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Rereading the Secundinus Stone from Vindolanda

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ABSTRACT

Meyer, Mullen, and Vanhala analysed the inscription SECVNDINVS CACOR *accompanying the carving of a phallus on a stone excavated at Vindolanda and explained* CACOR *as the present passive of the verb* cacare *'to shit out'. I suggest that* CACOR *may have been intended in abbreviation of* CACORVM*, the neuter genitive plural of the adjective* cacus*, a transliteration of the Greek* κακός *'evil', and that the phallus is depicted ejaculating over this word to symbolise its apotropaic power over evil.*

Keywords: Secundinus; Vindolanda; phallus; apotropaic; inscription; bilingualism

The purpose of this note is to propose a new reading of the Latin inscription on the so-called Secundinus stone excavated at Vindolanda in 2022. The face of this stone depicts an inscription of two words in association with a carved phallus. The first word, the name SECVNDINVS, occurs above the phallus, which then points rightwards to a second word, CACOR, whose significance is not clear. Meyer, Mullen, and Vanhala have recently discussed this inscription at length.[1] They considered two possible interpretations of the term CACOR: either that it is a clumsy abbreviation of the noun *cacator* 'shitter' in the nominative case, so that the inscription is best translated as 'Secundinus the shitter', or that it is the first-person singular of the present tense passive of the verb *cacare* 'to shit out', so that the inscription is best translated as 'I, Secundinus, am being shitted out', if the two words were in fact intended to be read together in this way, which was not necessarily the case. They considered the second interpretation of this term as a previously unattested form of the verb *cacare* to be the more plausible.[2] In both cases, they assumed that the reading CACOR is complete, that is, that the inscription of this term had always ended with the letter R and that this was not intended in abbreviation of some larger term. But is this correct?

On the first point, it seems probable that the inscription had always ended with the letter R. The inscription reaches to the end of the stone as it is now and, even though there is some minor damage to the facing surface of the stone in the top right corner above the R, there is nothing to suggest that a larger block of material has broken away from this side of the stone. On the second point, the possibility that the term CACOR may have been intended in abbreviation of some larger term deserves more consideration than it has received. Since the final OR

[1] Meyer *et al.* 2023.
[2] Tomlin 2023, 426 concurs.

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of CACOR could suggest the beginning of the suffix -ORVM used to mark the genitive plural of masculine or neuter nouns or adjectives of the second declension, one needs to ask whether there are any nouns or adjectives of the second declension with the stem CAC- and whether they would make sense if used in the present context. The answer is yes in both cases. In fact, there are two different potential explanations of CACOR if one accepts that it was originally intended to read CACOR<VM> instead.

The authoritative dictionary of classical Latin includes the noun *cacus* based on a single apparent occurrence of this term in an inscription from Rome.[3] This, a dedicatory inscription on the base of a statue erected by the *Cohors V Vigilum* in honour of the emperor Caracalla in 210, identifies the junior officers within each century by the abbreviation of their post and describes a certain M. Sattius Felix as a CACVS.[4] Since this term has the appearance of a masculine noun of the second declension in the nominative case, it had traditionally been treated as such.[5] The post of the same man is abbreviated as CPC in another inscription dedicated by the same unit previously in 205 and, because of the use of the form CACVS in the later inscription, that has traditionally been expanded as *c*(*acus*) *p*(*raefectus*) *c*(*ohortium*) 'the *cacus* of the prefect of the cohorts', implying that the *cacus* served the prefect as some form of orderly.[6] If one accepts this interpretation of the term CACVS on the Roman inscription, then one could plausibly read the inscription of the Secundinus stone as SECVNDINVS CACOR<VM> 'Secundinus of the *caci*', identifying him as a *cacus*, some form of orderly. However, the reading of the CACVS of the inscription from Rome as a noun has not gone uncontested. Sablayrolles argued that it abbreviates the post of *ca*(*rceris*) *cus*(*tos*) 'prison guard' instead and that the P of the abbreviation CPC is a mistake for R, so that this should read CRC in abbreviation of the same post, *c*(*a*)*r*(*ceris*) *c*(*ustos*).[7] In other words, he argues that the resemblance of CACVS to a noun of the second declension is simply an unfortunate coincidence. This interpretation seems preferable to accepting *cacus* as a noun because it is more plausible that the engraver of the inscription in Rome should have abbreviated the title of a common post in a unique manner than that none of the vast documentation otherwise for the Roman imperial army should mention a post by the title of *cacus*, if it really existed, except this single inscription in Rome.

A second potential explanation of CACOR if one accepts that it could be expanded to read CACOR<VM> is that it is the neuter genitive plural of the transliteration into Latin of the Greek adjective κακός 'evil'. The explanation for the use of this term in this way lies in its association with the phallus. The phallus was a common apotropaic device used to ward away evil, so it is consistent with its purpose that an accompanying inscription should reference evil. As to why this term should be in the genitive, this is best explained as an objective genitive, an indication that these 'evils' serve as the object of the action of the phallus. Perhaps one should understand some term such as *depulsor* 'averter', so that the phallus is being implicitly described as the (*depulsor*) *cacor* <*um*> 'the averter of evils'.[8] This interpretation is reinforced by the fact that the phallus points directly toward the term CACOR and even seems to be ejaculating over it since, as Meyer, Mullen, and Vanhala have suggested, the line that emerges from the tip of the phallus and bisects the first C of CACOR so that it resembles a Greek epsilon, is probably best explained as ejaculate. Hence the phallus ejaculates over a term seeming to mean 'evils' in the same way, for example, that other phalli have been depicted

[3] *TLL* III col. 12.
[4] *CIL* VI.1058 7, 15.
[5] Kellermann 1835, 17; Baillie Reynolds 1926, 88–9.
[6] *CIL* VI.1057 4, 11.
[7] Sablayrolles 1996, 232.
[8] For the phrase *depulsores malorum* 'averters of evil', see Lact., *Div. inst.* 2.14.13. The term *depulsor* was also an epithet of Jupiter. See *TLL* V.1 col. 619.

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ejaculating over the evil eye.[9] Finally, one also needs to explain why the engraver has used a Greek adjective transliterated into Latin here rather than the standard Latin adjective for evil, *malus*. The answer to this may lie in the use of bilingual obfuscation to increase the power of magic, as frequently occurs, for example, in the case of *defixiones* or curse-tablets.[10] Or to use another phrase to describe a similar, but admittedly not identical, phenomenon, the transliteration of a Latin charm into Greek characters, this may be an example of 'magical encipherment'.[11] In this case, therefore, the use of a Greek adjective transliterated into Latin may have been intended to increase the apotropaic power of the phallus against evil.

So, what is the relationship between Secundinus and the phallus that averts evils? The answer to this is provided by *RIB* 872 from Maryport, which depicts a phallus ejaculating upon an evil eye accompanied by the inscription *verpa M*(*arci*) *Sept*(*imi*) 'the dick of Marcus Septimius'. The parallel in circumstances suggests that Secundinus probably owns the phallus depicted on the stone from Vindolanda in the same way that Marcus Septimius owns that depicted on the stone from Maryport. At face value, each inscription seems to praise a named individual by claiming that he owns a phallus that has the power to avert evil. However, without more context, it is impossible to judge the precise meaning and intention behind these inscriptions. For example, does the ownership of the named individual relate to the carved symbol alone? In that case, it merely denotes ownership of this apotropaic device, claiming its protection for him alone. Alternatively, there may be an implicit allusion to the individual's actual phallus also in possible reference to his sexual success. However, such an allusion would be of secondary importance. The primary function of the Secundinus stone is to ward evil away from Secundinus.

Finally, one may return to the argument by Meyer, Mullen and Vanhala that CACOR is the present passive of the verb *cacare* 'to shit out'. If one prefers this interpretation, then the object being excreted should be the accompanying phallus, or so they assume. They next assume that the carved phallus must be interpreted literally in reference to a real penis, so that the inscription refers to anal sex. The only difficulty they have then is deciding whether Secundinus is the penetrator (*pedicator*) or the penetrated (*pedicatus*). However, if one interprets the carved phallus symbolically in insulting reference to someone as a 'dick', much as that term is used in modern English, then there is no need to assume any reference to anal sex here.[12] The 'dick' may be 'shitted out' because Secundinus has 'eaten' him up, where this means not the Secundinus is a cannibal who eats people whom he does not like for some reason, but that he deals harshly with anyone whom he considers to be a 'dick'.[13] It helps here to consider an example of a similar phenomenon from Pompeii mentioned by Meyer, Mullen and Vanhala, an inscription reading *hanc ego cacavi* 'I shitted this out' set beneath a large stone phallus on the external wall of a private house.[14] It is unlikely that the owner meant this to be understood in a sexual way, that he enjoyed, or was at least capable of, pushing large penises from his anus, because the Romans seem to have regarded the act of being penetrated in this way as shameful. Instead, this notice is better interpreted as a warning that he eats up and shits out 'dicks', bad guys, that is, that he deals harshly with them. In other words, this Pompeian inscription is the equivalent of a modern warning sign 'Burglars Beware', where

[9] See Parker 2021.
[10] Adams 2003, 44, 128, 144.
[11] Tomlin 2004, 264, in respect of a gold amulet dated to *c.* A.D. 75–125 found at Billingford, Nortfolk.
[12] For numerous examples of *mentula* 'dick' used as a term of abuse in this way, see Adams 1982, 11 as noted also at Meyer, Mullen, and Vanhala 2023, 316.
[13] The making of a connection between eating and excreting is natural and obvious. See *CIL* IV.1884 quoted by Meyer *et al.* 2023, 315, although it uses the reference to eating to allude to oral sex also. The same Latin verb *consumere* could be used in the senses both to kill individuals and to eat food, so there was a semantic link between these activities.
[14] Meyer *et al.* 2023, 315 on *CIL* X.8145.

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forceful language has been chosen in playful allusion to the presence of the apotropaic phallus. The same may be true of the use of CACOR in association with the phallus of the Secundinus stone where 'I (the 'dick') am shitted out' may simply serve as a warning that thieves will be dealt with harshly. In that case, the term SECVNDINVS merely identifies the owner of the property in whose wall this stone was situated and should not be interpreted as the subject of the verb CACOR.

In conclusion, Meyer, Mullen and Vanhala do not exhaust the possibilities in their discussion of the reading of the inscription of the Secundinus stone, since the term CACOR may have been intended in abbreviation of CACOR<VM> instead. However, whether one prefers CACOR or CACOR<VM>, it is unnecessary to read any references to anal sex into this inscription. The Secundinus stone is either purely apotropaic in nature or combines an apotropaic symbol with a warning to any potential thieves that they will be dealt with harshly, but none of this need involve suggestions of anal sex or rape, even metaphorically.

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