Poetry on the Advance:*

The Emergence and Formation of a Poetic Culture in Roman Britain

I.

Reflecting on the usefulness of popularity to a poet, when esteem alone is not enough to pay one’s bills, Martial writes –

Non urbana mea tantum Pipleide gaudent
otia nec vacuis auribus ista damus,
sed meus in Geticis ad Martia signa pruinis
a rigido teritur centurione liber,
5
dicitur et nostros cantare Britannia uersus.
quid prodest? nescit sacculus ista meus.
at quam uicturas poteramus pangere chartas
quantaque Pieria proelia flare tuba,
cum pia reddiderint Augustum numina terris,
10
et Maecenatem si tibi, Roma, darent!

Not alone does Rome’s leisure rejoice in my Pipleis, nor do I give these pieces only to empty ears. My book is thumbed by hard centurions beside Mars’ standards in Getic frosts, and Britain is said to recite my verses. What’s the use? My purse knows nothing of all that. Ah, but what immortal pages could I indite, what mighty battles could I blow on Pierian trumpet, if, in restoring Augustus’ divinity to earth, the gods in their benevolence had given Rome a Maecenas too!

(Mart. 11.3, transl. D. R. Shackleton Bailey)

Nerva’s restoration, Martial implies, should have included provision of well-endowed patronage of the arts as well – funds to match Martial’s popularity across the entire Roman world.¹ Not commonly at the centre of attention, yet altogether remarkable in Martial’s epigram, is how Martial presents the dissemination and popularity of his works. Two aspects stand out. First, the circulation of his works is attributed to the Roman military (sed meus … ad Martia signa … / a rigido teritur centurione liber, lines 3–4). Secondly, circulation of Martial’s work is imagined to reach the very extremes of the Roman empire,² from the ‘Getic frosts’ (line 3) to – allegedly (dicitur) – Roman Britain, where Martial believed his verses were recited (nostros cantare Britannia uersus, line 5).³

* This project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement No. 832874 - MAPPOLA).
³ ‘[F]or the sake of my country’s reputation for literary taste, I hope this was not true!’ (B. Baldwin, African and British Lawyers in Juvenal, Hermes 117 (1989) 378–380, 379). On the actual evidence for the awareness of Rome’s literary poetry in Britain see e. g. A. A. Barrett, Knowledge of the Literary Classics in Roman Britain, Britannia 9 (1978) 307–313.
The way in which the Roman army, as a major factor contributing to relative mobility of individuals within the Roman empire, may be thought of as a driver behind the diffusion and general dynamic of Roman poetry and song, has not sufficiently been explored. Similarly, regionalised approaches to poetry and song as a cultural practice, subject to local, ethnic, social, and cultural variation and change, have not yet been pursued in a research context in which Roman poetry has largely remained a domain of study in upper-class entertainment and intertextuality. Not only is the common approach at odds with a methodology that has long, and successfully, been adopted otherwise in historical and linguistic research: it also excludes the vast majority of surviving poems from the Roman world, the Carmina Latina Epigraphica, from consideration – a body of texts that provides us with information about a cultural practice that, subject to substantial regional variation, literary poets stylised and drove to its artistic extremes.

When Rome’s establishment first began to take notice of Britain, in the context of Caesar’s expeditions, there appears to have been not much expectation of any advanced poetic culture in this area. Cicero, in a letter to Atticus written in the context of Caesar’s expedition of 54 B. C., expressed little hope in the existence of any musical culture in Britain that would be worth mentioning:

\[ \text{etiam illud iam cognitum est, neque argenti scrupulum esse ullam in illa insula neque ullam spem praedae nisi ex mancipiis; ex quibus nullos puto te litteris aut musicis eruditos exspectare.} \]

It is also now ascertained that there isn’t a grain of silver on the island nor any prospect of booty apart from captives, and I fancy you won’t expect any of them to be highly qualified in literature or music!

(Cic. Att. 4.17.7, transl. D. R. Shackleton Bailey)

Conversely, Agricola, governor of Britain after the more successful Claudian conquest of Britain almost a century after Caesar’s failed campaigns, felt the need to ‘upskill’ the offspring of Britain’s establishment in order for them to become functioning members of the Roman society:

---


5 Important groundwork on this topic, not least with a view to linguistic instruction and education within the centurionate, has been carried out by J. N. Adams, The Poets of Bu Njem: Language, Culture and the Centurionate, JRS 89 (1999) 109–134.

6 For relevant methodological considerations on this subject see now P. Kruschwitz, Ballistas Grabepigramm zwischen Kreativität und Tradition: Gedanken zur römischen Gedichtkultur, Gymn. 126 (2019) 147–165, esp. 163–165.


8 C. Fernández Martínez, Carmina Latina Epigraphica de la Bética Romana. Las primeras piedras de nuestra poesía, Sevilla 2007 thus, entirely appropriately, speaks of this poetry as the first building blocks of ‘our’ (i. e., in this instance: the Bética’s) poetry.

9 At the same time, this provided some with an opportunity to write poetry about Caesar’s campaigns; cf. P. Kruschwitz, Gallic War Songs (II): Marcus Cicero, Quintus Cicero, and Caesar’s Invasion of Britain, Philol. 158 (2014) 275–305.

10 On the underlying idea of ‘integration’ see P. V. Cova, L’integrazione dei Britanni secondo Tacito, Agr. 21, BSL 40 (2010) 62–65; cf. also K. Clarke, An Island Nation: Re-Reading Tacitus’ Agricola, JRS 91 (2001) 94–112. – For a discussion of Tacitus’ comments on liberty and slavery in the Agricola see now M. Lavan,
Tacitus presents matters as though the promotion and spread of Roman-style education and culture¹¹ (whatever that actually means, considering that the arrivals themselves were rather more heterogeneous than the collective noun ‘the Romans’ would seem to imply) simply replaced what had existed before. A much more plausible scenario is, of course, that elements of cultural practice and learning created a fusion that was unique and specific to Roman Britain, drawing its unique nature from already diverse local substrates¹² just as much as from Roman mainstream culture and local practices, but also from individual preferences,¹³ reflecting the background of all those who acted on Rome’s behalf, though they themselves too in their composition reflected the rich and complex ethnic and linguistic diversity of the Roman empire.¹⁴

Moreover he began to train the sons of the chieftains in a liberal education, and to give a preference to the native talents of the Briton as against the trained abilities of the Gaul. As a result, the nation which used to reject the Latin language began to aspire to rhetoric: further, the wearing of our dress became a distinction, and the toga came into fashion, and little by little the Britons went astray into alluring vices: to the promenade, the bath, the well-appointed dinner table. The simple natives gave the name of “culture” to this factor of their slavery.


¹¹ Aspects of rhetorical and legal training in Roman Britain are touched upon in Baldwin (above, nt. 3).
¹³ This aspect was raised in a slightly different context by C. Johns, Art, Romanisation, and Competence, S. A. Scott – J. Webster (edd.), Roman Imperialism and Provincial Art, Cambridge 2003, 9–23.
¹⁵ This research extends a number of considerations first developed in P. Kruschwitz, Rocky Starts: the Arrival of Roman Poetry in Britain, Omnibus 76 (2018) 17–19. Foundations to this research were laid by P. Cugusi, Carmi epigrafici della Britannia, Rend. Mor. Acc. Lincei IX 2, 2006, 199–232, esp. 226–231 (an updated version of which was subsequently published by P. Cugusi, Carmi latini epigrafici della Britannia (CLEBrìt), Epigraphica 76 (2014) 355–407, esp. 391–397): while Cugusi covered aspects of chronology and geographical spread, he did not consider in greater detail matters of social, ethnic, and historical patterns that emerge from the overall spread of texts across time and space.
Next to nothing appears to be known, and presumably can be known, about song as a cultural practice of the Britons prior to the Roman conquest,\textsuperscript{16} not least because there was no wide-spread use of writing systems among the local tribes.\textsuperscript{17} In that regard, it is also next to impossible to capture the specifics of the transformative impact that the arrival of the Roman forces and the Roman establishment in Britain had on local practices. Based on the census, and elucidation, of the Latin verse inscriptions from Roman Britain, though,\textsuperscript{18} as well as mindful of the ultimately random nature of the material that has come to light so far, it is possible, however, to gain a rather better understanding of the poetic landscape that formed in Britain from the mid-first century A. D. onwards.\textsuperscript{19} The following review will take stock of the evidence with a view to both chronological and geographical contexts in order to understand the ways in which poetic practices began to establish themselves across the island.\textsuperscript{20}

II.

Arguably the oldest surviving monumental verse inscription from Roman Britain comes from Wroxeter (Shropshire). The text, inscribed on a sandstone monument dated to the first century A. D., commemorates the life of an eagle-bearer of the fourteenth legion. It reads as follows:\textsuperscript{21}

\begin{verbatim}
[T(itus) Fl]aminius T(iti filius) Pol(lia tribu) Fa[uentia]
an[orun XXXV stip(endiorum) XXII mil(es) leg(ionis)]
[XII]II Gem(inae) militai(a) aquilifer), nunc hic s[u]m.
[Haec?] legite et felices uita plus min[us]
[eu]tac dat tempus, hone[ste].

[T]itrus Flami[nius], son of Titus, of the tribus Pollia, from Faventia, aged 45: With 22 years of service as
soldier of the 14th legion ‘Gemina’ I was bearer of the eagle: now I am here.
Read these words, and be happy in your life, more or less: as you approach the underworld,
the gods deny you the wine’s grape and water.
\end{verbatim}

\textsuperscript{16} But cf. e. g. S. Piggott, The Carnyx in Early Iron Age Britain, \textit{The Antiquaries Journal} 39 (1959) 19–32.
\textsuperscript{18} This is based on my edition in P. Kruschwitz, \textit{Undying Voices. The Poetry of Roman Britain}, Reading 2015 [URL: thepetrifiedmuse.wordpress.com/undying-voices], with the addition of P. Kruschwitz, ‘I shall touch it with care and respect’: à propos a hitherto neglected senarius from Roman Britain (\textit{EE VII} 928 = \textit{RIB} 659), \textit{ZPE} 204 (2017) 24–26.
\textsuperscript{20} The question as to which literary texts would appear to have informed the writers, while an interesting one, will be excluded from the discussion here, as there is no evidence either way that would prove (or disprove) the actual existence of editions in Roman Britain (however likely this scenario will have been): bearing in mind the relatively high level of mobility of new arrivals to Britain, it is not at all clear whether they resorted to local resources or relied on previously acquired knowledge.
\textsuperscript{21} Further on this piece see Cugusi 2006 (above, nt. 15) 202–203 n. 1 = Cugusi 2014 (above, nt. 15) 357–359 n. 1, Schumacher (above, nt. 19) 54–72 n. 2 (with photo), and R. S. O. Tomlin, \textit{Britannia Romana. Roman Inscriptions & Roman Britain}, Oxford – Philadelphia 2018, 29–30 n. 2.11.
Live life honestly, while the star of life permits.

(EE IX p. 534 = CIL VII 154 = CLE 806 = RIB 1 292 (cf. p. 76) = Undying Voices 3)

Titus Flaminius, originally also represented in a sculpture above the inscribed text, is introduced with his full credentials as a Roman citizen in his nomenclature as well as described as a long-serving, ranking military man in a distinguished position. Hailing from Faventia in Cisalpine Gaul, he is introduced in the first person and states his fate: nunc hic sum, ‘now I am here’ – far away from Faventia, in Britain, and no longer among the living. His final thoughts, as suggested by the poetic part of this inscription, a poem in three hexameters (lines 4–7) addressing a general audience, concern the pleasures of a life far away from the place of his eternal rest – the grapes that make the wine, and water. The advice he gives is simple: live life with decency while you can.

The military unit mentioned in this inscription, the Legio XIV Gemina, was involved in the Claudian invasion of Britain as well as in the Roman response to the revolt of Boudicca, and from the legion’s nomenclature in this inscription one may even reasonably deduce that Titus Flaminius had died before the Boudiccan revolt. While there can be no certainty at all that this is the oldest Latin poem ever written or recorded in Britain, it is certainly both an appealing and not an unreasonable thought that poetry arrived in the knapsacks of the Roman army – almost in the way in which Martial imagined, above. This picture does not change immediately as time progresses.

Poetry as an export is also the very idea behind what appears to be the second-oldest item of Latin verse recorded in Roman Britain thus far – a recently discovered, not yet fully documented inscription on a stylus (a writing utensil of all things!), dated to around A.D. 62–70, from the Bucklersbury site in the City of London. The text, engraved in four lines on the stylus, was given and translated as follows by Roger Tomlin:

Ab urbe u[e]n[i] munus tibi gratum adf(e)ro
aeccul[ eat]um ut habe[a]s memor[i]a m nostra(m)
rogo si fortuna dar[e]t quo possem
largius ut longa uia ceu sacculus est (u)acuus

I have come from the city. I bring you a welcome gift with a sharp point that you may remember me. I ask, if fortune allowed, that I might be able (to give) as generously as the way is long and as my purse is empty.

(University of Oxford, Centre for the Study of Ancient Documents, Newsletter 21, Spring 2018, 4–5 with drawings)

Slightly later, from the turn of the first to the second century A.D., dates an inscription from York, in which a father – a soldier or a veteran, most likely – mourns the loss of his daughter at the age of thirteen:

[Di(is)] M(anibus).
Corellia Optata an(norum) XIII.

---

23 The nomenclature is inconclusive. One must note the absence of any mention of the mother. The daughter’s name Optata might suggest a family link to North Africa where names of this type are particularly frequent, though the onomastic clue, without any supporting evidence, is by no means compelling.
24 Further on this piece see Cugusi 2006 (above, nt. 15) 203–204 n. 2 = Cugusi 2014 (above, nt. 15) 359–361 n. 2, Schumacher (above, nt. 19) 32–53 n. 1 (with photo), and Tomlin (above, nt. 21) 362 n. 12.72.
Secreti Manes, qui regna
Acherusia Ditis inculti-
tis, quos parua petunt post
lumina uit(a)e exiguus cinis
et simulacrum, corpoe|is um-
bra: insontis gnat(a)e geni-
tor spe captus iniqua
supremum hunc nat(a)e
miserandum defleo finem.
Q(uintus) Core(illius) Fortis pat(er) fac(u|a)tur.

To the Spirits of the Departed.
Corellia Optata, aged 13.

Reclusive Manes, inhabiting the Acherusian realm of Hades,
whom a little pile of ashes and the spirit do seek
after but a short light of life – the body’s shade:
I, the begetter of an innocent daughter,
trapped by wrongful hope, wretched,
wail this, my daughter’s ultimate destiny.

Quintus Corellius Fortis, the father, had this made.

(CIL VII 250 = CLE 395 = RIB I 684 = Undying Voices 1)

Also from York, and unambiguously related to Rome’s military establishment, another early poetic line, dating to earlier than A. D. 120 when the doomed Legio IX Hispana received its marching orders, is preserved on an altar dedicated to Silvanus by the secretary to the legionary legate.25

D[eo sancto]
Silua[no sacrum].
Lucius Celerini(?)us Vitalis cornicularius
Leg(ionis) VIII His(panae)
Uotum) solaeus) (aeus) libens) m(erito).
et donum hoc, donum
adpertiniat: cautm attiggam.

Sacred to the saint god Silvanus.

Lucius Celerini(?)us Vitalis, cornicularis of the Legio IX Hispana, fulfilled his pledge happily, willingly, and deservedly.

And this gift, let the gift pertain: I shall touch it with care and respect.

(EE VII 928 = RIB I 659)

With two funerary and one votive inscription, admittedly a small sample size, the earliest evidence for this emerging cultural practice in Roman Britain first appears in the exact contexts in which it also dominated outside of Britain.26

25 Further on this piece see now Kruschwitz 2017 (above nt. 18).
26 A number of texts that were discussed as carmina epigraphica from Roman Britain by others will be omitted from the present considerations. These include the following –
• Certainly, or almost certainly, not metrical:
  o EE VII 1141; RIB II 2491.147 = Undying Voices 12 (P. Kruschwitz, Going Out On the Tiles. RIB 2491.147, ZPE 196 (2015) 307–312),
III.

As Roman military units advanced further to the north, poetry followed, albeit – at least initially – not in its monumental form and shape. Poetry evocative of, but not directly based on, Vergil reached Hadrian’s Wall at Lodge Crag by Low Row (Cumbria), where individuals, presumably while quarrying stones for the fortification efforts related to Rome’s frontier and its associated structures, inscribed the following graffito:

\[ \text{Aurea per caelum uolitat Victoria pennis} \]

Golden Victory flutters through the sky with her wings.

\( (\text{CIL VII 844a = RIB I 1954 = Undying Voices 6 c}) \)

Possibly alluding to the honorific title of the Legio VI Victrix Pia Fidelis, and thought to have been inscribed in conjunction with the drawing of an altar and an express mention of said sixth legion, Latin verse thus emerged barely a mile away from the then northwesternmost frontier of the Roman empire. Somewhat further to the east, at Vindolanda (near Hexham, Northumberland), and presumably from a date slightly later in the second century A. D. as well, at least a couple of writers appear to quote Vergil more directly still – possibly in the context of writing exercises (though one cannot be certain about that).

- **Not datable to the period of Roman occupation of Britain:**
  - \( \text{RIB II 2503.102} = \text{Schumacher (above, nt. 19)} 171–175 \text{n. 15 (with photos), but cf. Cugusi 2006 (above, nt. 15) 214–215 n. 13 = Cugusi 2014 (above, nt. 15) 374–375 n. 13 in favour of a metrical nature, but reliant on the assumption of false quantities),} \)
  - \( \text{CIL VII 229 = RIB I 594} = \text{Schumacher (above, nt. 19) 157–162 n. 12, but cf. Cugusi 2006 (above, nt. 15) 224 n. 25 = Cugusi 2014 (above, nt. 15) 388 n. 25,} \)
  - \( \text{RIB II 2503.104} = \text{Schumacher (above, nt. 19) 169–170 n. 14, but cf. Cugusi 2006 (above, nt. 15) 224–225 n. 26 = Cugusi 2014 (above, nt. 15) 389 n. 26;} \)
  - \( \text{RIB II 2503.381} = \text{Schumacher (above, nt. 19) 205–207 n. 21, but cf. Cugusi 2006 (above, nt. 15) 225–226 n. 28 = Cugusi 2014 (above, nt. 15) 390–391 n. 28).} \)

- **Not from Roman Britain and not datable to the period of Roman occupation:**
  - \( \text{CLE 346 = RIB II 22415.72–73 (medieval: see Schumacher (above, nt. 19) 26–28, but cf. Cugusi 2006 (above, nt. 15) 214–215 n. 13 = Cugusi 2014 (above, nt. 15) 381–383 n. 19),} \)
  - \( \text{RIB II 2414.2a} = \text{late fifth or early sixth century: see Schumacher (above, nt. 19) 28–29, but cf. Cugusi 2006 (above, nt. 15) 221–222 n. 21–22 = Cugusi 2014 (above, nt. 15) 385–386 n. 21–22} \)
  - \( \text{CLE 714 = ILCV 1114 (mid-sixth century A. D.: cf. Cugusi 2006 (above, nt. 15) 223–224 n. 24 = Cugusi 2014 (above, nt. 15) 387–388 n. 24).} \)

Inclusion of the texts listed in the first category, in the event of disagreement with the decisions taken here, would not alter the qualitative picture that emerges from the texts utilised for the present study in terms of chronology, spread, and sociology.

Further on this piece see Cugusi 2006 (above, nt. 15) 211 n. 11 = Cugusi 2014 (above, nt. 15) 369–370 n. 11, Schumacher (above, nt. 19) 93–97 n. 5.

RIB I 1953.

The Legio VI Victrix appears to have arrived from Germany in A. D. 122, cf. L. Keppie, Legiones II Augusta, VI Victrix, IX Hispana, XX Valeria Victrix, in: Le Bohec – Wolff (above, nt. 22) I 25–37, esp. 30 (with nt. 67–69). On the legion in more general see e. g. A. R. Birley, VI Victrix in Britain, in: R. M. Butler (ed.), Soldier and Civilian in Roman Yorkshire, Leicester 1971, 82–96.

This explanation has commonly been adopted for the dialogical text of T. Vindol. II 118 = Undying Voices 11, on which see now P. Kruschwitz, T. Vindol. II 118: An Obscene Joke from Vindolanda?, Tyche 29 (2014) 271–272. A second potential reference to Vergil, though rather more problematic than the previous case, was noted for T. Vindol. II 121. (A problem not commonly addressed in the context of alleged writing exercises is the
By the late second and early third century A.D., verse at Rome’s northwesternmost frontier had begun to manifest itself in more monumental forms. Two pieces discovered in the area of Habitancum (Risingham, Northumberland) would appear to convey an idea of the lives and hardship endured by members of Rome’s military in hostile climes. The first one of these, from Habitancum itself, is an altar dedicated to the Nymphs in response to a premonition that one Fabius, a soldier, had in his dream:

Somnio prae-monitus
miles hanc ponere ius-
sit
aram quae Fabio nup-
ta est Nym-
phis uene-
randis.

Forewarned in a dream the soldier commanded to have this altar erected by her who is married to Fabius, to the venerable Nymphs.

(CIL VII 998 = CLE 263 RIB 1 1228 = Undying Voices 17)

While the nature of the premonition as such remains unclear, it is remarkable, and presumably meaningful, how specific the response is – not just an altar erected by Fabius, but, in fact, by his wife (whose name remains unknown). It may not be altogether absurd to infer that the dream involved some type of ill omen with an impact on the soldier’s wife and, considering the recipients of this altar, involving, or affecting, an aspect of nature, such as the life-giving powers of a local spring.

Life in a challenging environment has also been the theme in a second poetic piece, a heavily damaged funerary monument that was discovered near Habitancum, but north of Hadrian’s Wall (though it may have been moved to its eventual findspot for its secondary use):

[- - Flam]inii ++nsae

question as to why in virtually all cases any given text only ever appears once: is repetitio est mater studiorum not a key principle for any writing exercise?)

31 Further on this piece see Cugusi 2006 (above, nt. 15) 210–211 n. 10 = Cugusi 2014 (above, nt. 15) 368–369 n. 10, Schumacher (above, nt. 19) 87–92 n. 4, and Tomlin (above, nt. 21) 208 n. 9.15 (with photo).

32 Tomlin (above, nt. 21) 208 speculates that Fabius, possibly of Northern African extraction and in command of a military unit, is identical with one Fabius Honoratus mentioned in RIB 1482 (at Chesters), where a wife, Aurelia Eglectiane, is also mentioned. This is a plausible, but by no means certain, assumption: for one thing, miles would seem somewhat of an understatement for Fabius, if he had indeed been the commander of a unit at the time.

33 Further on this piece see Corpus Signorum Imperii Romani, Great Britain 1.8: Roman Sculpture from England (Oxford 1994) 98 (with photo pl. 72 n. 265), Cugusi 2006 (above, nt. 15) 209–210 n. 9 = Cugusi 2014 (above, nt. 15) 367–368 n. 9 and Schumacher (above, nt. 19) 98–107 n. 6 (with photos).
Although the heavily damaged state of this piece does not allow for any confident conclusions, the dread of northern frost and darkness seems palpable from the few words that do survive in this text.

The sky is also the theme in the final piece to be considered here, a dedication erected by one Marcus Caecilius Donatianus, a military tribune, dated to the second or third century A.D. and discovered at Carvoran (Northumberland).\(^{34}\)

\[\textit{Imminet Leoni Virgo caelesti} \]
\[\textit{situ specifera iusti inuentrix} \]
\[\textit{urbium conditrix:} \]
\[\textit{ex quis muneribus nosse contigit} \]
\[\textit{deos. ergo eadem Mater diuum,} \]
\[\textit{Pax, Virtus, Ceres, dea Syria} \]
\[\textit{lance uitam et iura pensitans.} \]
\[\textit{in caelo uisum Syria sidus edidit} \]
\[\textit{Libyae colendum; inde} \]
\[\textit{cuncti didicimus.} \]
\[\textit{Ita intellexit numine inductus} \]
\[\textit{tuo. Marcus Caecilius Donatianus} \]
\[\textit{militans tribunus} \]
\[\textit{in praefecto dono principis.} \]

Virgo, in her heavenly realm, is close to Leo:
    holding ears of grain, the inventor of justice,
    foundress of cities:
    gifts that allowed us to recognise the gods.
Thus she is also the Mother of the Gods,
    Peace, Virtue, Ceres, the Syrian Goddess,
    administering shares of life and justice with her scales.
Syria gave rise to this constellation, to be seen in the sky,
    to be worshipped in Libya;
    that is how we all have acquired our knowledge.
Thus came to understanding, persuaded by your divine will,
    Marcus Caecilius Donatianus,
    who serves the army as a tribune
    in the post of prefect, granted by the Emperor.

(CIL VII 759 = CLE 24 = RIB I 1791= Undying Voices 4)

Caecilius Donatianus, a ranking officer, appears to have composed this text as a reminder that, even in a hostile setting in which one may only hope for future prosperity, in a setting in which ethnicities from across the empire – from Syria to Libya – were united not only under Roman command, but also under the same sky, everyone still had something in common: the same desires, the same hopes, and the same religious beliefs (even if expressed in different terms).35 Into this mix of unifying factors, one may well add the use of inscribed verse – mostly alien still to the stretches from which this piece hails, but common practice in Roman North Africa and the Near East.

IV.

Monumental poetry in the immediate vicinity of Hadrian’s Wall not only remains closely associated with Rome’s military presence, but also profoundly reflects the specifics of this challenging environment and the hopes, fears, and desires of those who served the Roman empire. Poetry behind the front lines, in turn, increasingly begins to reflect the emerging and evolving civic life of the province.

Interestingly enough, funerary commemoration in verse is not as prominently attested in Roman Britain as it is elsewhere in the Roman empire. It is by no means altogether absent, however, as not only some of the aforementioned pieces, but also e. g. the following heavily fragmentary item from third or fourth century A. D. Lindum / Lincoln (Lincolnshire) shows:36

\[\text{[- - ]ES[- - ]} \\
\text{[- - a]x\textit{i}t\text{ d}ul\textit{ciss}ima\text{ pro-} \\
\text{\{es\ - - \}sa\ est\ comp\textit{a}re\ \textit{Ditis} \\
\text{[- - (post?)quan\text{}m\ est\ \textit{ab}lata\ repente \\
\text{[- - d]\textit{olui\ tua\ fata} \\
\text{[- - ]EN} \\
\text{[- - u\textit{x}it\ an(nos)\ \textit{VIII.}}\]

\[\text{\ldots\ldots.}\]

\[35\text{ It is altogether unnecessary to suggest a visit of Julia Domna as the occasion that sparked the erection of this monument, as some have suggested (cf. e. g. Tomlin (above, nt. 21) 373).}\]

\[36\text{ Further on this piece see Cugusi 2006 (above, nt. 15) 216–217 n. 15 = Cugusi 2014 (above, nt. 15) 376–377 n. 15 and Schumacher (above, nt. 19) 108–114 n. 7 (with photo).}\]
... she lived, our sweetest off-
   spring ... she was ... by Dis' companion
... after she was snatched away suddenly
   ... I was pained by your fate

... she lived 9 years.

(EE IX 1113 = CLE 2267 = RIB I 265 = Undying Voices 18)

Due to the fragmentary nature of this piece, not much can be said about the deceased and her family background. An important peculiarity of the civic life that began to form in the province of Britannia, and that persisted throughout its existence, is its peculiar ethnic composition – a composition in which arrivals from across the Roman empire, whether in the context of Rome’s military and administrative structure or otherwise, not infrequently maintained, and wished to assert, their links to their respective ethnic and geographic origins. This desire was already tangible in the inscription of Caecilius Donatianus. The same desire is evident in an inscription on a sarcophagus from York, tentatively dated to the second century A. D.:37

\[
\text{Iul(iae) Fortunat(a)e, domo}
\]
\[
\text{Sardinia. Verec(undio) Diogeni}
\]
\[
\text{fida coniuncta}
\]
\[
\text{marito.}
\]

For Julia Fortunata, whose homeland was Sardinia. To Verecundius Diogenes38 devotedly coupled, who was her husband.

(EE III 183 p. 313–4 = RIB I 687 = Undying Voices 14)

The wish to celebrate one’s non-local origins in verse remains visible, however, even in a poem dated to a time period as late as the fourth or fifth century A. D., inscribed on a tombstone discovered at Carlisle (Cumbria):39

\[
\text{D(is) M(anibus).}
\]
\[
\text{Fla(avius) Antigonus Papias}
\]
\[
\text{ciuis Gr(a)ecus uixit annos}
\]
\[
\text{plus minus LX. quem ad}
\]
\[
\text{modum accom(m)odatam}
\]
\[
\text{fatis animam reuocavit.}
\]
\[
\text{Septimia domina [- - -]}
\]

To the Spirits of the Departed.
Flavius Antigonus Papias,
Greek citizen, lived
60 years, give or take a few:
he made his soul return to the Fates,

37 Further on this piece see Cugusi 2006 (above, nt. 15) 204–205 n. 3 = Cugusi 2014 (above, nt. 15) 361–362 n. 3, Schumacher (above, nt. 19) 151–156 n. 11 (with photo), and Tomlin (above, nt. 21) 237 n. 9.51.
38 The same man is attested in an inscription of another sarcophagus from York, now lost, that identifies him as a sevir of York and the Morini as well as a citizen of the Bituriges, a tribe from central Gaul: RIB 678.
39 Further on this piece see Cugusi 2006 (above, nt. 15) 223 n. 23 = Cugusi 2014 (above, nt. 15) 386–387 n. 23, Schumacher (above, nt. 19) 163–168 n. 13 (with photo), and Tomlin (above, nt. 21) 377 n. 12.91 (with photo). Cf. also P. Kruschwitz, Three Short Notes on RIB 955 = CLE 1597, ZPE 195 (2015) 295–296 (with photo).
While it remains unclear what brought Antigonus Papias to Britain, it is obvious that, though mentioned with his Roman tria nomina, it appears to have been of importance to his honourand(s) that he was, in fact, of Greek descent and thus died away from home.40

A third text that must be mentioned in this context comes from Brough-under-Stainmore (Cumbria / Westmorland) and has been dated to the third century A.D. This inscription commemorates a young man called Hermes. Remarkably, this piece does not only allude to the foreign origin of Hermes, from Commagene in the very east of the Roman empire, but also celebrates him in Greek verse:41

May you, wayfarer, upon seeing sixteen years-old Hermes of Commagene, hurled into this tomb by fate, say the following words: ‘Greetings, you, boy, from me: though you crept not far ahead in your mortal life, you hasted as quickly as possible to the land of the Cimmerian people.’

Neither will you lie, for the boy was good, and you will do him a good service.

Reference to Hermes as παῖς (‘boy’, ll. 6 and 11) of ‘good’ quality (l. 11) may suggest that he had been a slave. Furthermore, the elaborate nature of the poem with its Homeric allusions may be taken as an indication that Hermes served someone of elevated social status – perhaps a military commander or ranking administrator?

Hermes’ funerary poem is by no means the only Greek verse inscription that has emerged from Roman Britain, and almost all42 instances can be seen in the context of both the

41 Further on this piece see Schumacher (above, nt. 19) 16–17 n. 2gr and Tomlin (above, nt. 21) 236 n. 9.50.
42 An exception is RIB I 241 (cf. below, section V).
ethnic diversity through the influx of arrivals from the eastern half of the Roman empire and
the cross-cultural fertilisation that such arrivals brought about through the import of their
poetic cultural practices. In two cases, this is linked to oriental cults at Corbridge
(Northumberland). A dactylic hexameter in a third-century inscription refers to the worship
of the Syrian deity of Melqart:

```
Ἡρακλεῖ
Τυρίωι(ι)
Διοδώρα
ἀρχέται.
```

For Hercules
of Tyre:
Diodora,
archpriestess.

(CIL VII p. 97 = IG XIV 2554 = RIB I 1129 = Undying Voices 13)

A second item, undated, mentions Astarte:

```
Ἀστήριτης
βομόν μ’
ἔσορξ:
Πούλχερ μ’

5 ἀνέθηκεν.
```

You behold me –
Astarte’s
altar:
Pulcher
consecrated me.

(CIL VII p. 97 = IG XIV 2553 = RIB I 1124 = Undying Voices 7)

Further away from the frontier, at Chester, a member of the medical profession, presumably
related to the legionary fortress and settlement of the late second century A. D., also
expressed himself in Greek:

```
Πανυπέροχα-
ζ ἀνθρώπων
σωτήρας ἐν ἀθα-
νάτουν

5 Ἀσκληπιών ἦ-
πάχεωμ’ (?) <θ’> ‘Ὑγε-
ὴν <καὶ> Πανάκαι-
ἀν εἰμιτρός (?)
‘Ἀντίωχος

- - - - -
```

---

43 Further on Oriental cults in Roman Britain see now E. Harris – J. R. Harris, Oriental Cults in Roman Britain
(Études préliminaires aux religions orientales dans l’Empire romain 6), Leiden 2015 (esp. 96 ff. on the cults of
Asia Minor and Syria).
44 Further on this piece see Schumacher (above, nt. 19) 17–18 n. 4gr.
45 Further on this piece see Schumacher (above, nt. 19) 17 n. 3gr.
235 n. 3 (with photo on plate XVIII n. 2) and, more recently, J. Clackson – T. Meissner, The Poet of Chester,
Those mortals’
  pre-eminent
  healers among the
  immortals,
Asklepios, healing-
  handed Hygieia,
  and Panakeia:
the doctor
  Antiochus

(SEG XXXVII (1987) 260 n. 840 = Undying Voices 21)

In all three instances it may have been the Greek and / or Oriental nature of the cults in
question that resulted in the specific choice of language. At the same time, both the linguistic
choice and the presence of the relevant cults (and the professions mentioned), not unrelated to
the composition and needs of the Roman army across Britain, is also testament to the actual
diversity of the individuals who made up the changing population of Roman Britain.

Further poetic evidence for professions related to the presence of the Roman army,
the emergence of local infrastructure, and also the use of inscribed verse in religious contexts
comes from Bowness-on-Solway (Cumbria), where an inscription, tentatively dated to the
third century A. D., conveys the hopes of a merchant for improvement of his financial
situation:47

... I, Antonianus, dedicate this.

But grant my requests, so that the proceeds of my business may lend credence to my promises:
I will consecrate a poem, in due course -- --
  -- -- with golden letters, every single one of them!

(CIL VII 952 = CLE 229 = RIB I 2059 = Undying Voices 5)

Especially remarkable for its objectification of poetry as a text that can be made more
precious by means of expensive materials employed for its very lettering, this piece appears
to commemorate the financial struggles of a merchant whose quaeustus (‘business’) was in
need of fetura (‘proceeds’) to such an extent that he asked for divine support. The nature of
Antonianus’ business is unknown, as is the answer to the question as to whether his prayers
were answered.49

47 Further on this piece see Cugusi 2006 (above, nt. 15) 215–216 n. 14 = Cugusi 2014 (above, nt. 15) 375–376 n.
14, Schumacher (above, nt. 19) 135–145 n. 9 (with photo), and Tomlin (above, nt. 21) 298 n. 11.23.
48 A first line has variously been restored as /Matribus deabus aed[em (cf. e. g. Tomlin (above, nt. 21) 298). My
autopsy of this monument in Carlisle’s Tullie House Museum did not corroborate this.
49 With the promise of an additional carmen in the future, this text is a remarkable key to the frame of mind
of an individual with regard to the potential reasons to engage in composing and inscribing verse: clearly a poem
as a piece of art was deemed a valuable gift – valuable enough for it to be deemed sufficient incentive to the
divine powers to support Antonianus’ uotum in the first place, and then even more so, if presented in gold, as
something that would satisfy them in exchange for economic success. In that respect, poetry as a manifestation
of creative art appears to have the same value as e. g. a votive sculpture.
A final aspect related to the evolution of Roman infrastructure that has had an impact on the local production and preservation of poetry in Britain is the maintenance of infrastructure at the hand of Roman officials. An altar from Catterick (North Yorkshire), datable to A. D. 191, provides one of two relevant examples:50

Deo qui uias
et semitas commentus
est. Aur(elius)
Dasso\(^2\) fecit u(otum) l(aetus) l(ibens) m(erito).
Q(uintus) Varius Vitalis
beneficiarius co(n)s(ularis) aram
sacram restituit
Apronian et Bradua
co(n)s(ularis).

To the god who conceived
roads and paths:
Aurelius
Dasso fulfilled his promise happily, gladly, deservedly.
 Quintus Varius Vitalis,
adjutant of the governor has restored
this sacred altar
under the consulship of
Apronianus and Bradua.

(CIL VII 271 = CLE 25 = ILS 3929 = RIB I 725 = Undying Voices 16)

A more widely discussed piece, however, as well as a piece in which the formation of its poetic content is definitely deliberate rather than potentially just accidental, is a fragmentary stone from Cirencester (Gloucestershire), dating to the late third or early fourth century A. D. most likely:52

I(oui) O(ptimo) [M(aximo)]
Lucius Sept[imius]
ur(p)erfectissimus pr(aes) B[rit(anniae) pr(ima)]
resti[tuit]
ciuis R[- - -]. ||
[si]gnum et
[e]rectam
[pr]isca re-
[li]gione co-
[l]umnam ||
Septimius
renouat
primae
provinciae
rector.

50 Further on this piece see Cugusi 2006 (above, nt. 15) 209 n. 8 = Cugusi 2014 (above, nt. 15) 366–367 n. 8, Schumacher (above, nt. 19) 146–150 n. 10 (with photo), and Tomlin (above, nt. 21) 268–269 n. 10.32.
51 A variant reading, T(itus) Ir[das s(ingularis) c(onsularis)], giving an otherwise unattested and implausible name, has been rejected, probably correctly, by N. B. Rankov, The beneficiarii consularis in the Western Provinces of the Roman Empire, DPhil. Oxford 1986 (1987), 124.
52 Further on this piece see Courtney (above, nt. 34) 152–153, 361–362 n. 161, Cugusi 2006 (above, nt. 15) 217–218 n. 16 = Cugusi 2014 (above, nt. 15) 377–378 n. 16 and Schumacher (above, nt. 19) 73–86 n. 3 (with photo).
To Jupiter, the Best and Greatest:
Lucius Septimius,
of equestrian rank, governor of Britannia Prima,
had this restored,
a citizen of R . . .
The statue and
the column that
was erected by
religious worship
of olden times
Are renewed by
Septimius,
the First
Province’s
master.

(EE IX 997 = ILS 5435 = CLE 277 = RIB I 103 = Undying Voices 8)

While the piece may not, as previously thought, belong into the context of pagan restoration under the rule of Julian the Apostate, it certainly belongs firmly into the context of celebrating infrastructural restoration in verse, adding the poem as a dignifying decorative element to an object of worship.

V.

In (reasonably) safe distance from the empire’s north-westernmost frontier, centres of Roman civic life began to develop. The relative stability and prosperity of life in these areas is mirrored in the poetic record that begins to represent the stratigraphy of a Romano-British society more fully. The poetry that emerges in the south and southeast in particular, on the one hand reflects the desires of a consolidated upper class to engage in lavish decorative displays of status and education on the one hand and the ability of lower social strata to convey their humour through short compositions in the form of graffiti.

The former of these two aspects can be seen in examples of verse employed for decorative uses in elite villas in Kent. Fragments of wall plaster from a Roman villa at Otford, dated to the second century A. D., quote Vergil’s Aeneid accompanied by a pictorial representation of a relevant scene:

Bina manu [ato crispans hastilia ferro ?]

[Brandishing] two [spears with] b[road heads] in his hand...

(RIB II 2447.9 = Undying Voices 6 b)

A large mosaic representing the abduction of Europa by Jupiter in disguise as a bull, discovered in the context of a lavish Roman villa at Lullingstone and datable to the first half

---

53 Cf. RIB I p. 758 ad n. 103.
of the fourth century A.D., takes a witty, wholesomely feminist stance on Jupiter’s escapade with a less than subtle allusion to the Aeolus episode in the first book of Vergil’s *Aeneid*:

\[
\text{Inuida si t[a]uri uidisset Iuno natatus,}
\]
\[
\text{iustius Aeolias isset ad usque domos.}
\]

Had jealous Juno seen the bull’s swimming attempts,
More rightfully still would she have approached the halls of Aeolus.

\[(RIB \ II \ 2448.6 = \text{Undying Voices 2})\]

Only slightly later in date than the Lullingstone mosaic, from the late fourth century A.D., is another mosaic – a (damaged) piece that was discovered in the context of a Roman villa at Frampton (Dorset), in which mythical scenes were accompanied by ecphrastic verse:

\[\text{Neptuni uertex, reg(i)men} \]
\[\text{sortiti mobile uentis, } || \]
\[\text{scul(ptu)<ra> cui c(a)erulea est[|]} \]
\[\text{delfinis cincta duob[us].} \]

\[
[- - -] \]
\[
[- - -] || \]
\[\text{mun<us perficis ullum,} \]
\[\text{[i]gnare, Cupido.} \]

The head of Neptune: a kingdom,
Driven by the winds, he has been assigned.
His appearance is blue,
Surrounded by two dolphins.

... ... you achieve any task,
silly Cupid!

\[(EE \ III \ p. \ 311 = CIL \ VII \ 2 = CLE \ 1524 = RIB \ II \ 2448.8 = \text{Undying Voices 10})\]

Rather less clear than the previous examples, yet possibly similar in a once decorative function, is the context of a (now lost, undated) piece from Wilcote (Oxfordshire). The fragment of a copper plate preserved but a single word – yet the shape of the single word that survives suggests that it once was part of a poem in epic verse:

\[
[- - -] \pi\tau\omicron\lambda\mu\omicron\omicron\omicron\iota[n [- - -] \]
\[
[- - -]+\Gamma\Sigma(?)[ - - -] \]

... in battles...
.......

\[(EE \ IX \ 1003 = RIB \ I \ 241 = \text{Undying Voices 19})\]

\[55\] Further on this piece see M Henig, *The Secret of the Lullingstone Mosaic*, Kent Archaeological Review, 139 (2000) 196–197, Cugusi 2006 (above, nt. 15) 218 n. 17 = Cugusi 2014 (above, nt. 15) 378–380 n. 17, Ling (above, nt. 53) 78–79 (with photo), Schumacher (above, nt. 19) 208–218 n. 22 (with photo), and Tomlin (above, nt. 21) 282 n. 11.02.

\[56\] Further on this piece see Cugusi 2006 (above, nt. 15) 220–221 n. 20 = Cugusi 2014 (above, nt. 15) 383–384 no.20, Ling (above, nt. 54) 79–82 (with engraving), and Schumacher (above, nt. 19) 219–234 n. 23.

\[57\] Cf. Schumacher (above, nt. 19) 16 n. 1gr.
With less focus on lavish display, but rather a desire to document one’s quick wit, a small number of poetic (or at least: poeticising) graffiti document a consolidated poetic culture across social strata beyond the upper class. This is certainly true for an inscribed tile from Silchester (Hampshire), perhaps datable to the second century A.D., in which the notorious opening of the second book Vergil’s *Aeneid* has been adopted and wittily recontextualised in what may have been a quasi-curse:58

Pertacus, Perfidus,
Campester, Lucilianus,
Campanus: conticuere omnes.

Pertacus, Perfidus,
Campester, Lucilianus,
Campanus: they all fell silent.

*(EE IX 1293 = RIB II 2491.148 = Undying Voices 6 a)*

It also holds true for an actual leaden curse tablet from Kelvedon (Essex) which was read as follows and interpreted as of iambic rhythm by Paolo Cugusi:59

Quicumque res Vareni in-
uolauerit si muler (!) si mascel (!)
sanguno (!) suo soluat
et pecunie (!) quam exes(ol)u’ erit’
Mercurio dona(t) et Virtuti s(acra).

Whoever has stolen the property of Varenus, whether woman or man, in his own blood and from the money which he has consumed let him pay gifts to Mercury and sacred offerings to Virtue.


Finally, a rather puzzling matter, also almost certainly unrelated to any upper-class activity, is a recurring line that was first discovered on two tiles from Binchester (country Durham), probably dating to the third century A.D.60 The shorter variant of the two reads as follows:

Armea me docuit.

*(EE VII 1146 = EE IX 1290 = CLE 1939 = RIB II 2491.146 (ii) = Undying Voices 15 a)*

The longer version reads thus –

58 Further on this piece see Cugusi 2006 (above, nt. 15) 205–206 n. 4 = Cugusi 2014 (above, nt. 15) 362–364 n. 4 and Schumacher (above, nt. 19) 179–184 n. 17 (with photo). – The same Vergilian line would also appear to feature on a sherd of a bowl that was discovered at St Albans (Hertfordshire), *RIB* II 2502.51 (on which cf. Cugusi 2006 (above, nt. 15) 224–225 n. 26 = Cugusi 2014 (above, nt. 15) 389–390 n. 26; Schumacher (above, nt. 19) 176–178 n. 16 remained doubtful over the correct reading, but cf. now R. S. O. Tomlin, *Britannia* 46 (2015) 419.

59 Further on this piece see R. P. Wright, Roman Britain in 1957: Inscriptions, *JRS* 48 (1958) 150–155, esp. 150 n. 3 (with drawing) and Cugusi 2006 (above, nt. 15) 231–232 (‘Appendice’) = Cugusi 2014 (above, nt. 15) 400 (‘Appendix II’).

60 In theory, a date in the late first century A. D. would also be possible. This, however, can now be ruled out with great certainty as a result of a new find (below, nt. 61). – Further on both pieces see Cugusi 2006 (above, nt. 15) 207–208 n. 5–6 = Cugusi 2014 (above, nt. 15) 364–365 n. 5–6; Schumacher (above, nt. 19) 185–191 n. 18 (with photo of *RIB* II 2491.146 (i) = *Undying Voices* 15 b), and Tomlin (above, nt. 21) 289 n. 11.11.
Armea me docuit ‘recte
tibi’ dicere cunctis.

(RIB II 2491.146 (i) = Undying Voices 15 b)

– which tentatively was translated as follows:

Armea (?) taught me to say
‘you’re right’ to everyone (or: everything).

This set has very recently been supplemented by a third find, in the shape of a graffito on a pot base from East Farleigh (Kent), published by Alex Mullen and Roger Tomlin, suggesting that the text itself was a more widespread little composition, even if the overall interpretation, and especially the meaning of ‘Armea’, remain unclear. ⁶¹

VI.

As far as recorded poetry is concerned, Britain was a blank canvas prior to the arrival of Rome’s legions: a geographical space for which it is possible to witness the emergence and formation of a cultural practice, well-established in other parts of the Roman Empire, over a discrete period of time and dependent on social, cultural, ethnic, linguistic, and economic factors that underpinned provincial life in Britain in more general terms. While there is no reason at all to suggest that poetry and song were altogether absent from Britain’s pre-Roman cultures, it is clear that new arrivals import cultural practices that they are familiar with and that hold meaning to them. Down to its very end, by the time Roman rule is lifted, poetic composition in Britain remains the domain of foreigners most of all, joined eventually by a locally formed elite.

Beginning with funerary commemoration in verse in central Britain, at least in one instance unambiguously linked to an arrival from mainland Italy, a lightheartedly inscribed writing utensil, and a religious dedication, the production of verse at first followed Rome’s fighting forces to the north – very much following the logic of Martial’s epigram that emphasises a link between the spread of Roman poetry and the mobility of Rome’s army. At Hadrian’s Wall, after a phase of informal writing, monumentally inscribed verse begins to surface, and it is from there that the empty spaces in the hinterland, all the way to the south and southeast of England, begin to see an increasing engagement with poetic compositions. Eventually, as a new-style elite began to form, even lavish decorative uses of poetry – in the shape of musive and painted texts – appeared.

When compared to other provinces, Britain developed an almost unique poetic identity in its surviving verse inscription. While funerary carmina exist, they do not, unlike in other places, dominate the material. Much rather, there is an especially high number of religious texts among Britain’s inscribed poems – from religious cults that are sustained and supported by state officials to expressions of individual and personal belief to mythical allusions. Not only in these texts, but more generally, a distinct sense of fragility, a life that is constantly under threat and in danger, prevails – a sensation that other provinces, even under similar conditions, do not appear to display to a similar extent in their verse inscriptions.

⁶¹ A. Mullen – R. S. O. Tomlin, More from the Romano-British Poets? A Possible Metrical Inscription from East Farleigh, Kent, Britannia 50 (2019) 47–54, who, based on a reading of as (?) mea in the newest addition to the corpus, have suggested that the especially bizarre formation Armea may, in fact, be an incorrect rendering of ars mea.
There is no teleology, inherent or otherwise, no plot in the attestation and spread of verse inscriptions anywhere in the Roman Empire – and the picture that begins to form through their study, in any given context, may be very incomplete and non-representative. Considering the small sample size of relevant texts from Roman Britain, even a very small number of additions to the corpus may have fundamentally transformative potential to analyses and interpretations. Yet the picture that seems to form through the combination of chronological and geographical information about the surviving texts on the one hand and factors related to social, ethnic, historical context and circumstance on the other, is a compelling one – designed to provide an in-depth understanding of verse as a cultural practice that manifests, and transforms, itself continually in the multi-ethnic and multilingual realities of the Roman Empire, driven by substantial levels of individual and group mobility as well as contact and exchange of an ever-changing mixture of cultures, religions, and languages.