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ET ROGO TE: CONCERNING THE RELIGIOUS PURPOSE
OF AN INSCRIBED TERRACOTTA FROM AUGUSTA TREVERORUM

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I

The Rheinisches Landesmuseum Trier is in possession of a small fragment of a terracotta statuette (inv. n. 1970, 646) which was found in 1970 in Weimarer Allee, then known as Ostallee, very close to the museum itself and presumably outside its original archaeological context. The piece, which I was able to examine in January 2017, dates from the second century AD, and it can be identified as part of a seated figure, whose arm is holding a spherical object (4.7) × (3.7 cm). From this it can be deduced that the fragment originally belonged to the central part of the left side (if looked from the front). At the lower end, in an area corresponding to the seat, there is an inscription written *ante cocturam* with a sharp object and in cursive lettering (fig. 1). The text, whose letters are only a couple of millimetres tall, takes up two lines, although only the first one (*et rogo te*) can be read without difficulty. Below this first line, however, there are traces of additional characters.



Fig. 1. Front view of the piece. Source: Rheinisches Landesmuseum Trier

Since the discovery of this piece, two questions have been raised, which, I believe, are interrelated: on the one hand, there has been a certain amount of debate as regards the purpose of the statuette; on the other, the purpose of the text itself was discussed, a discussion which, in turn, has been linked to a possible metrical nature.

The first report of the piece, published only months after its discovery, was produced by W. Binsfeld.² He included it in a small addendum at the end of an article discussing statuettes signed by one Melausus and one Fidelis, without proposing, however, that it should be attributed to those two craftsmen. With a view to the spherical object, he believed that it probably represents an apple, and he concluded that the statuette should represent either a matron or a native version of the goddess Minerva. Binsfeld refers to F. Hettner³ to support this last argument, even though Hettner, in actual fact, considered statuette no. 136 a sitting

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² W. Binsfeld, *Melausius und Fidelis*, *Kölner Jahrbuch für Vor- und Frühgeschichte* 11 (1970), 75.

³ F. Hettner, *Drei Tempelbezirke im Trevererlande. Festschrift zur Feier des Hundertjährigen Bestehens der Gesellschaft für nützliche Forschungen in Trier* (Trier 1901), 67 no. 136.

deity, without identifying it as Minerva. The next to comment on the piece was U. Schillinger-Häfele.⁴ She, too, believed that it represents a sitting deity, but does not comment on the spherical object. Moreover, she was the first to note the traces of some characters in the second line of the text. Finally, P. Cugusi and M. T. Sblendorio Cugusi have recently included it in their collection of *carmina epigraphica* from Gaul,⁵ ascribing it to an erotic typology.

Already Binsfeld suggested that the text must have been some kind of request, which seems uncontroversial, given the presence of *rogo*. The next aspect that caught his attention was that the sequence of the inscribed words, from a metrical point of view, conforms to the beginning of a hexameter (assuming that the final syllable of *rogo* was shortened, as it happens often since the time of Horace).⁶ The fact that it begins with *et* lead him to suggest that perhaps it is a quote from a known verse. However, the parallels provided by him (*CLE* 1047 and 1048, with regards to the expression *et te precor sit tibi terra levis*) lead to a context, *viz.* the funerary, markedly different from that of the statuette, as I will explore further, below.

Later, Schillinger-Häfele suggested that either the text began on the right side of the figure and, therefore, *et rogo te* would either not have been the beginning of the text, or, following Binsfeld's lead, might be a quote drawn from a literary composition, adding Martial's 12.25.1, *cum rogo te*, as a parallel. Again, this reasoning seems to fall flat: in particular, one must note that in Martial's line, it is *cum* (not uncommon in the initial position in the *carmina epigraphica*, s. *CLE* 685, 1116, 1654, 2037, 2040), and not *et*, that opens the statement. In the latter case – i.e., *carmina* that start with *et* – only two inscriptions could be considered (*CLE* 1462, funerary *carmen* where *et* clearly links *praescriptum* and poem, between which there is no visual distinction;⁷ and *RIB* 659, a votive inscription).⁸

Finally, Cugusi and Sblendorio Cugusi added some graffiti (*CIL* IV, 1991; 8259; *CLEHisp* 135) to the discussion, providing potential parallels in support of an erotic classification. The first two are indeed of an erotic type, the third one, however, engraved on a ceramic plate *ante cocturam*, offers more difficulties and, in fact, has more plausibly been interpreted as a funerary *carmen* (*HEp* 2002, 73).

II

Although, at least in theory, nothing would prevent the terracotta from Trier from having been part of a burial (as seems to be the case in the aforementioned *CLEHisp* 135), the abundant representation of the cult of *matronae* in the Rhine area,⁹ relatively close to Gallia Belgica, and, in particular, the large number of statuettes found in the sanctuaries of Möhn, Dhronneck and Gusenburg (cf. Hettner) make a religious context significantly more likely. The question of whom the statuette represents, though important, seems secondary, however, since several others have been preserved showing fusions of traditional attributes of Minerva, the *matronae*, and Celtic deities.¹⁰

One difficulty with a religious interpretation of this fragment is that we do not have a sufficient understanding of a range of practical aspects related to votive offerings, and the votive ritual in general.¹¹ Rou-

⁴ U. Schillinger-Häfele, Vierter Nachtrag zu *CIL* XIII und zweiter Nachtrag zu Fr. Vollmer, *Inscriptiones Bavariae Romanae*, *Bericht der Römisch-Germanischen Kommission des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts* (1977), 453–454 no. 3.

⁵ *Carmina Latina Epigraphica non Bücheleriani delle Gallie [CLEGall]* (Cesena 2019), no. 98.

⁶ See for example L. Ceccarelli, *Prosodia y métrica del latín clásico* (Sevilla 1999), 30.

⁷ The size of the characters decreases progressively in this inscription, though it must be noted that this feature has not been employed to distinguish prose from verse in the overall appearance (see M. Limón Belén, *La compaginación de las inscripciones latinas en verso. Roma e Hispania* [Roma 2014], 44 and 96). Moreover, the verse part has not been arranged in a way that its commencement were to coincide with a line break.

⁸ Unsurprisingly, in the *carmina epigraphica* lines commencing with *et* are much more common in the middle or at the end of poems than they are in the first position.

⁹ See, among others, G. Schauerte, *Terrakotten mütterlicher Gottheiten. Formen und Werkstätten rheinischer und gallischer Tonstatuetten der römischen Kaiserzeit*, *BJ Beih.*, XLV (Köln–Bonn 1985); A. G. Garman, *The Cult of the Matronae in the Roman Rhineland: An Historical Evaluation of the Archaeological Evidence* (Lewiston, N.Y. 2008).

¹⁰ S. W. Binsfeld, *Römische Tonfiguren des Töpfers Fidelis im Staatsmuseum Luxemburg*, *Hémecht* 22 (1970), 91.

¹¹ See T. Derks, *Gods, Temples and Ritual Practices. The Transformation of Religious Ideas and Values in Roman Gaul* (Amsterdam 1998), 215–239 for an analysis of what we know about votive offerings in the Roman Gaul.

tinely, its strong, almost contractual, character is emphasized,¹² so much so, that in some cases it has been argued that the people who dedicated the inscriptions would not really care about the text on them and that the stonemasons would add them directly according to the usual format.¹³ However, those statements only refer to the second part of the votive ritual, the so-called *solutio*, which is what we know best due to the nature of our epigraphical, literary, and legal sources. In stark contrast to this, and clouded by uncertainty, particularly with regard to the private sphere, is the beginning of the votive ritual, the *nuncupatio*, at which point the dedicator places their request. It is generally accepted that private votives were written on wax tablets that would be read during the ritual, an aspect upon which I will touch in more detail later. The very etymology of *nuncupare*,¹⁴ however, should make us understand the fundamental role in the religious ritual of the written, and subsequently recited, word.¹⁵

While fulfilment of a petition is commemorated by means of a public and permanent monument, with the undoubted social component that this entails, the *nuncupatio* of a private individual would have had a notably private character (Derks, 229 understands written vows as ‘a form of correspondence with the Gods’) and be carried out using fragile or perishable materials.¹⁶ An exception to this rule is *CLE* 229, a *carmen* from Britain engraved in stone, in which the dedicator promises to cover an inscription with golden letters if their request were to be granted.¹⁷ Public *nuncupationes*, however, as we understand from the acts of the *fratres Arvales*,¹⁸ were indeed recorded in marble and followed a strict formulary which, in turn, was exported to the provinces.¹⁹ The epigraphic poetry has preserved two indirect references to this practice. The first one is a funerary poem in which it is stated that public vows had been made for the health of the dedicatee (*te coluit proprium prouincia cuncta parentem / optabant uitam publica uota tuam*, *CLE* 2099, 9–10, from Aquitania). Another one can be found on *CLE* 2046, and honorary inscription (*multis pro meritis haec stat imago tibi / quam positi longe testantes publica uota / usque procul patriae mittimus in gremium*, v. 8–10, from Pannonia inferior). Without losing sight of the idea of the dissemination of these practices, it seems certain that, in the context of Gaul, the use of tablets was also widespread, as can be deduced from the discovery of numerous seal boxes which were originally used to seal these items, lest people pried on them.²⁰

There are also a number of literary references to a practice of placing wax tablets with petitions on the knees or thighs of the statues of the gods.²¹ As Juvenal mentions, in the sanctuary at the spring of the Clitumnus river there were tablets hanging from the walls of a *porticus* (*legitime fixis uestitur tota libellis / porticus*, 12.100–101). Pliny the Younger encourages his friend Romanus to visit this place, and among its multiple charms he lists the possibility of reading the numerous inscriptions that people had left on walls

¹² Cf., for example, M. Beard, J. North, S. Price, *Religions of Rome*. Volume 1: *A History* (Cambridge 1998), 34.

¹³ Cf. R. Haensch, *Inscriptions as Sources of Knowledge for Religions and Cults in the Roman World of Imperial Times*, in J. Rüpke (ed.), *A Companion to Roman Religion* (Oxford 2007), 182. See also *ibid.*, p. 180–186, for an analysis of what votive inscriptions allow us to deduce about worship and religious offerings.

¹⁴ The term was already used in this context in antiquity. See, for example, *nunc conscientia spreorum et Capitolium et sollemnem votorum nuncupationem fugisse*, Liv. 21.63.7.

¹⁵ See E. A. Meyer, *Legitimacy and Law in the Roman World* (Cambridge 2004), 74 ff. for the importance of reciting the prayers contained on *tabulae*.

¹⁶ See Derks, 226 ff. for further development of these ideas.

¹⁷ On this piece, see P. Kruschwitz, *Poetry on the Advance: The Emergence and Formation of a Poetic Culture in Roman Britain*, *Greece and Rome* 67 (2020), 194–195 (in press).

¹⁸ Edited by J. Scheid, *Commentarii fratrum Arvalium qui supersunt. Les copies épigraphiques des protocoles annuels de la confrérie Arvale, 21 av.–304 ap. J.-C.* (Roma 1998).

¹⁹ Cf. J. C. Saquete Chamizo, S. Ordóñez Agulla, S. García-Dils de la Vega, *Una votorum nuncupatio en Colonia Augusta Firma* (Écija–Sevilla), *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 176 (2011), 281–290.

²⁰ S. Derks, 227 ff.

²¹ *Propter quae fas est genua incerare deorum?*, Iuv. 10.55; *genua incerare* also appears in Prud. *apot.* 457 and, with the same sense, *ham.* 404 *incerat lapides fumosos idolatrix religio*. See also Apul. *apol.* 54.7 *uotum in alicuius statucae femore signasti*. We tentatively discuss a possible religious use of a lamella aurea in P. Kruschwitz, V. González Berdús, *From Vienna with love: Revisiting CIL III 6016.3 = CLE 1812 adn.*, *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 217 (2021), 71–74.

and columns in praise of the spring and the god (*leges multa multorum omnibus columnis omnibus parietibus inscripta, quibus fons ille deusque celebrator*, 8.8.7).²²

The variety and scarcity of these sources related to the *nuncupatio* (in comparison with those that pertain to the *solutio*) make it unrealistic to assume that this was a uniform and permanent practice. This gives us a changing and flexible image of the *nuncupatio* in private votives, in which the only consistent element is the use of small and fragile materials in private or personal requests.

III

In light of the above, a new and more in-depth analysis of the terracotta from Trier and its exact use during the votive ritual becomes necessary. So far, the fragment has only been compared with pieces preserved in the aforementioned sanctuaries of Möhn, Dhronacken, and Gusenburg. This was done in order to elucidate the typology of the statuette, but not with any real desire to understand the purpose and meaning of the inscription.

Even though a significant number of fragments have been preserved with engraved texts that generally contain information about the craftsman or the date of fabrication,²³ it is more striking that, in addition to the craftsman's marks, there are several fragments with traces of cursive writing that escape this classification. Particularly interesting in this regard are numbers 283 (back of a bust with the inscription *amo co[---]*; Hettner adds that traces of text can be seen on the top and bottom lines) and 284 (side of a seated deity in which he read *su[---]* / *sul[---]* / *su[---]*), which he relates, not to the item's manufacturing, but to the dedication of the piece). One might add others, in which only some characters, which have traditionally been interpreted as part of the manufacturer's cognomen (see, for example, nos. 258, 274, 279 and 281a), can be read, where no supporting evidence exists to prove such an interpretation. With this in mind, and also considering that Hettner himself explicitly states, with regard to the sanctuary of Gusenburg, that of the thousands of fragments found only the largest or best preserved were kept, amounting to only a few hundred of the total sum, it is not unreasonable to think that there were quite a few more inscribed statuettes with messages other than the respective craftsman's signature.

As already mentioned, the beginning of the private votive ritual was considered a moment of communication between the person making a request and the deity, which, in conjunction with other factors such as the influence of the ceremony of the local cults, would undoubtedly contribute to the regional specialization of this stage of the religious ceremony. Therefore, in addition to the very likely engraving of the petition on different materials, it also should not be ruled out that the request could be accompanied by some kind of offering or token (note, once again, the example of the British votive, *CLE 229*), or that it was not recorded in writing at all. In the case of Trier, where the number of unengraved figurines representing matronae or other divinities is staggering, I believe that these may, in fact, have been used as tokens to mark the beginning of the votive ritual and that, in some cases, the devotees chose to have a brief message inscribed on them.²⁴

This theory is worth exploring from two additional points of view, one related to the support itself, and the other related to the message that has been preserved on the piece. Beginning with the support, in the same way that in the case of large statues a person making a request would approach and place the tablet in the lap of the deity, hoping that the latter would benevolently accept and act on the request, in the case of the figure from Trier we would find the same practice, only reproduced on a much smaller, more personal scale. The surviving part of the inscription is found on the side of the piece, but, as already mentioned, due to the state of preservation of the object we cannot know if it continued through other areas or if this place was simply chosen because it was the smoothest (it should be kept in mind that many of these seated divinities

²² This is in addition to some inscriptions from magistrates requesting visitants to refrain from writing on the walls, see J. C. Martín, *Plinio el Joven. Epistolario (libros I–X); Panegírico del emperador Trajano* (Madrid 2007), 472 n. 742.

²³ Cf. for example, Hettner, no. 268 *a* and *b* (drawing on taf. III, photography on taf. XIII, 15 and 16), fragments of the back of two statuettes of a seated deity showing remains of *Melausus fecit*; no. 262 (drawing on taf. III and photography on taf. XIII, 8), a bas-relief of Amor and Psyche on the back of which *[Fi]delis / [f]ecit / [...] Nonas / [...] Jaias* can be read, and where Hettner suggests *[M]aias*.

²⁴ On the custom of engraving names or petitions on votive figures, cf. A. Abt, *Die Apologie von Apuleius von Madaura und die antike Zauberei* (Gießen 1908), 210.

were represented with objects in their lap). Obviously, the decision to engrave the message in a visible place rather than on a potentially sealed wax tablet must have been made in the knowledge that anyone would be able to read it that way. I don't think it's out of the question that, in fact, it was done precisely because of that. Since the inscriptions were usually read out loud, each person who would read this short message, written in the first person, would be echoing the request.

Turning to the brief surviving text, it can be read as follows:

et rogo te
+ [- - -] +++
[- - - - -?]

'And I ask you [...]

First of all, one must note that it bears striking similarities with the formula *te precor quaesoque*, often used in the *acta* from the *fratres Arvales*.²⁵ Although such a short sequence, in the way in which it survives here, cannot be ascribed with total certainty to a specific typology, it is reasonable to assume that private requests, about which our knowledge is rather scarce, would have a form parallel to that of public ones to some extent.²⁶

The few traces of letters preserved in the second line prevent us from proposing any safe restitution of the text. However, in light of what has been discussed, above, it would seem reasonable to assume that it contained the object – or purpose – of *rogo*. There is one trace preserved on the left-hand side, right at the edge of the fragment, which can barely be discerned and that had remained unedited until now. As for those traces at the right hand side of the line, they could be interpreted as three letters, considering a ligature between the last two: perhaps [- - -]cua, or [- - -]sua. If this last suggestion is correct, we might think of a sequence along the lines of *pro salute sua*, with a reasonably correct iambic rhythm save the final *ā* of *sua* (a trochaic rhythm would also be possible, of course). Either way, it seems bold to accept the metric nature of the text when only such a short sequence has been preserved. On the other hand, if the traces were interpreted as part of two, rather than three letters, a possible reading would be [- - -]em, which could have been an accusative ending or an inflected verbal form. This would mean accepting two different shapes of the letter E in the inscription, however, monumental E and cursive II, as attested twice in the first line; such inconsistency is, however widely documented, not least in the cursive inscriptions of Pompeii (*CIL* IV, 1679; 1261; 1781; 1852; 1884; 2186; 2187; 1347; 1430).

Finally, it may be worth noting that the first line shows perfect vowel symmetry E – O – O – E, and this is also visually reflected thanks to the use of the cursive. With regards to the beginning with *et*, as H. Halla-aho²⁷ studies regarding the Latin of non-literary letters, this conjunction often has a topic-changing or topic-introducing function. In particular, a case is documented in which *et* is used right at the beginning of the letter after the salutation (no. 7), a usage which is also found in some passages of Petronius. She believes that this could reflect 'actual syntax in spoken narratives', which is very much applicable to the fragment from Trier.

All these considerations unequivocally point to a votive background of the Trier fragment, which thus also advances to become important evidence for subtle changes in format and form in the private petitions of the Empire in general and, more specifically, of the Gallia Belgica, where votives have a limited representation in the epigraphic record.

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²⁵ See Scheid 54.5 for *precor*, 22.6 and 22.22, 62a.25 for *precamur* and 100a.29, 101.1, 114 II.21–22 for *precati*.

²⁶ Additionally, the formulas *oro et rogo* and *rogo et opto* are documented in epistolary language. See H. Halla-aho, *The Non-literary Latin Letters. A Study of Their Syntax and Pragmatics* (Helsinki 2009), 57.

²⁷ Halla-aho, 66.