Chronological and Geographical Information in Latin Inscriptions:
examples and issues

Silvia Orlandi
(Università La Sapienza Roma)

In the spirit of this event, I’m not going to present a prefab solution for the treatment of geographical and chronological information in a digital environment, but rather to make a survey of the different issues raised by that this kind of information, in its extreme variety.

In fact, the way in which we encode digital data always depends on the questions that we are going or that we are supposed to ask those data.

Speaking about geographical and chronological information, even within the limits of Latin Epigraphy – that is my main research field – the scenario includes a large number of different cases, which require attention and consideration.

Geographical information, for example, can be given not only by the text of an inscription, but by the inscribed monument as a whole, when we know the topographical context in which it was originally displayed, and sometimes it is even still preserved. Just to give you a couple of significant examples, in the funerary inscriptions of Aulus Hirtius, who died in 43 BC when he was in charge as a consul, a key role is played not by the text – that is really minimal: Aulus Hirtius Auli filius – but by the fact that his monument was found – and it still is – in the middle of Campus Martius, the most honourable place for a man to be buried in ancient Rome (slides 2-3). Or, in another context, a graffito from Pompeii – Suspirium puellarum Celadus tr(aex) – owes its meaning to the fact that it is scratched on a column of the training school for the gladiators (slide 4). In all these cases, it is clear that our possibility to exploit the potential coming from the geographical information of these inscriptions depends on their ingestion in an as precise as possible georeferenced system.

But we must admit that in many cases – maybe in most cases – we don’t know, and we can’t reconstruct the original context of an inscribed monument, being many inscriptions not in situ any more, and preserved or only described without any information about their find spot.

However, we should not forget that geographical data coming from the archaeological context of an inscription could be very interesting and informative even when the context is not the original one, but a context of re-use of an ancient inscription. Removing a stone from its original location to re-use it as writing or building material means for us losing the original context and therefore the complete meaning of that stone, but sometimes also the context of re-use can be meaningful, like, for example, in the case of the church of S. Maria in Castello, in Tarquinia, whose floor is completely made with marble slabs coming from Rome (slide 5), or like in the famous case of the Pisa’s Dome, where we can find many inscriptions coming not only from Pisa (slide 6), but also from Ostia. Both cases are not isolated but can be understood only in the framework of the commerce of ancient marbles along the coast of the Tyrrhenian Sea during the middle Ages, that follows precise routs and reasons.

Therefore, a find spot deserves care and attention also when it is clear that it is not the original spot of the material we are recording. Of course, its encoding requires a special attention, to allow a potential user to distinguish information related to the original and the secondary use of the stone.

Let us now move to geographical data coming from the content of the inscriptions.

The first image that comes to my mind – and not only mine, I think – are the thousands of funerary inscriptions od soldiers – praetoriani, urbaniciani, classiarii, equites singulares… – mentioning their place of origin – origo – with the name of the town – Mediolani, Opitergio (slide 7) – or using different expression, like natione Pannonins (slide 8), or a simple adjective formed on a geographical name: Germanus, Batavus, and so on.
The origo is commonly mentioned also in the long lists of retired soldiers – _laticula militum_ – that used to celebrate their _honesta missio_ putting a dedication to the gods or to the emperor (slide 9). Note that in the _laticula_ the _origo_ is normally given in an abbreviated – sometimes much abbreviated – form, that requires particular attention not to generate false or “imaginary” readings. Let me say that the edition of this particular kind of documents in the Epigraphic Database Roma has been particularly careful and is therefore quite reliable.

But soldiers are not the only people moving from one place to another in the Roman world: different communities of foreigners were present and active, for many reasons, in Rome and other ancient places, where the geographical mobility of families and individuals is much more attested than one could think.

In Rome, for example, we have a _Iulia Carnuntilla ex provincia Pannonia Superior_, but also the place reserved in the Coliseum for the citizens of Gades, as we can see in the step with the inscription _Gaditanorum_ (slide 10), in Tarracina was buried a _M. Sempronius Longinus_ that came from the African city of Leptis (_Leptitanus_) (slide 11), and the list could go on, with a potentially infinite variety of forms, stories and reasons that led these people to leave their original mother town to face the risks of a long journey. Sometimes very long, like in the case of _Valeria Frontina_, who also came to Tarracina following his husband _Valerius Montanus_, a ship commander (nausilax), form a far town in Frigia, _ex civitate Coropisso vico Asseridi_ (slide 12).

In many other cases, geographical information is linked to the political activity of Roman magistrates that used to hold positions all over the Empire – for senators and equites – or all over Italy – for local magistrates.

Just to quote an example, in an honorific inscription from _Bovianum_, a _Q. Arruntius Iustus_ is mentioned, and his _cursus honorum_ is illustrated, including different curations and patronships: he was not only patron of the town where he was honoured, but also _curator rei publicae_ of _Terventum_, patron of _Saepinum_ – all centres of the _Regio IV_ – and – with a geographical “eccentricity” that requires some consideration – patron of _Vicetia_, in _Venetia et Histria_ (slide 13). This can probably be explained with the family relationships of our _Iustus_, which may be linked with the _Arruntii_ from Verona, a powerful senatorial family with a large sphere of influence. In this way, an apparently simple geographical indication becomes an interesting document of the political and economic ramifications of the members of the senatorial order during the first centuries of the Roman Empire.

In other words, geographical information mentioned in epigraphic texts can have an extreme variety of forms, expressions, reasons and explanations, and the only thing that this kind of data seems to have in common is the fact that the places explicitly mentioned in Latin inscriptions are normally different from the place where the inscription was found or comes from.

Geographical, or better: topographical information related to the same original find spot of an inscription usually refers to monuments, buildings, neighbourhoods, and other internal subdivisions of an ancient town. Some examples: the funerary inscription of an artisan – a _sutor_, a shoemaker – whose shop was _a Porta Fontinale_ (slide 14), or a slave collar that ask to bring back the fugitive to the _Forum Martis_, that is the Augustus’ _Forum_ (slide 15). And I could go one, since there are hundreds of texts like these. Should we consider them as geographical information too? And if so, how can we encode the inscriptions where a fundamental component of the topographical information is given not, or not only, by words but by drawings? The _Forma Urbis_ is just the most famous example (slide 16), but it’s not the only one, since we have not only other _formae_, but also documents like an inscription illustrating the water distribution among a group of land owners in the suburbium of Rome (slide 17); or like one of the most exciting epigraphic discoveries of the last years: the fragments of a bronze table with a catastral map of the _ager_ round Verona (slide 18).

If we want to encode the geographical information given by these documents, we will definitely have to take into account both the textual and the visual elements.
But this is not enough, since we can consider interesting from a “geographical” viewpoint also inscriptions including a mention not to an ancient region, town, place or building, that are “places” in a wide sense, but to a distance or a series of distances, that is to say a linear space.

This concept can be expressed in the very laconic form of the numbers of miles from the beginning of the street, carved on the milestones, or in a more complex form, in itineraries like the Lapis Pollae (slide 19), the silver vases of Vicarello (slide 20), or an interesting fragment from Vigna Codini, where distances are counted not in number of miles, but in number of days of journey (slide 21).

Not less rich of instances, varied and often complicated is the scenario when we consider the chronological information that we can find in the field of Latin epigraphy.

In this case too, sometimes this kind of information is to be found not within the text, but outside the content of the inscription, namely in its archaeological context, when known and datable.

For example, the famous Lapis Satricanus (slide 23), found re-used as building material in the foundations of a temple built at the beginning of the Vth century, must be dated before this time, and the Poplio Valesio here mentioned can be therefore identified with the Publius Valerius Publicola, that was consul at the end of the VIth century.

Or we can have examples like a marble slab found in situ in one of the columbaria still existing in vigna Codini, whose building can be dated precisely to the year 10 AD, since another inscription, bearing the names of the consuls of this year, mentions the distribution of the individual places by the curator of the society who sponsored the construction of the funerary building (slide 24). In this case, the text is just a name without any other indication, but the archaeological context allows us to date this inscription as precisely as much more informative texts.

More interesting for our discussion are the inscriptions in which the chronological information is inside the epigraphic text itself. Even narrowing the survey to the Latin inscriptions of ancient Italy, the number of different cases that we can meet is amazing.

The most common and widespread chronological system is of course the consular dating, generally with the name of the two consuls – ordinarii or suffecti – of the year.

But this form of dating is used to define the chronology of a very wide range of different actions, and can, therefore, assume a correspondingly wide range of different meanings.

Unlike the funerary inscriptions of Christian commitment, where the consular date of the depositio is a common feature, pagan epitaphs normally don’t give this kind of information, but there is more than one exception. For example, an inscription where the names of A. Caecina and L. Munatius, consuls in AD 13, refers to the year of the death of the young C. Vettius Fuscus (slide 25). But we can also find cases where the date of death is expressed in a much more detailed way, like in an inscription from Venafro, where chronological information includes year, month, day and hour both of the death and of the birth of the deceased (slide 26).

On the opposite side, we have the group of the so called “ollae di S. Cesareo” (slide 27), where the date of death is given with a precise indication of the day of the month, but without any reference to the year, making the chronological information interesting in itself, but almost useless without the support of other dating elements like archaeology, palaeography and onomastic.

Funerary texts are not the only epigraphic documents presenting a consular date. Well-preserved sacred dedications and honorary inscriptions sometimes include, at the end of the text, or, often, on one side of the base, a precise indication of the day in which the monument was dedicated. But special attention in tagging chronological information must be paid to some re-used bases, where the dedication date on the side don’t correspond any more to the text on the front, erased or at least replaced by a new, later text.
In the statue bases erected by the urban prefect *Passifilus Paulinus*, for example, the consular date 355 AD refers to the honorary inscription for Magnentius that could be read on the opposite side, and that was re-used without erasing the previous text (slide 28).

Moreover, the day for the dedication of sacred monuments was often chosen not by chance, but with the precise will of celebrating a significant date or an imperial anniversary. A dedication to *Mars Invictus*, worshipped as father of Romulus and Remus, was set up by Maxentius ante diem XI Kalendas Maias, that is on April 21st, anniversary of Rome’s foundation (slide 29).

Much less symbolic, and much more practical is the function of the consular dating to the year 80 AD that we can find on some marble columns, not finished, referring to the moment when the block was extracted in the marble quarries, or on some lead pipes from Rome, that can be used to date the building of a water conduct (slide 30).

A similar level of accuracy in giving the reader of an inscription a precise information about its chronology, can be reached using the names of other magistrates, active at Imperial, urban or local level. From an “ancient Romans” perspective, these names were an easily understandable and usable chronological information. The problem is that we modern scholars often don’t know the complete lists of the holders of different magistracies and priesthods, and this kind of prosopographical data that could also be encoded as “chronological information” actually becomes clear for us only if supported by other documents. A typical example is a dedication to *Hercules Invictus* set by four different *praetores urbani* (slide 31): we don’t know when they hold this position, but ancient Romans did, so for them this was a very precise chronological information, and if we can just say that all this happened in the first half of the IVth century it is our problem, not theirs.

But a precise date can be expressed not only with the names of the magistrates in charge in a given year, but also referring to the distance from a starting point, that is to say using an “era”.

The best known – but not the most used – is probably the era *ab urbe condita*, commonly used in historiography, but not so widespread in the epigraphic sources. A single, but significant, example can be given by a dedication to *Libertas* set up by the Roman Senate and People on the very first day of the reign of Nerva, in 96 AD, 848 years after Rome was founded (slide 32).

In this case, we can use this form of date as a precise chronological information because we know the date of the foundation of Rome. But there are other eras, used at a local level, where the starting point is all but sure. A good example is the so called *era patatina* (slide 33).

Finally, we can recall the inscriptions where the chronological framework is given by a reference to big historical events. Unfortunately for us, such references can sometimes be clearly interpreted (*Aegypto capto* on the obelisk in piazza del Popolo, for example), but sometimes what was clear to the eyes of our ancestors, must be inferred by us, and becomes a much less definite chronological information.

A couple of examples: in a famous inscription from *Ateste*, the reference *navali praelio* becomes clear thanks to the *cognomen Actiacus* of the men here honoured (slide 34), while the identification of the *fatalis casus* that caused the collapse of a monument in the centre of Rome (slide 35) is still discussed and can – or cannot – be the sack of Alaric in 410, and therefore can – or cannot – be used and encoded as a useful chronological information.

Moreover, there are cases in which even a clear reference to a known historical fact not necessarily leads to a univocal chronology of an inscription: the text carved on the base of the column of *Gains Duilus* (slide 36) records, in archaic Latin, the booty (number of ships, and so on) of the battle of *Mylae*, during the first Punic war, but it’s written in very elegant Augustan letters, on a block of marmor lunense… In this case – that is much less isolated than I thought – the content of the inscription (historical elements, language characteristics) leads to a chronology, while its formal, external aspects requires another chronology. And above all an explanation…
To summarize, I have tried, with this quick survey, to show you in how many different ways geographical and chronological information can be displayed or – in a wider sense – be present in Latin inscriptions.

In both cases, what can be encoded as chronological or geographical data may have very different forms and very different meanings: the same expressions can play different roles, and the same purpose can be achieved in different ways.

How can we encode – or even think to encode – all these data in a way that makes them usable in the framework of a research tool? As always, the solutions and the answers that technology can give us depend on the questions that we want to ask. Being these questions practically infinite, as I’ve just tried to show, I think that the best thing to do in a comprehensive project is to keep the encoding process at a minimal level, to be as “neutral” and “objective” as possible. But at the same time, the encoded content must – and I deliberately use must and not should – be reusable for other, more specific purposes, as in the EAGLE project, that was conceived in this spirit.

In other words: technology can be the answer, but the question always depends on us.