturaes da cidade de Évora (Lisbon, Pedro Craesbeek: 1625); Fernandes Pereira B., As Ora ções de Obediência 23.