(Re)tracing History without Boundaries

A Common Digital Platform for Medieval and Early Modern Epigraphy

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General issues

Over the course of the past few decades, a huge leap forward has been made in humanities, particularly in biography, duo to the possibilities opened up by new technologies – although a lot more is left to be desired. Only a few years ago, a valiant attempt has been made to offer a project designed to overcome problems, related to different formats and data models of national biographical collections (BiograVIS). The BiograVIS project accurately pinpointed the problem that "archives have been translated and aggregated into comprehensive, partially structured research databases", but are still structured in a such manner that not every researcher from anywhere in Europe (or the world, for that matter) can freely access it and process it right away. Another similar COST project, "Reassembling the Republic of Letters" proposed a similar idea: to bring together raw material and process it in such a way that these large amounts of (mostly text) documents would be manageable for professionals as well as non-professionals to be processed in any way possible.

In a similar but unrelated field, the field of epigraphy, the problem is very much the same – although the state of affairs is much more crude still – not Greek and Roman epigraphy, which has had a long scholarly tradition as well as the tradition of digital processing (see below), but first and foremost medieval and early-modern epigraphy, which has suffered, at least in some countries (particularly of the so-called former Eastern Block) a particular kind of neglect.

Although medieval and early modern epigraphy has a strong tradition of scientific attention in western European countries (it is noteworthy that this survey deliberately omits the rune inscriptions from the northern European countries and that of the English area), it lags behind in the field of digital processing and visualisations compared to Greek and Roman epigraphy. Considering the historical development of medieval epigraphy, the thesauri of inscriptions from Italy, Spain and Germany stand out; studying inscriptions from the Italian countries has a particularly long tradition; addressing the important Christian centres, the scientific organisation of the *Monumenta epigraphica Christiana* strongly hints at CIL. Lately, these publications have only intensified in number; one such example (among many) is Paola Guerini's *Inscriptiones Medii Aevi Italiae (saec. VI-XII) II: Umbria, Terni* (Guerini 2010). The medieval and early modern inscriptions, collected in Spain, are being systematically published in the so-called Corpus inscriptionum Hispaniae medievalium (cf. Martín López 2014); similarly, the medieval and early modern inscriptions, collected in the area of France, are published in the *Corpus des inscriptions de la France médiévale*.

One of the must exemplary approaches to medieval and early modern epigraphy is the extensive German corpus Die Deutsche Inschriften (DI; the Die Deutsche Inschriften is also online: http://www.inschriften.net/); the academies of science in Berlin, Düsseldorf, Gottingen, Heidelberg, Leipzig, Mainz, Munich together with the Austrian Academy of Sciences in Vienna undertook a massive task of publishing a series medieval and early modern inscriptions occurring in the entire German-speaking area. Since 1942 when the first volume was published, more than 90 volumes have been published to this day (cf. Jäger 2012; Zahn 2014). Individual volumes address inscriptions from one or more cities in a particular area. During the course of publishing the DI, a methodology for the description of medieval and early modern inscriptions was devised: outstanding works of this kind are, among others, the papers by Fritz V. Arens and Konrad F. Bauer the "Mainz Inscriptions – and Introduction to the German Epigraphy" (Arens, Bauer 1945) and Austria's Walter Koch "Epigraphy – Instructions for the Transcription and Classification of Script in the medieval and early modern inscriptions" (Koch 1975). Another important work by several authors is "German Inscriptions. Terminology for the Description of Script" (Deutsche Inschriften: Terminologie zur Schriftbeschreibung. Wiesbaden 1999), which was written by the associates of the DI based on the German and Austrian inscription materials within the series' time scope, addressing the scripts occurring from the early middle ages to the late 17th century. One of the most systematic manuals for medieval and early modern epigraphy was written by Rudolf Kloos (Kloos 1992) in 1980: the manual was later reprinted. He assembled the basic

bibliography and a survey of corpuses, but above all, he tried to forge sound methodological guidelines (Kloos, 1992, 87ss.), which will serve this project to some extent; his "Introduction to the Medieval and Early Modern Epigraphy" (Einführung in die Epigraphik des Mittelalters und der frühen Neuzeit) is therefore indispensable.

As of late, corpuses similar to Die Deutsche Inscriften are being assembled in some eastern European countries, such as Slovakia (*Corpus inscriptionum Slovaciae* – cf. Čovan 2016), whereas others, e.g. Poland, have featured such collections for decades (*Corpus inscriptionum Poloniae*); in Poland, thematic monographs on medieval and early modern inscriptions are being published at an accelerated rate (Kotlowski, Starek 2014; Kotlowski, Starek 2015).

A short case study …

This is all find and well. However, the following short case-study will tell us that a concerted and big effort needs to be invested in order to come even closely to the efforts invested into harmonizing vast quantities of data and making it available to researchers worldwide.

When approaching e.g. 16th century humanists involved in a European-wide network of scholars, diplomats and politicians, one stumbles upon the name of one Pier Paolo Vergerio "the Younger" (1498-1565). The man left a heavy trace in the post-Reformation European politics, yet precious little epihgraphic material is left behind. Or is it? Only a handful of major works have been published about him in recent decades (e.g. A. Jacobson Schutte, *Pier Paolo Vergerio: The Making of an Italian Reformer*, 1977), yet all of them neglected an important piece of his personal history – an inscription still extant in the Koper cathedral, only hidden from "uninvited" eyes:
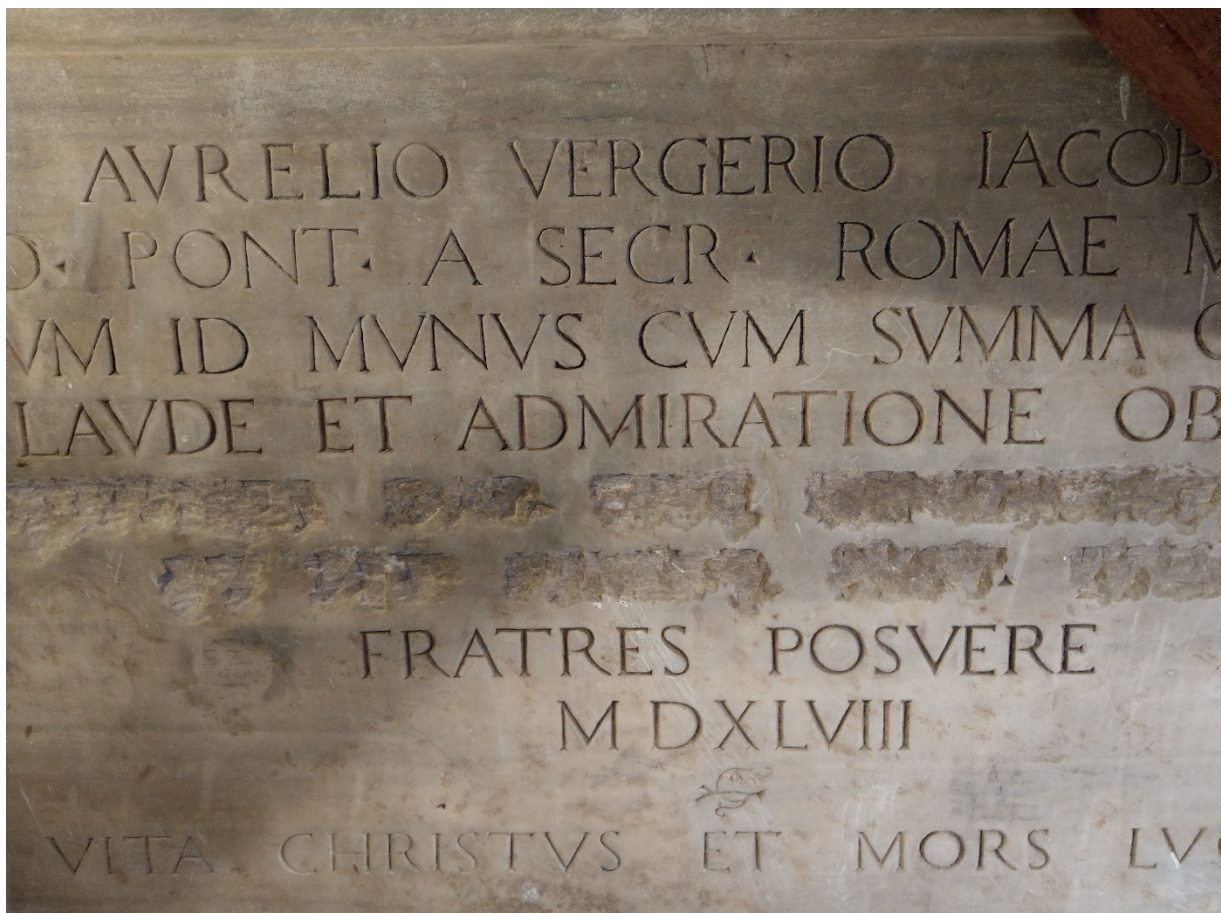

Fig. 1. Inscription of the Vergerii, Koper cathedral (© G. Pobezin).

This very interesting inscription with its striking *damnatio memoriae* failed to be entered into any epigraphical database – much like the one in Tubingen recording his death in 1565. For any researcher of humanism and humanists, particularly the ones of such high profile, these epigraphic sources are an indispensable source.

But a tool for processing these sources is needed: advanced search options and visualizations facilitating the processing, analysis and even finding data in a large, sometimes not even registered data. To enable access to this data and the analyses thereof, a concerted effort of several stakeholders from several countries would be needed, which could build, develop and contribute to an all-European visual information portal for the recording, processing, exploring and equipping epigraphical records with metadata that would allow professional and non-professional researchers a simple and comprehensive access.

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