

# *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:<sup>1</sup>

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INTIIRIAPAVIDAMVOLITANSPINNA-  
TAPVBIIM (*vac.*) SEG (*vac.*)  
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This has commonly been thought of as a pupil's exercise of sorts,<sup>2</sup> 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:<sup>3</sup>

*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)<sup>4</sup> as follows:<sup>5</sup>

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*Interea pauidam uolitans pinna-  
ta p(er) u<r>bem (vac.) seg(niter). (vac.)*  
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<sup>1</sup> An image is available at <http://vindolanda.csad.ox.ac.uk/exhibition/images/118.jpg>.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. A. K. Bowman – J. D. Thomas, *The Vindolanda Writing Tablets (Tabulae Vindolandenses II)*, London 1994, 65–67 (also available at <http://vindolanda.csad.ox.ac.uk>), a view taken by many since (cf. e. g. S. MacCormack, *The Shadows of Poetry. Vergil in the Mind of Augustine*, Berkeley 1998, 3 nt. 8, J. M. Ziolkowski – M. C. J. Putnam (edd.), *The Vergilian Tradition. The First Fifteen Hundred Years*, New Haven – London 2008, 44–45, or J. Wintjes, *Keep the Women out of the Camp - Women and Military Institutions in the Classical World*, in: B. C. Hacker – M. Vining (edd.), *A Companion to Women's Military History*, Leiden 2012, 17–59, esp. 17–18).

<sup>3</sup> 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).

<sup>4</sup> 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 <sup>3</sup>2003, 11. 88–89.

<sup>5</sup> Scappaticcio [above, nt. 3] suggests that the P in line 2, due to its graphic representation, is in fact to be understood as *p(rae)*. 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)<sup>6</sup> 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:

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*Interea pavidam uolitans pinna-*  
*ta pubem (vac.) seg(niter). (vac.)*  
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‘Meanwhile, the winged, fluttering, a trembling pubes . . .’ – ‘Slack!’

*Pavidam ... pubem*, ‘trembling pubes’ (*vel sim.*),<sup>7</sup> 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’.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> H. D. Jocelyn argued that, due to the consonantic cluster *-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 manfredclaus.com database of Latin inscriptions yields numerous instances in the Latin inscriptions for e. g. forms and derivatives (including compounds) of *cognoscere* written as *\*-cog(n- - -)*.

<sup>7</sup> For *pubes* as a sexual term (referring to the pubic area more generally [cf. Auson. *epigr.* 58.6 Kay: *tergo femina, pube vir es*], pubic hair, or in fact the testicle) cf. J. N. Adams, *Latin Sexual Vocabulary*, London 1982, 68–69. 224. 228.

<sup>8</sup> This would appear to be a more natural understanding, in keeping with the spectrum of meaning of Latin *segnis -e*, anyway.