CHAPTER 9

Roman Gaia and the Discourse of Patronage: Retrograde C in CIL VI

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Introduction


Rome, 1st century BCE

Dead: Flaminia Saluta, freedwoman of a woman. Gaius Valerius Phileros, freedman of Triarius, magistrate’s attendant. Valeria Scurra, freedwoman of Gaius and a woman. Gaius Valerius Eros, freedman of Gaius. No-one other than those whose names are inscribed above will be buried in this tomb. This memorial does not follow the heir. Twelve feet in frontage, eighteen feet in depth.

This inscription (CIL 6.37156) situates the death, burial, and commemoration of a certain Flaminia Saluta within a wider symbolic context.¹ The principles underpinning Roman onomastic conventions can be applied to identify and interpret important elements of the personal identity and social condition of the deceased and the other three named individuals. Unpacking CIL 6.37156 reveals the following information: Flaminia Saluta is deceased; two men (C. Valerius Phileros, C. Valerius Eros) and another woman (Valeria Scurra) share Flaminia’s legal right to occupy this tomb; all these persons are ex-slaves; the space designated for their burial monument is twelve by eighteen Roman feet. We also learn that the libertus Phileros was attached to a certain C. Valerius

¹ For editorial apparatus and commentary, CIL 6.4/3, p. 3821. The cognomen Saluta appears in other urban epitaphs: e.g., CIL 6.4816, 12743, 21667 (where it is engraved, as here, with an apex), 23498, 28270, 28711; cf. also ILS 7826.
Triarius in the capacity of *accensus.* The nomenclature of the other freedpersons strongly suggests that he was also the person who freed C. Valerius Eros and Valeria Scurra.

As can be seen, the text of the inscription comprises two abbreviations. The first of these is either the Greek letter *theta*, known generally as the black *theta* (θητα Lutrum), or the Latin letter O with a medial bar. This epigraphic marker, used in Latin inscriptions to indicate that individuals named after the sign were deceased, need not detain us. More interesting from a socio-historical perspective is the deployment of retrograde C. In particular, the manner in which (and possible reasons why) the discourse of the Latin epigraphic tradition assigns the identities of many women to a fixed and stable category – “Gaia”, the reverse of the masculine referent signifying the Roman owning class, “Gaius”. It is in regard to notions of patronage in an ancient Roman context that the usage of the retrograde form of the Latin letter C (刑警 or >) is of particular interest. Looking at the way in which the dedicators of inscriptions such as this use this abbreviation for a female slave-owner provides an intriguing case-study in how Roman men and women used epigraphic discourse conforming to a recognizable, though in this case unique, formula and whether or not such an abbreviation – one of tens of thousands used in sepulchral, honorific, and dedicatory Latin inscriptions – is susceptible to straightforward interpretation.

The modern interpreter of inscribed memorials regularly confronts the various domains of contestation that encompass signifiers representing historical and cultural phenomena. As will be seen, retrograde C constitutes one such

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2 *Accensi* were public officers who attended to several of the Roman magistrates. They summoned people to assemblies, and those who had lawsuits at court; they preserved order in the assemblies and the courts; and proclaimed the time of day when it was the third, sixth, and ninth hour. They were commonly freedmen of the magistrates they served. Regarding Phileros’ *patronus*, the editor of the inscription proposes that C. Valerius Triarius was (a) a legate of Lucullus in the Mithridatic war, (b) a Roman magistrate (*aedile*) and head of a local association (*collegium*) at Fundi (a seacoast town on the via Appia between Formiae and Tarracina, and home to the famous vintage of Caecuban wine), (c) Cicero’s friend, the tutor of his son, or (d) none of the above. It is impossible to determine which, if any, of these was the case.

3 The sign Θ, used rarely in Latin inscriptions before the Augustan period, stands either for Greek *thanatos* or Latin *obitus*. In either case, however, the word abbreviated refers to death and is used in Latin inscriptions to indicate that individuals named after the sign were deceased: see Friggeri-Pelli 1980; cf. Marichal 1945: 46 n. 72; Watson 1952: 58.

4 According to Elliott 1998, the number of abbreviations in Latin inscriptions published in *L’Année Épigraphique* between 1888 and 1993 is 31,214.