Off the Beaten Track

Epigraphy at the Borders

Proceedings of the VI EAGLE International Meeting (24-25 September 2015, Bari, Italy)

Edited by

A. E. Felle

A. Rocco

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Foreword

Silvia Orlandi
EAGLE Project Scientific Coordinator - 'Sapienza' University of Rome

Since the beginning, and in response to a real need of the academic community, the main aim of the EAGLE project has been 'to make accessible texts and images - with the related metadata - of a high percentage of the ancient Greek and Latin inscriptions dating from the seventh century BC to the seventh century AD'. Thanks to a huge job of harmonization and disambiguation of data coming from different content providers, we can say that the project is going to accomplish this mission.

But since the beginning, we have all been aware that the fulfilment of this task wouldn't satisfy all the needs of epigraphic research or answer the questions. Just the opposite: as the work proceeds, we always find new problems, but also new issues, and patterns that could be followed.

As scientific supervisor, I don't think that this is a negative aspect of the project, but rather proof that we are probably going in the right direction. This explains the wide variety of themes discussed during the First EAGLE International Conference in 2014 in Paris, the dramatic growth of networking activities in many, often unexpected directions, and the interest for the EAGLE project shown by colleagues and institutions dealing with epigraphic materials belonging to different cultures and civilizations.

All this has led us to consider the possibility, and therefore the need, to discuss problems that go beyond the 'official', original limits of the EAGLE projects in many different ways: problems regarding content, chronology, geographic areas, and forms of communication.

Content

The EAGLE project has a very strong thematic character, focused as it is on ancient Greek and Roman epigraphy. However, the inscriptions are never considered as mere texts, but rather as inscribed monuments, where archaeological and topographical aspects has the same importance as the textual content. In this framework, images have a fundamental role, of which the importance and implications are becoming clearer and clearer. Palaeographic analysis of inscriptions, for example, can benefit greatly from a 'visual' approach and from the technical possibilities opened up by the inclusion of image-based search

included in the EAGLE portal. In the same way, special attention should be paid to images that are strictly connected to the epigraphic texts in many graffiti and Christian inscriptions, where the drawings play a key role in communicating the epigraphic message: they have to be encoded in a digital archive in order to keep their close connection with the texts and, at the same time, their specific nature.

Chronology

The first examples of Greek and Latin inscriptions date from the end of the eighth - beginning of the seventh century BC. While there is no agreement among the scholars about the beginning of Medieval epigraphy, the eighth century AD seems to be a turning point in epigraphic habit. The chronological range chosen for the EAGLE project is therefore a convention that doesn't exclude the importance of materials coming from a more remote past, on the one side, or belonging to the Middle Ages, on the other. In both cases, an accurate reflection is needed: archaic texts often present palaeographic characters, writing techniques and linguistic issues that are completely different from those found in classical inscriptions; Byzantine epigraphy, compared to ancient Greek epigraphic materials, shows interesting differences in form and content; inscriptions written in Italian *volgare*, abandoning the use of classical Latin, share nevertheless a surprising number of technical aspects with ancient epigraphs. All these examples, which sometimes cross the chronological borders of the EAGLE project, give an important contribution to the epigraphic science not only by widening the variety texts, artifacts and languages considered, but above all giving epigraphers new eyes to look at traditional problems, and new ways to find unexpected connections.

Geography

The Mediterranean world, the traditional enviroment of the Greek and Latin civilizations, is the geographic focus of the EAGLE project. But since the beginning projects dealing with epigraphy of different areas have expressed their interest in sharing knowledge and experiences. After all, contacts with the Arabian peninsula, the Indian Ocean and the far East are well-documented in Roman times, and interesting challenges and considerations can come from the knowledge of completely different epigraphies, showing first of all the incredibly widespread use of this form of communication. Everywhere in the world, in all time periods, men have chosen to abandon the traditional, daily way of writing to make what can be called an 'inscription', often sharing the same needs, feelings or hopes. And this consideration is of invaluable help in dealing with all kinds of epigraphic material, no matter where it comes from.

Dissemination

Greek and Latin inscriptions are often difficult to understand, not only because they are written in ancient languages and alphabets, but also because they are sometimes communicated and explained only in 'academic' publications, intended for a public of scholars and learned people. Crossing the borders of classical epigraphy also means going beyond the limits of the traditional way of presenting ancient inscriptions, opening the knowledge of these texts to a broader public. The EAGLE mobile application, using a well-tested form of image-based recognition system, and the EAGLE storytelling application, which underlines the narrative content included in every inscription, even in the most apparently simple text, are here in University of Bari officially presented for the first time. Thanks to, in the one case, a technology that allows for the identification of an inscription without digitising any text, and, in the other, the thousands of beautiful and interesting stories that can be told starting from an inscription, we hope to find a new, innovative way to reach a broader public, ready to share with us the persuasion that even epigraphy ... can be fun.

In other words, exploring roads that are - in many different ways - 'off the beaten track' doesn't mean betraying the original spirit of the EAGLE project, but, on the contrary, improving our knowledge of ancient inscriptions and of the world that produced them, sharing this knowledge within a wide network of best practices, and making it accessible in both traditional and innovative ways.