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PETER KRUSCHWITZ

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In December 2014, I was given the opportunity to examine the funerary inscription for Flavius Antigonus Papias (*RIB* 955¹ = *CLE* 1597),² discovered at Carlisle and now kept in the archive of Tullie House Museum & Art Gallery, Carlisle (Cumbria, UK).³



As a result of the autopsy, I wish to make three short observations on this text:

1. The second line of the inscription, containing the name of the deceased, has been slightly misread. Previous editions give it as *Fla(uiu)s Antigon(u)s Papias*. The correct reading, however, is *Fla(uiu)s Antigoñus Papias*. The penultimate sign in *Antigonus* is not an N, but, in actual fact, a ligature of the letters N and V, resulting in a shape of the N with its first vertical *hasta* extended above beyond the angle where the first vertical and the diagonal *hastae* meet – a shape that is slightly, but distinctly, different from that of all other Ns in the same inscription:⁴



¹ A more easily accessible version of this entry with useful links to relevant literature is now available online at <http://romaninscriptionsofbritain.org/inscriptions/955> [last accessed 9 December 2014].

² For recent studies of this text see P. Cugusi, *Carmi epigraphici latini della Britannia*, *Rend. Mor. Acc. Lincei* IX 2, 2006, 199–232, 223 no. 23 and M. Schumacher, *Die Carmina Latina Epigraphica des römischen Britannien*, Berlin 2012 [http://www.diss.fu-berlin.de/diss/receive/FUДИSS_thesis_000000040118], 163–168 no. 13. Both studies give an account of older scholarship on this text.

³ I am very grateful to Mr Tim Padley, Curator of Archaeology at Tullie House Museum, for his generous help and support on occasion of my visit. All photos were taken by myself on occasion of my visit; their copyright lies with Tullie House Museum, Carlisle.

⁴ Historical drawings of this text do not bring this detail out with sufficient clarity.

2. The reading *Septimia domina* in line 7 is beyond dispute. The editors of *RIB* 955 were mistaken in their claim that ‘the M in DOM seems hardly supported by the numerous other m’s in the text’: the traces, albeit difficult to make out due to the damage caused by the amateurish attempt to resect the stone’s for re-use, are unambiguous and show precisely the same shape of the M (including the way in which the first *hasta* is tilted) as found elsewhere in the same inscription:



Traces beyond the word *domina* do not amount to anything.⁵

3. The claim that this inscription is a Christian one remains altogether inconclusive.⁶ There are no traces of Christian symbolism, the imagery behind *quem ad modum accomodatam fatis animam reuocauit* (lines 4–6) is perfectly in keeping with ‘pagan’ thought, and the introductory dedication to the *Dis Manibus*, alongside a mention of *fatis*, is reason enough to dispute any Christian background (if not a good enough reason to rule it out altogether, as has been observed before). This leaves the phrase *plus minus* (line 4). One must note, however, that the claim that *plus minus* is restricted to Christian inscriptions is now an altogether a circular one, for it keeps being used as a criterion – sometimes, like here, even the sole criterion – for such decisions,⁷ an overreach that arbitrarily reduces the pool of conflicting evidence. To be sure, it is sufficiently well established that the phrase *plus minus*, as an expression of vagueness when it comes to indications of age, is particularly common in Christian texts.⁸ Yet, the phrase is well attested, throughout Latinity, in pagan authors from Plautus to Servius.⁹ Moreover, certainly as far as Roman Britain is concerned, the phrase is repeatedly found in contexts that completely lack conclusive and undisputable signs of Christian background.¹⁰ In that regard, it seems problematic, to say the least, to claim with certainty that the inscription for Antigonus Papias is Christian.

Peter Kruschwitz, University of Reading, Department of Classics, Whiteknights, PO Box 218, Reading RG6 6AA, United Kingdom
p.kruschwitz@reading.ac.uk

⁵ D. R. Howlett, *Insular Inscriptions*, Dublin 2006, 19 suggests to supply *memoriam posuit*, largely on the basis of numerical guesswork. While this supplement can neither be confirmed nor denied, one ought to bear in mind that it is extremely unlikely that line 7 was, in fact, the final line of the text, for otherwise the way in which the inscription was resected would not have made a great deal of sense.

⁶ It thus appears in *ILCV* 3308A.

⁷ Cf. J. M. C. Toynbee, Christianity in Roman Britain, *Journal of the British Archaeological Association*, ser. 3, 16, 1953, 1–24, esp. 14. More recently a sceptical view was expressed by Cugusi (above, nt. 2), while Schumacher (above, nt. 2) 164 with nt. 622 was inclined to see the inscription as Christian.

⁸ See e. g. H. Nordberg, *Biometrical Notes. The Information on Ancient Christian Inscriptions from Rome Concerning the Duration of Life and the Dates of Birth and Death*, Helsinki 1963, 14–15. 25–30.

⁹ Even a most superficial search for this phrase on <http://latin.packhum.org/> yields over twenty tokens.

¹⁰ Cf. *RIB* 26. 787. – *RIB* 292 = *CLE* 806: *felices uita plus min[us] e[ste]* (‘be more or less happy in your life’) is a slightly different case, but also an inscription that most definitely lacks Christian background.