Off the Beaten Track

Epigraphy at the Borders

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Off the Beaten Track. Epigraphy at the Borders
An Introduction

Antonio Enrico Felle
Epigraphic Database Bari – University of Bari 'Aldo Moro'

Usually, the introductions are expected to be boring and often are considered useless... So, I wrote very few words only to describe the agenda of our meeting and to try to explain - I hope - its *raison d'être*.
First of all, I draw your attention to the content of the text published on *Current Epigraphy* on 25th May 2015 which describes our conference:[1]

> 'Hosted by EAGLE (Europeana network of Ancient Greek and Latin Epigraphy), [the Meeting] is the sixth in a series of international events planned by this European and international consortium with the support of the Department of Classics and Late Antiquity Studies at the University of Bari "Aldo Moro".
>
> The aim of this initiative is to create a shared space to discuss the issues addressed in digitizing inscriptions characterised by unusual features in comparison to the usual epigraphic habit.'

The keyword of our meeting is the adjective "unusual".
Since the late Eighties, at the outset of the database of the ancient Christian inscriptions from Rome, Carlo Carletti (the creator of the current Epigraphic Database Bari, now EDB[2]) and I came face to face with many *unusual* inscriptions, from different perspectives, in relation to the so-called "normal" ancient inscriptions.

I will try to explain it with an example (Figure 1).
As we can see, we had some troubles processing recurrent Christian inscriptions in which images, symbols, or generally non-alphabetical signs play a very special and important role in connection - or not - with texts or, also, with some single letters.

This odd feature of ancient Christian inscriptions is commonly explained supposing that these inscriptions were commissioned by non-alphabetized patrons to non-professional stone-cutters, but the issue is not so simple: moreover, we see

[1] http://www.currentepigraphy.org/2015/05/25/epigraphy-at-borders-bari/.
[2] http://www.edb.uniba.it.

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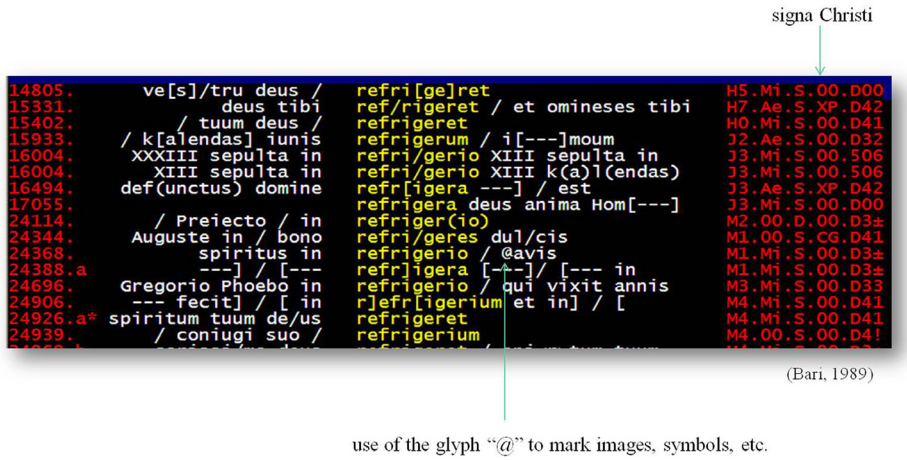

FIGURE 1. RESULTS BY SEARCHING THE STRING 'REFRIGER*' IN FORM OF KWIC LIST (SCREENSHOT FROM THE VERY FIRST DATABASE ABOUT ICVR, BARI 1989: IMAGE DIPARTIMENTO DI STUDI UMANISTICI, UNIVERSITY OF BARI 'ALDO MORO').

the same phenomenon also in contemporary Jewish inscriptions (Figure 2): it has evidently other reasons.

Today we still have trouble processing these documents in EDB, because the various relationships between texts and images (positioning, relative chronology, prevalence, mutual significance) are not encoded yet by current conventions and transcribing systems (even in EpiDoc). We can inform about the existence of these images only giving a short description in Latin, between double parenthesis: but, nothing about their positioning and their relation to the letters (Figure 3).

This is not an issue relating only to the Late Antique Christian - or also Jewish - inscriptions. Our experience with the

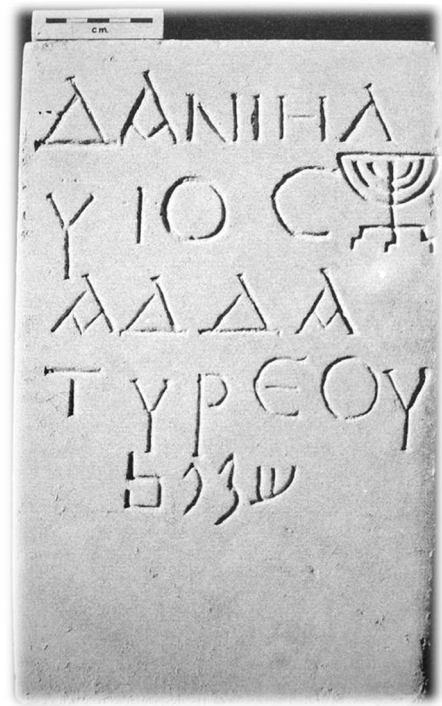

FIGURE 2. BETH SHE'ARIM (ISRAEL). EPITAPH OF DANIEL, FROM TYRE, WITH MENORAH WITH FINAL ACCLAMATION IN HEBREW SHALOM. 4TH CENT. (FROM SCHWABE AND LIFSHITZ 1974, N. 149).

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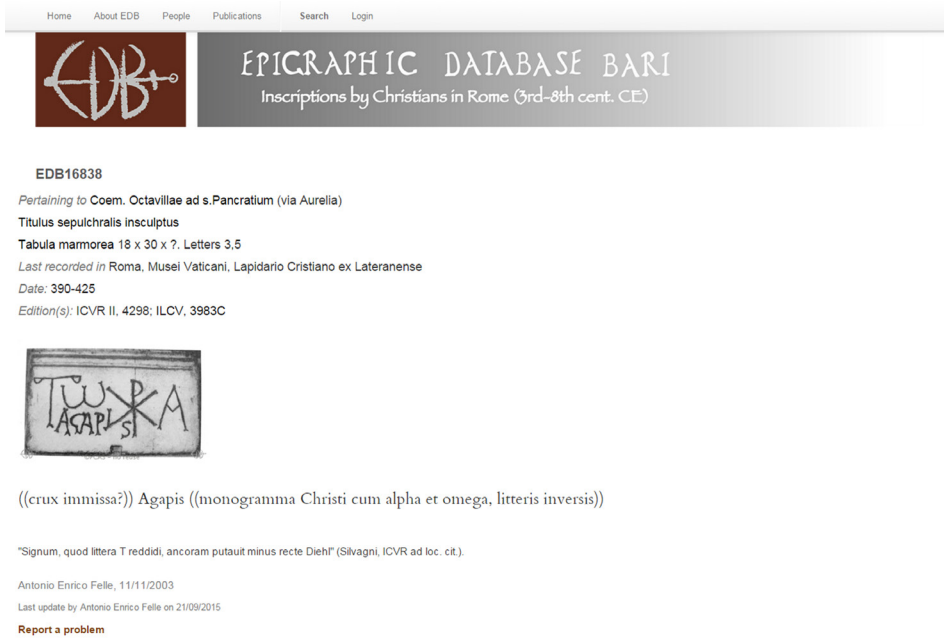

FIGURE 3. EDB16838 (HTTP://WWW.EDB.UNIBA.IT/EPIGRAPH/16838). END OF 4TH CENT. AD (IMAGE EPIGRAPHIC DATABASE BARI).

Epigraphic Database Bari - and with other databases - is probably the same as that of other scholars involved in similar projects. I believe that the issues presented here, in our 'shared space', can be approached thanks to the simultaneous attendance of specialists from various fields of epigraphy.

Bearing in mind this, we have organized the agenda of this meeting in Bari, thanks to the precious support of dr. Anita Rocco, evaluating those fields of epigraphy commonly considered, in some way, 'off the beaten tracks'.

We have therefore invited colleagues that are involved in projects of digitization and encoding of epigraphic documents – precisely 'at the borders' of the area of interest of the EAGLE Project (as written in our subtitle).

First of all, we have to consider these 'borders' from a chronological perspective. I draw your attention to two papers about two projects: one by Giulia Sarullo about the Archaic Latin Inscriptions between 7th and 5th cent. BC (*The Encoding Challenge of the ILA Project*) and the other by Luna Cacchioli and Alessandra Tiburzi, with the supervision of Nadia Cannata, about the Italian Middle Age vernacular inscriptions till the 14th cent AD, at the beginning of the Modern Age (*EDV - Italian Medieval Epigraphy in the Vernacular (9th - 15th c.): a new*

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database). These two projects, as far landmarks outside the external borders of ancient Greek and Latin epigraphy, define a very long time-span (more than 2000 years: 700 BC - 1500 AD) during which the realization, the use and the notion of 'written monuments' (according to a fitting definition of the inscriptions, see Manacorda 2000) are not always the same. On the contrary, they deeply changed: I do believe that the ways we used to encode inscriptions must consider their transformations from the standard model.

Maybe, many of us have a platonic idea when they say or hear the word 'inscription' or also 'epigraph': a white marble slab or block, with a brilliant blue sky as background, bearing letters wisely carved, corresponding to words in a perfect Latin or classical Greek. This image is not always true, not only in archaic times or in Late Antiquity, Middle Ages, or in Byzantium or in the Pre-islamic or Islamic world, but also in Greek and Roman "classical" world. I think that this is proved with particular evidence by Rebecca Benefiel and Holly Sypniewski's paper about the graffiti of *Herculaneum* (*Working with texts and images: The Graffiti of Herculaneum*).[3]

In my opinion, the graffiti (in every age: archaic, classical, medieval and after) will help us to light up the idea of our meeting: they lead us to ask ourselves several methodology questions, useful also for other kinds of inscriptions.

First of all, the difficulty in defining the physical dimensions of the material on which the graffiti are: what are their correct measures? They are indefinite, because the graffiti are scratched or engraved on various objects and surfaces, and in many places: sometimes they are not written on a wall (measurable, at last), but directly on rock surfaces: there are so many impressive examples,as for example in the Sacred Cave of St. Michael in Apulia, in Southern Italy (Figure 4).

In some cases, we can only record the dimensions of single letters; in this regard, the experience of the *Digital Archive for the Study of Pre-Islamic Arabian Inscriptions* (illustrated in the paper by Alessandra Avanzini, Annamaria De Santis, Daniele Marotta, Irene Rossi, *Is still Arabia at the margins of Digital Epigraphy? Challenges in the Digitization of the Pre-islamic Inscriptions in the project DASI*), [4] among which the so-called 'rock-inscriptions' are recurrent, can be very useful (as for other issues, of course, also about writing and language).

[3] See http://ancientgraffiti.wlu.edu/hgp/. I have also to remember, about this same topic ('anomalous' classical epigraphy), the important project led by José Remesal (University of Barcelona) on the Amphorae epigraphy (see DATABASE - CEIPAC Corpus informático del instrumentum domesticum, http://ceipac.gh.ub.es/), with all the issues about the formalization of this special epigraphic documentation. We previewed a lecture by J. M. Remesal at the meeting in Bari, but unfortunately he could not be present.

[4] See http://dasi.humnet.unipi.it/.

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Figure 4. Monte Sant'Angelo (Gargano, Northern Apulia, Italy). Graffiti on the rock in the Sacred Cave of st.Michael. 7th - 8 cent. AD (image Dipartimento di Studi Umanistici, University of Bari 'Aldo Moro').

The graffiti, such as they are, are *suo loco appliciti*: then, it is essential to describe and to encode their positioning, both in relation to the other ones on the same carrier, and to their general archaeological context, with the aim to define, respectively, their relative and absolute chronology. The *Ancient Graffiti Project* as well the *Epigraphic Database Bari* (which also records many epigraphs - graffiti or not - still in their original position), bring to our attention some questions and some answers - maybe useful to all of us - about the possible ways of recording the archaeological contexts of inscriptions: which features we have to consider, to describe, to encode? With which level of detail?

Other important issues which concern all kinds of inscriptions, are language and writing. Extemporaneous writers use in their scratched inscriptions a 'popular' speech and/or an ordinary writing (Figure 5), that often are very far from the accuracy we see in the standard inscriptions by professional stonecutters.

This phenomenon is recurrent - as well-known - in Christian and medieval inscriptions: we can read something about this issue (and about other ones) in the paper offered by Anita Rocco (*From officina lapidaria to D.I.Y: encoding inscriptions from the Roman Catacombs*), as like in the one by the équipe of Nadia Cannata.

I do not know which is the best way to encode the 'unusual' (not incorrect!) words and writings we meet in the inscriptions. But I am sure that this 'technical' issue (in this case as well as in other ones) implies an ontological reflexion by both epigraphers and IT experts.

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Figure 5. Rome, via Ardeatina, catacomb of Domitilla. Graffito in cursive writing. ICVR, III 8034; EDB24880. First half of 4th cent. AD (image Epigraphic Database Bari and Papal Commission of Sacred Archaeology)

Which is the proper aim of the transcriptions of the inscribed texts by the epigraphers?

As for the language issue, my opinion is that, firstly, we should transcribe the texts as they are; then, in some way, we should adapt them to a 'correct' language - both ancient and modern - 'correct' only because it represents a common background of users of the different digital corpus of inscriptions.

As for the writing issue, I think that the opportunity to use many digital images can be a huge help: nevertheless we have to catalogue the images and the various features of writing, in order to retrieve the documents, according to the very often neglected point of view of palaeography. A few months ago, I talked about this issue during a workshop organized by the committee of the corpus of the *Inscriptiones Medi Aevi Italiae* at the Centro Italiano di Studi sull'Alto Medioevo in Spoleto: unfortunately, a shared inventory of the terms defining different kinds of ancient and medieval writings does not exist yet: maybe, the experience in EAGLE about shared controlled vocabularies in relation to carriers, materials, and so on, could be useful to this purpose.

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Figure 6. Rome, via Ardeatina, catacomb of Domitilla. ICVR, III 7306; EDB24027. End of 3rd cent. AD (image Epigraphic Database Bari and Papal Commission of Sacred Archaeology)

Figure 7. Trani (Apulia, Italy), Cathedral. Images and texts scratched on a funerary limestone slab (from Carletti 1988). 7th - 8th cent. AD (image Dipartimento di Studi Umanistici, University of Bari 'Aldo Moro').

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Let's go back once more to the graffiti for a last issue (all of you can see how many are the issues for the epigraphers...): often we come across graffiti without any text or single letters (Figures 6-7).

May we consider them still as 'inscriptions', or not? We should ask ourselves the same question also in relation to many other 'unusual' documents traced on carriers in durable materials (according to another, old-fashioned, definition of the inscriptions) in different times and cultures.

In this respect, I would like to point out that the common idea of a structured relationship between texts and images in the inscriptions of the Classical world, maybe is not always true, as displayed in in the paper of Hannah Cornwell and Jane Masséglia, in relation to the documents considered in the Ashmolean Latin Inscriptions Project (*Signs, Symbols and Spaces in the Ashmolean Latin Collection*).[5]

The difficulty in describing and encoding the multifaceted relationship between texts and images is particularly high, both in Christian and Western Middle Ages inscriptions, but also - impressively - in the Byzantine world (see now a very interesting book: Eastmond 2015). The paper offered by Andreas Rhoby about the present status of projects of digitizing Byzantine inscriptions *(Challenges of Byzantine Epigraphy in the 21st Century*) obviously can not deal with all the issues about the very complex field of the Byzantine epigraphy (see Rhoby 2015): but, I think that the wide and strong experience of the EAGLE project can be very useful for the future digital corpus of these very important (and in many cases very *unusual*) inscriptions.

Facing these - and many other - questions raised by the 'off the beaten track' epigraphy implies a thorough analysis, to be carried out both by epigraphers and IT scholars, together.

As we have learned from our experience in the EAGLE project, this cooperation implies not only mere technical solutions, but can open the doors to new questions and new approaches to our documents, that can be seen under unexpected points of view, that the scholars of the IT domain can usefully offer to the epigraphers and generally to the scholars of the past (an example can be offered by Pio - Fumarola - Felle - Malerba - Ceci 2014).

I do believe that IT scholars could open the perspectives of the epigraphers to current orientations of our common field of research in the next future.

[5] http://www.ashmolean.org/ashwpress/latininscriptions/category/latin-inscriptions/.

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