

Verses in Latin Inscriptions: From Rhythm and Rimes to Aesthetics

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Estelle Ingrand-Varenne:

Verses in Latin Inscriptions: from Rhythm and Rhymes to Aesthetics. The example of La Sauve-Majeure.

The great majority of Medieval Latin inscriptions were written in prose; nevertheless, a small but significant part of the epigraphic production used verses in Antiquity and the Middle Ages. Poetry represented, in fact, about 15% of the epigraphic texts in the 11th to 13th centuries.

In epigraphy, verse was employed for all sorts of subjects (religious and profane) and various supports and material (tombs, stained-glass windows, wall paintings, bells, crosses, reliquaries etc.). The use depended on the author's willingness, his culture and his taste. They were above all an ornament and thus took part in the decor. Medieval inscriptions did not develop specific kinds of verses; they reused the two great meters bequeathed by Greeks and Romans: the dactylic hexameter and the pentameter, which together form the elegiac distich.

There is no specific terminology under which to group these versified inscriptions, as is the case with "epigram" in the Byzantine world. Funerary poetry is well identified and was considered a real "genre", but can we speak about an "epigraphic poetry", with specific qualities different from poems in other contexts? I believe that this question has never been asked of the Latin Middle Ages, but it is a point worth thinking about. In order to answer this question, one must define beforehand what poetry is. In the Latin Middle Ages, prose could have a strong poetical character and the divide between prose and poetry often blurred.[1] Even if this aspect will not be developed in this paper, we must keep it in mind.

In order to understand this "epigraphical poetry", its actual functioning, and the links between poetry and epigraphy, in linguistic, literary and historical perspectives, I propose to analyze in detail one example in the Sauve-Majeure abbey. This Benedictine abbey (located nearly 30 km from Bordeaux, between the Garonne and the Dordogne rivers, in Entre-deux-

[1] See BOURGAIN P., « Qu'est-ce qu'un vers au Moyen Age ? », *Bibliothèque de l'École des chartes*, t. 147, 1989, p. 231-282; KELLY D., *The Arts of Poetry and Prose*, Turnhout : Brepols, 1991, p. 39-40.

Mers, along the routes to Compostella) was founded in 1079 by Gérard de Corbie, and was under the protection of the Dukes of Aquitaine. In this abbey, embedded in the columns which supported the transverse ribs of the nave, twelve medallions were inscribed with verse inscriptions at the beginning of the 13th century. Each medallion focuses on one apostle and reminds congregants in two verses of the apostolic mission (to preach, to govern, to found and to sanctify the Church), and then the place and the conditions of his martyrdom. Only 6 medallions still exist today, but the 6 others inscriptions are known thanks to a testimony of dom du Laura in the 17th century.[2]

Verses:

The inscriptions engraved in the medallions of La Sauve-Majeure epitomize the Latin poetry of the High Middle Ages, because they use the Latin hexameter (a line made from six feet, spondee or dactyl, even if many poetic liberties were allowed). First example, in the two verses for saint Jude, we have :

Dūm [dŏ]cĕt/ ēt p(ēr)/ sē crē/dūnt Jh(ē/s)ū t(ĭb)ĭ/ Pērsē
Jūdā/ pō(n)tĭfĭ/[cūm] glădĭ/ō fĕrĭt/ āgmĕn ĭ/nīcū(m).[3]



Figure 1: Medallion for Saint Jude. Photo: E. Ingrand-Varenne.

[2] *Corpus des Inscriptions de la France Médiévale* V, 38, p. 128-133.
[3] Translation: While Jude is teaching, and that, thanks to him, Persians believe in you, o Jesus, an impious troop of priests strikes him with a sword.

Hexameter was the main metrical structure in the inscriptions and the meter most used in the Middle Ages and Antiquity, employed by Virgil and Ovid, the two authors most read during the medieval period. The dactylic hexameter was a long meter which offered the advantage of easily following the syntactic schema; verse and sentence were in harmony and formed the same unity, even if there were rejets (or carry-overs) and enjambments. This meter was most often used in distich, as in the inscriptions of La Sauve-Majeure.

The medieval innovation in poetry was the invention of conscious rhymes, a sound structure adding to the metrical structure, foreign to Classical Latin poetry. Leonine rhyme – that is, an internal rhyme between the last or last two syllables before the obligatory caesura (the word break in the middle of the third foot) and the last or last two syllables of the line – was the most common type of rhyme in verse inscriptions. For example:

*Dūm [dŏ]cĕt/ ēt p**(ēr)/ sē** // crē/dūnt Jh(ē/s)ū t(ĭb)ĭ/ P**ērsē***

*Jūdā/ pō(n)tĭf**ĭ/[cūm] //** glădĭ/ō fĕrĭt/ āgměn ĭ/n**īcū(m)**.*

Leonine rhyme was particularly fashionable in the 12th and 13th centuries across the whole of Latin poetry. The rhyme could also be a rhythmic and a formal structure; it emphasized the meaning of the verses, helped to construct the sentence by groups of words between two rhymes. The rhyme strengthened the mnemonic power of the verse. In each distich, the poet of La Sauve-Majeur tried to alternate feminine and masculine rhymes. In another example, we have verses for saint Andrew:

*Urb[s] ŏpŭ/lēntă **Pă/trās** // […] / tē dū(m) / ōmĭnă / **pāt(r)as***

*P(rē)dīcāt / Andr**ē/ās** // q(uē)m / pōst c(r)ŭcĭ/fīx(ĭt) E/g**ēas**.*[4]

Two full leonine hexameters comprise this distich, but there is also a common rhyme *-as*, so theses verses are also *unisoni*. In the first hexameter, the rhyme is strengthened by a rhetorical figure: *annominatio* or paronomasia, that is, a figure of sound, a play upon words which sound alike (*Patras* the city/*patras* the verb *patro*, *are*); this was used very much in epigraphic discourse and was more generally really appreciated by medieval authors, readers and listeners.

The verse inscriptions of La Sauve-Majeure did not have a specific layout that enhanced the meters; nevertheless the use of the space was conspicuous: the text engraved around the medallion was circular (from the halo) and the text in the picture could be legible horizontally (on two lines for saint James) or vertically, in column (for saint Peter). More

[4] Translation: Patras, rich city … since you achieve the prediction; Andrew is preaching and then Egeas crucified him.

generally, verses were less enhanced in epigraphic material than in manuscripts. Most of the time, this was due to the material support, but verses were sometimes written with line breaks or with strokes converging on the same rhyme (examples of this occur at Elne[5] and Saintes[6]), or with specific punctuation identifying the boundaries of each verses.

In conclusion of this first part, one can say that verse inscriptions were not very original, neither in the metric, nor in the graphic forms. If there was an "epigraphic poetry", it has to be sought somewhere else.

A literary work:

I would like to propose two hypotheses about these inscriptions that might seem rather mundane after this first part. The first hypothesis is that they could be read on two levels: the first one and the most obvious is the scale of the medallion in each pillar with its two hexameters, the second is the scale of the church with only one long poem, spread across the twelve distiches. Why only one poem? Because, even if the distiches are syntactically independent, there is a strong thematic unity (apostolic college) and the symmetrical structure and the stylistic features show that these verses are of a piece. Moreover, from a theological point of view, the apostles are not separated entities, but they form a unit; there are not only twelve apostles, but there is an apostolic college.[7] The whole poem thus would read:

Telis Hyrthaci narratur in urbe feraci
Nadaber inflictus Matheo letifer ictus.
Dum docet et per se credunt Jhesu tibi Perse
Juda pontificum gladio ferit agmen inicum.
Convertenda a Deo datur India Bartholomeo
Regis obeditur […] hic ense feritur.
Pe[n]is multimodis furor [o]lim fecit Herodis
Sanctos puniri Jacobum[que] mucrone feriri.
Exit ab errore Petri[que] receptat ab ore
Sacram Roma fidem [Nero crucifigit] ibidem.
Ur[bs] opulenta Patras […]es dum omina patras
Predicat Andreas quem post crucifixit Egeas.
Qui primo Saulus est dictus postea Paulus

[5] Epitaph of the bishop Guillaume Jordan, died in 1186. *CIFM* XI, 49, p. 60-61, pl. XXI, fig. 43-44.
[6] Epitaph of Béranger. *CIFM* I-3, Charente-Maritime 31, p. 116-117, pl. LX, fig. 77-78.
[7] *Dictionnaire de théologie catholique*, fascicule VI, article « apôtres » de J. Bainvel, col. 1647-60.

Altior in donis Rome ruit ense Neronis.
Qui […] corrumpi […] nec igne […]
Johannes cum vivis ethere vivit.
Thomas quem voluit sua tangere vulnera Christus
Mysta Dei cecidit apud Indos cuspide cesus.
In Phrygie gentem Philippum verba serentem
[…] crucifigunt Ierapolite.
Dum Jaques/Jacobus hortatur Judeos excerebratur
Nam ferit injuste justum plebs impia fuste.
Postquam sorte datum Mathias pontificatum
Pluribus explevit annis in pace quievit.

My second hypothesis is more an intuition than a proved assertion, but I would like to submit it. I think this text was not written expressly to be engraved. It might have existed beforehand; one can imagine that it was a didactic poem to easily keep in mind the apostles' martyrdom, but for this I have no real proof, because no source has been found.

Why think that this poem was already written? This text is different in several points from the other verses intentionally written for epigraphic supports (furthermore linked to a picture). First, the verb *narratur* in the first medallion for saint Matthew is rarely employed in epigraphic texts, because they are simply not narrative most of the time. Its use can of course be justified by the meter, but it remains unusual. Then again, this poem does not have the stylistic features so characteristic of epigraphic discourse, that is to say deictic words (terms anchored in the context, often used with pictures, for example *hic*)[8] or formulas. The poet did not use ready-made rhymes (as was often the case in funerary poems).

These verses are not only very far from the common "epigraphical poetry", but also they employ an original vocabulary because of the subject (the apostles' martyrdoms). The lexical field of the weapons (which were represented in the right hand of each apostle, but unfortunately many have disappeared today) and of the violent death is very used: with common nouns such as *telum* (spear weapon, Matthew), *letifer ictus* (fatal stroke, Matthew), *gladius* (sword, Judas), *ensis* (sword, Bartholomew and Paul), *mucro* (sharp end of a sword, James Major), *cuspis* (tip, spear, Thomas), *fustis* (stick, James Minor), and verbs such as *infligo* (to dash, Matthew), *ferio* (to strike, Judas, Bartholomew, James Major), *punio* (to punish, James Major), *crucifigo* (to crucify, Andrew, Philip et Peter), *cado* (to fall, to die,

[8] There is one exception: the *hic* in Barthelemy's medallion.

Thomas), *excerebro* (to take the brain out, literally, James Minor). Mathias, the apostle who was elected in replacement of Judas, is the only to be said: *in pace quievit*; (following tradition, John has not been martyred, but here, the distich is not complete). The whole poem shows real research into composition and a literary work.

The link between epigraphy and poetry, and certainly the explanation for the reuse of this poem, is the ability to condense, to compress ideas into just a few words: in this case, the martyrdom of each apostle, which is the matter of many long narratives, has been reduced to two verses each. The name of the saint is given along with the people, the region or the city he had evangelized (Nadaber for Matthew, Persians for Judas, India for Bartholomew and Thomas, Rome for Peter and Paul, Patras for Andrew, the Jews for James Minor), their opponents (especially kings or likewise: Hyrtacus against Matthew, Herod against James Major, Nero against Peter and Paul, Egeas against Andrew), and not least, the way they died for Christ. The pictures carved in the medallions propose a different story from the inscriptions, or more exactly, they show the continuation: indeed, the kings that had made apostles suffer are now literally trampled by them (with the exception of Matthew whose feet are posed on vegetal matter, and Judas who is holding a dragon underfoot). The apostles are standing up, with halos, and are considered as saints and martyrs.

The poetic compactness perfectly fits the needs of epigraphic texts. Medieval inscriptions are naturally brief and have a low textual volume. 9 words is the median according to statistical studies;[9] the inscriptions of La Sauve-Majeure are made of 12 words on average. The material has been specially selected, each word is important. Authors not only had to condense their words, but also to evoke and to suggest. The verse inscriptions for the apostles were like an abstract with key-words or tags of the apostolic story already known by the readers. The numerous proper nouns in this poem certainly help to make connections in the reader's memory with his own knowledge, and propose an intertextual work.

To sum up this part, poetry enhances the features of the epigraphic discourse, and when poetic form and epigraphy meet, they strengthen together. "Epigraphical poetry" is made of texts expressly written to be inscribed and texts really inscribed, but also as poems with an epigraphic aim but without materialization known, and verses coming from other sources (a sort of rerouting or second use).

[9] See my Ph.D. thesis, *Langues de bois, de pierre et de verre. Histoire du langage épigraphique et de son passage du latin au français (Ouest de la France, XII^e^- XIV^e^ siècles)*, 2 vols, defended on March 2013 (advisors: Cécile Treffort and Cinzia Pignatelli), vol. 1, p. 118.

The epigraphic contribution: a monumental poetry

If the poem of La Sauve-Majeure already existed, what changed once it was engraved? The answer is twofold: a monumental character and a liturgical echo. The context transformed the poem.

The twelve medallions were embedded in the columns which supported the transverse ribs of the nave. This localization was significant. The apostles were metaphorically called "pillars" of the universal Church in the New Testament (Gal II, 9; Eph II, 19-20; Ap XXI, 4). This metaphor was widely developed by the first Christian authors and was particularly strong for 12th-13th c. spirituality.[10] Moreover, it was used in the rite of dedication of a church.

In the medallions, each apostle holds in the left hand a little church (with a different form in each case), symbol of the very church he founded. According to the paleographic analysis, these medallions seem to have been engraved in the first part of the 13th c.; that is why they have been linked with the dedication of the new church in 1231 (a rebuilding project had begun a few decades before this, because the abbey had been wrecked in the middle of the 12th c.). Some scholars hypothesize (because of the solemnity of this liturgical feast in La Sauve-Majeure)[11] that the dedication of the church was followed by anointing with chrism the internal walls of the church where twelve crosses were painted or carved, and beneath where candles were fixed, and that these crosses were replaced by the twelve medallions. Actually the form of the medallion reminds one of the circular form in which crosses were painted.

Even if it is an attractive hypothesis, there is no proof that the two events were concomitant. Nevertheless, it is obvious that, thanks to the inscribed texts and the carved pictures, these medallions took part in the "building of the church/Church", the monumental edifice itself, and the universal congregation, and they explicitly echoed the liturgy.

A question remains on hold: if it is only one poem, where is its beginning in a literary and monumental perspective? Which way should we follow for the reading? The editors, who published the verses, gave first the inscriptions *in situ* and then the lost verses. But it is not certain that the medallions *in situ* are still located in their original pillar. The verb *narratur* in Matthew's distich could mark the beginning of the text:

*Tēlīs / hyrth**ā/cī** // nār/rātŭr ĭn/ ūrbĕ fĕ/r**āci***

*Nādăbĕr/ īnfl**īc/tūs** // + Mā/thēō/ lētĭfĕr/ **īctus***

[10] VERGNOLLE É., « La colonne à l'époque romane. Réminiscences et nouveautés », *Cahiers de civilisation médiévale*, n°162, avril-juin 1998, p. 141-174 ; CAFFIN A.-G., « Les apôtres, porteurs des croix de consécration », *Les Cahiers de PACoB*, n°2, décembre 2007, p. 16-21.

[11] See HIGOUNET C., HIGOUNET-NADAL A., *Le Grand cartulaire de la Sauve Majeure*, Bordeaux, 1996, vol. 2, n°1456, p. 836-837.



Figure 2: Medallion for saint Matthew. Photo: E. Ingrand-Varenne

This narrative verb that evokes an indistinct source – perhaps oral – is the only one in the poem and could be an introduction of the whole. This medallion is located in the first north pillar and is always mentioned first.

The most logical and symbolic order would be: first north pillar, first south pillar, second north pillar, second south pillar etc., from the nave to the choir. Indeed, the medallion for Peter, chief of the apostles, is placed on the north wall of the choir. One can suppose that the text of Paul was its counterpart on the south wall, because of Paul's status and because their verses are very similar and remind the reader/viewer of their martyrdom in Rome during the reign of Nero.

Exit ab errore Petri[que] receptat ab ore
Sacram Roma fidem [Nero crucifigit] ibidem.
Qui primo Saulus est dictus postea Paulus
Altior in donis Rome ruit ense Neronis.



Figure 3: Medallion for saint Peter. Photo: E. Ingrand-Varenne

The reading of the poem could lead the reader from the entry to the choir, from far-off lands to Rome. This poem proposed then a real progression through the church and across the cartography of the Church. But it is just my hypothesis and the chance of the inscriptions is that they can be read in different orders.

The poem engraved in La Sauve-Majeur abbey is a good illustration of the global issues of "epigraphical poetry", which relied on both words and context. The originality was not in the poetical and rhymic aspects (they followed the tastes of this time), but in the monumental and iconographic development of the text which was really embodied. The inscription gave a new existence to the text, made it resound, and let it take part, in this case, in the building of the monument, an edifice conceived as both church and Church.