Quantifying Prestige: Towards a Systematization of the Prestige Categories in Latin Inscriptions

Hernán González Bordas

The project "Graver dans le marbre: Routes et Origines des Marbres antiques d'Aquitaine et d'Espagne (ROMAE)" is led by Anna Gutiérrez Garcia-M. and funded by the LaScArBx.[1] Within this framework, a study of five selected regional *corpora* of marble inscriptions of these two regions (i.e. Burdigala and Dax in Aquitania; Labitolosa, Galice, and Emerita Augusta, in the NE, NW, and SW of Hispania, respectively) has been undertaken. Despite their unequal importance, they include both private (funerary and votive) and public inscriptions. So, a basic step was to try to establish the degree of prestige embedded in each of the studied inscriptions, in order to subsequently cross-reference this data with the type of marble used (i.e. local, regional, or imported).[2] This short paper briefly presents the basis and methodology proposed to achieve this.

Quantifying prestige is a complex and even problematic venture. First of all, to evaluate the degree of prestige or ostentation of each inscription in a comprehensive way would ideally imply a comparison of each inscription to the rest of those found at the same area and period, which was far beyond the scope of the ROMAE project. Additionally, converting qualitative data into quantitative values is far from straightforward. Having said that, some interesting goals have been achieved, such as the definition of a specific, restricted[3] data-sheet to systematically record the most relevant features related to prestige (fig. 1). This emerged from a consensus among the epigraphists involved in the project[4] and the specialist in statistic data treatment. This data-sheet includes data from two major areas: the formal characteristics (i.e. the monument itself), and the textual content (i.e. the message inscribed). They are:

- The type of monument and the place of finding within the urban landscape (if known).
- The dimensions of the monument as well as those of the epigraphic field; the size of the monument is obviously especially significant in the case of displaying public inscriptions.
- The quality of the surface finishing of the monument, as well as the quality of the carving (the layout/*ductus* and the paleography, with emphasis on elements such as *hederae,* apices, and elegant links). The prestige or the ostentation conveyed are linked to a careful and uniform finish. As for all aesthetic categories, the possibilities were reduced to three (e.g. careful, medium, and careless for the *ductus*).
- The decoration or the absence of decorative motives, as well as the quality of the ornamental elements when present.
- The type of location within the ancient urban landscape, since this can mean a great difference in terms of visibility, intentionality, ostentation, and prestige.

Fig. 1: Example of the Epigraphic Data-sheet with indication of the two main types of data recorded (i.e. according to formal aspects and based on the text content); duplication of the textual fields is a result of the two individuals mentioned in this particular inscription.

- The social, political or the religious position of the individuals, if it is a votive inscription; this is assessed in a hierarchy going from the Emperor and his family to the local level.
- The legal status of the individuals and if they originally belonged to the community where the inscription is made or not.

Although these may also convey a message of prestige, economic and military aspects are not considered since they do not appear in our *corpus.*

Despite particular problems encountered, which cannot be discussed here due to the limited length of this contribution, this card has proven useful for our purposes within the ROMAE project. It can also serve as a universal model for prestige or ostentation studies which can be adapted to the study of other epigraphic *corpora* in any type of material.

Notes

[1] This project focuses on the use of local marbles as an element of prestige in these western Roman provinces (<https://blogs.uab.cat/romae>). I would like to thank particularly Anna Gutierrez-García-M. for her advice and help with this paper.

[2] The origin of the marble is established through a multi-method archaeometric analysis, which was another important part of the ROMAE project. For an example of this, see González Soutelo et al. 2020.

[3] Contrary to the usual composition of epigraphic corpora; this restricted approach is due to the need for as few emply fields as possible in the subsequent statistical treatement of the data. Also, too many parameters may prevent the appearance of behaviors that explain trends.

[4] Namely, Jonathan Edmondson (York University), Milagros Navarro Caballero (Ausonius Institute), and the author of this paper.

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Fig. 1: by the author.

References

González Soutelo et al. 2020

S. González Soutelo – A. Gutiérrez Garcia-Moreno – H. González Bordas – M.-C. Savin, Estudio epigráfico y arqueométrico de la placa funeraria de Cela (Mos, Pontevedra): Nuevas propuestas de interpretación, Estudos do Quaternário/Quaternary Studies 20, 2020, 71–84.