An obscene joke from Vindolanda?


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AN OBSCENE JOKE FROM VINDOLANDA?

_T. Vindol._ II 118 (written on the obverse of letter draft _T. Vindol._ II 331) reads as follows:¹

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INTIRIIAPAVIDAMVOLITANSPINNA-
TAPVBIIM (vac.) SEG (vac.)
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This has commonly been thought of as a pupil’s exercise of sorts,² copying the beginning of a famous passage from the ninth book of Vergil’s _Aeneid_, namely _Verg. Aen._ 9.473–475, at which the rumour of her son’s death reaches Euryalus’ mother:³

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Interea pauidam uolitans pennata per urbem
nuntia Fama ruit matrisque adlabitur auris
Euryali. (...)
```

Meanwhile Rumour, the winged messenger, rushes ahead, fluttering across the trembling town, and reaches the ears of Euryalus’ mother.

Accordingly, the text of the tablet has been restored and interpreted by the editors (and others)⁴ as follows:⁵

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Interea pauidam uolitans pinna-
ta p(er) u<r>bem (vac.) seg(niter). (vac.)
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¹ An image is available at http://vindolanda.csad.ox.ac.uk/exhibition/images/118.jpg.
³ On Vergil at Vindolanda see recently M. C. Scappaticcio, _Virgilio, allievi e maestri a Vindolanda: per un’edizione di nuovi documenti dal forte britannico_ , ZPE 169, 2009, 59–70 (esp. 60–61 on the present tablet).
⁴ In addition to the material assembled above, nt. 3, see e. g. A. K. Bowman, _Life and Letters on the Roman Frontier. Vindolanda and Its People_ , London ³2003, 11. 88–89.
⁵ Scappaticcio [above, nt. 3] suggests that the P in line 2, due to its graphic representation, is in fact to be understood as _pra(e)_ . This remains unconvincing, as (i) the form of the P (which occurs three times in the tablet – here, in _pauidam_, and in _pinna[ta]_) is in flux and (ii) the shape of line 2 relatively closely resembles that of the P in _pauidam_.

Meanwhile (scil. Rumour), the winged (scil. messenger, rushes ahead), fluttering across the trembling town . . .’ – ‘Slack!’

The ‘teacher’ (if this is indeed the underlying scenario that resulted in the addition of what seems to say seg(niter), in a different hand)\(^6\) may well have taken the writing on this tablet in the same way as its modern interpreters.

Another interpretation is possible, however – an interpretation that accounts for the spellings of line 2 without the assumption of any abbreviations or mistakes (which, incidentally, are absent from the first line, as pinnata is hardly more than an orthographical variant of pennata in Classical Latin).

The alternative interpretation that one ought to consider is this:

\[\text{Interea pauidam uolitans pinna-}\]
\[\quad \text{ta pubem (vac.) seg(niter). (vac.)}\]

‘Meanwhile, the winged, fluttering, a trembling pubes . . .’ – ‘Slack!’

Pauidam ... pubem, ‘trembling pubes’ (vel sim.),\(^7\) could thus have advanced to become the object of what follows in the Vergilian passage, nuntia Fama ruit (‘messenger Rumour casts’) – but there is, of course, no urgent need to supply ruit at this stage so as for this obscenity to develop its force.

Finally, if the ‘teacher’ understood the ‘pupil’s’ obscene variation of Vergil’s line, of course, one may wish to take his comment seg(niter) as ‘lame’ or ‘dumb’ rather than ‘slack’.\(^8\)

\[^6\] H. D. Jocelyn argued that, due to the consonantic cluster –\textit{gn}–, the adverb segniter could not possibly be abbreviated seg. (on which see Scappaticcio [above, nt. 3] 61 with nt. 13). This is, of course, as apodictic as it is indemonstrable. In fact, even a most superficial search in the manfredclauss.com database of Latin inscriptions yields numerous instances in the Latin inscriptions for e.g. forms and derivatives (including compounds) of cognoscere written as *cogn(\textit{n}–).\(^\star\)


\[^8\] This would appear to be a more natural understanding, in keeping with the spectrum of meaning of Latin \textit{segnis} –\textit{e}, anyway.