

13. Epigraphy as a tool for learning Latin

The case of the Prežihov Voranc Primary School in Ljubljana, Slovenia

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Abstract

The Prežihov Voranc Primary School in Ljubljana is the only state primary school in Slovenia that has continually maintained a tradition of early learning of the Latin language. The Latin teacher, Aleksandra Pirkmajer Slokan, has introduced new programmes to stimulate children's interest in the classical language, some of which are based on epigraphy. The results have included several exhibitions and a small guide through the *lapidarium* of the National Museum of Slovenia, written specifically for young people.

Keywords

Primary School, Latin, epigraphy, research papers, guide to *lapidarium*

13.1. The Prežihov Voranc Primary School in Ljubljana

The Prežihov Voranc Primary School in Ljubljana is the only state primary school in Slovenia that has continually maintained a tradition of early learning of the Latin language (11–15 year-olds). The beginnings of classical education in Slovenia date back to 1563 (at the initiative of the Protestant reformer Primož Trubar), and it was in 1899 that the Classical High School in Ljubljana moved into a newly built facility; the Prežihov Voranc Primary School is now located at that site.

Since the beginning of the 20th century, the situation of teaching classical languages has changed significantly. Soon after World War II, the eight-year high school was cancelled and an eight-year primary school was founded, the higher classes of which became the heirs of the former lower high school. Soon after this school reform (1958), the early learning of Greek (13–15 years) faded away completely, while Latin was marginalised and, since 2003, has been an optional subject solely

for the students of the last three years of Primary school education with two lessons per week. Nevertheless, school statistics show that the interest for learning Latin is far from decreasing. Not only the interest of children but also the results of the selfless work of Latin teachers, especially Aleksandra Pirkmajer Slokan, prove that children want to learn a new language, the language for which research papers on primary schooling have repeatedly proven is far from dead, as might have been incorrectly believed.

Since 1991, under the supervision of Aleksandra Pirkmajer Slokan, Latin extracurricular activities called *Per vias antiquas* ('On Ancient Paths') have been carried out. This name encompasses several different activities that strive to bring the Latin language closer to children, to motivate them, and to make the Latin class more interesting with diverse approaches. In the 6th year, Latin is incorporated into these activities with the intention of both familiarising children with Latin and of making their decision whether or not to choose it as their optional subject for the following three years easier. *Per vias antiquas* also includes the school bulletin *Rustica Latina* (published since 1993), drama-recitative performances (recitations, skits, drama plays), excursions in Slovenia and abroad (e.g. Aquileia, Ptuj and the shrines of Mitra, Pula, Venice, etc.), visits to collections and exhibitions of museums and galleries, walks in ancient Emona (present-day Ljubljana), while in the autumn of 2010 a free course of Latin was organised for parents. For epigraphy, three areas of the primary school students' research activities have exceptional importance: research camps, research papers, and the research project entitled 'Epigraphy', all of which will be dealt with in detail below.

13.2. Research camps

Under the influence of the school astronomy camp and as a part of the extracurricular *Per vias antiquas* activities, the first research camp was organised in 1991. To date, the school has organised 23 such research camps in various places across Slovenia, which have lasted from three to eight days and are known by the name *Lingua Latina laeta* ('Merry Latin'). The common goal of all the camps is the research of the interdisciplinary usefulness of the Latin language and the search for the connections between ancient and modern civilisations. The camp programme is composed of three different interconnected sections (lin-

guistic, cultural-civilisation, and recreational). The research work is carried out at several levels of difficulty and according to interest groups (drama, journalistic, arts, music workshop, etc.) and is reflected in the writings for the camp bulletin, which has since then become the all-school bulletin *Rustica Latina* (Fig. 13.1), as well as in gathering of ideas for project and research papers, etc. Therefore, these research camps have become the source and workshop of ideas for the entire school work of *Per vias antiquas* and vice versa. The slogan *Per vias antiquas* has gradually integrated all Latin extracurricular activities at school, including the drama-recitative performances, the bulletin *Rustica Latina*, research papers, and epigraphic workshops in addition to camps, trips, and museum visits.

13.3. Research papers

Since 1994, students have participated in annual gatherings of young researchers and their mentors. Twelve research papers have been written thus far, seven of which have received prizes. The mentor of these papers is Aleksandra Pirkmajer Slokan, who chooses appropriate themes for research papers in cooperation with the students, encourages students in their ideas and the development of their hypotheses, aids them in finding reference literature, and facilitates cooperation with scientists from various fields of expertise. Research papers are devoted to different themes from Roman culture and civilisation, from describing everyday Roman life, the research of preserved archaeological remains to considering their presentation and potential solutions regarding how to better present these to the public. It should be emphasised that more than a half of these 12 papers deal with epigraphy.

In the first research paper, students researched Roman monuments; they were primarily interested in *Archaeological monuments on facades of houses in Ljubljana* [AVSEC et al. 1996]. They focused on Roman inscriptions immured into the Ljubljana cathedral of St Nicholas and seminary (in the years 1701–1713), which represented the first lapidarium in Ljubljana, the Thalnitscher Lapidarium. They chose eight inscriptions and analysed each of them according to the standards established in epigraphy and also used for electronic epigraphic databases. Thus, for every monument a description, place and time of discovery, and the location where it is kept were added. They also wrote out the full Roman inscription and added its Slovenian translation. For them, an



Fig. 13.1. The school bulletin Rustica Latina

important aspect was represented by the art message on the monument; therefore, the depictions on the stones were described in detail, and each one was drawn (Fig. 13.2) and individually photographed. This paper is primarily focused on the linguistic discussion of the Roman monuments; a part of the paper deals with the detailed analysis of the Latin vocabulary, with which students could use their knowledge of Latin on a practical and (most importantly) original Roman inscription after only two years of learning the language.

The title of the second research paper was *Among the Roman inscriptions in the lapidarium of the National Museum in Ljubljana* [M. HERMAN et al. 1997]. This paper was written when the lapidarium of the National Museum was inaccessible due to a reorganisation. The hypothesis was that lapidaria are generally not primary-school-student-friendly but arranged by adults for adults. The theme of the paper was various types of inscriptions (altars, tombstones), which were described according to the above-mentioned steps: the time and place of making or discovery, followed by the precise transcription with additions, translation into Slovenian, the analysis of the vocabulary and they also added a precise explanation of the realia and the description of the monument (whether there were any ligatures used, punctuation marks, damage, etc.). The descriptions were accompanied by a drawing of the entire slab or only one detail (Fig. 13.3), and a photograph; the entire work was concluded with their opinions and thoughts about the monument. Four monuments (on which professions of the deceased are depicted) were discussed in this manner, three monuments with the stonemason's errors, and a few monuments containing abbreviations. As the students wrote, they used their knowledge of Latin as a key to uncovering the initial secrets of epigraphy.

The lapidarium of the National Museum of Slovenia was also the subject of the next research paper but with the focus shifted to the lapidarium itself: *The lapidarium of the National Museum in Ljubljana: yesterday, today, tomorrow* [BEG et al. 1997]. The children described the attitude towards ancient remains in the past, when Roman monuments were used as building material, immured into churches, castles, and houses as a decoration on facades. We can only speak about the existence of the first lapidarium in the time of Janez Gregor Dolničar, who had 14 Roman inscription slabs immured into the Ljubljana cathedral and seminary at the beginning of the 18th century. When the museum was founded in 1821 and its building opened to the public in 1885, most



Fig. 13.2. Picture of the tombstone for Secco (CIL 03, 03871 = AIJ 195 = Iupa 3709)



Fig. 13.3. Picture of the tombstone for the slave Flavos (*CIL* 03, 10775 = *AIJ* 187 = *ILJug* 314 = *RINMS* 51 = *Iupa* 3702 = *EDR* 129071)

of the Roman monuments were transferred there, but the lapidarium had not yet been arranged. Thus, these stones were randomly arranged along the ground floor hallways, and most of them were immured into walls. In the spring of 1995, the stones were taken out of the walls and placed into the lapidarium, where the monuments were freestanding and information boards were added. The outer lapidarium in the museum garden, opened in 2006, was intended for milestones, sarcophagi, urns, mosaics, and other larger monuments. There are plans to turn the basement into a space for the presentation of additional monuments. The focus of the research paper was primarily the manner in which the lapidarium could be appropriately presented to young people, especially primary school children. The message of the research paper was the following: stone monuments lose their value if their message is not communicated to general public.

The communicative power of stone monuments was the topic of a research paper in 1997/1998 entitled *Artistic image of Roman stone monuments in the lapidarium of the National Museum in Ljubljana* [AHLIN et al. 1998]. In the lapidarium, they chose eight Roman stelae, which some of the most richly decorated monuments, and described them according to the known protocol, mostly emphasizing their depictive aspects. The paper was illustrated with pictorial material (Fig. 13.4 and 13.5) and commentary about the students' impressions during the study of an individual slab was given.

Several years of observing and describing stone monuments encouraged the teacher and her students to continually think about the ways to bring the lapidarium closer to young people. Hence, the next research paper was devoted to the *Lapidarium for primary school children* [A. HERMAN et al. 1999]. Specifically, when reviewing the relevant educational brochures, the students discovered that most were intended for adults, even experts, while primary school students who are also interested in ancient monuments lacked any appropriate guide. Their assumption was that 'a guide helps you see more'. This research paper thus developed a model of a guide that would contain a great deal of pictorial material, while the accompanying text would be short and concise but still appropriate for students, and the newly acquired knowledge would be deepened with worksheets. The National Gallery in Ljubljana, where many educational brochures and leaflets are available for the youngest visitors, served as an example for the preparation of the guide. In the last part of the paper, students suggest how the slightly dull



Fig. 13.4. Picture of the tombstone for Surus and Quarta (CIL 03, 03815 = AIJ 141 = RINMS 87 = lupa 3681 = EDR 134931)



Fig. 13.5. Picture of the tombstone for Publius Nertomarius Quartus (CIL 03, 010794 = AIJ 236 = RINMS 145 = ILSl 85 = lupa 373)

and grey space of the lapidarium could be livened up: one could be taken through the exhibition by a guide dressed in a toga, Roman music could be heard in the background, the museum shop could sell souvenirs with epigraphic motifs, while at the exit Roman coins would be distributed for good luck and as souvenirs.

In 2006/2007, students again dealt with epigraphy for their research paper, that year's title being *Roman inscriptions from Ig* [GORUP et al. 2007]. They primarily focused on the personal names on the Roman monuments found in the area of Ig and kept at the church of St Michael in Iška vas and the lapidarium of the National Museum of Slovenia. They investigated whether the intermingling of indigenous people with the Romans can be verified by research. They established that the indigenous and the Roman names on the tombstones of the families from Ig often appear next to each other; most frequently, the older generation bears indigenous names while the younger bears Roman ones, but there are exceptions. The monuments most frequently attest male names, while from the linguistic perspective the contents of the inscription are also simple and understandable for primary school students.

When analysing the names, especially when determining various groups of indigenous names, children sought help with Marjeta Šašel Kos, PhD, who was the co-mentor of all epigraphically-focused research papers.

13.4. Research project Epigraphy

As early as in 1992, Aleksandra Pirkmajer Slokan decided that Latin classes could be enriched with epigraphy. Inscriptions on Roman monuments represent the only original Roman text that can help students deepen and develop their knowledge of Latin. Help with the realisation of the project was also offered by the National Museum of Slovenia, which is located in the immediate vicinity of the school, so the lapidarium is easily accessible, and its staff is hospitable and ready to help. Regular visits to the lapidarium helped the children read the messages written in stone by their predecessors in this region, while during other extracurricular activities they depicted ancient monuments in various techniques: chalk, pencil, clay (Fig. 13.6 and 13.7) etc.



Fig. 13.6. Milestone (made of clay) (CIL 03, 04620 = 11319 = RINMS 179)

Fig. 13.7. Tombstone for Aurelia Ursa (made of clay) (CIL 03, 03844 = 13398 = AIJ 172 = RINMS 43 = lupa 2923 = EDR 129063)

Their objets d'art, which in past years lay forgotten at the school, were exhibited twice: first in 1995 at the National Museum of Slovenia during the time when the lapidarium was not open to the public (Fig. 13.8), and four years later when the artwork of stone monuments was exhibited at the epigraphic exhibition upon the 100th anniversary of the school. The final goal of the Epigraphy project was the production of the primary-school-students' guide to the lapidarium of the National museum of Slovenia.

13.5. Guide to the lapidarium for primary schools

The result of a decade (1992–2002) of visiting the National Museum of Slovenia lapidarium, learning about epigraphy, and research work led to the publishing of the *Guide to the lapidarium for primary school students* (Fig. 13.9) [PIRKMAJER SLOKAN 2004]. It is intended for students of primary school higher classes and knowledge of Latin is not necessary for its use. The introduction contains a brief history of the lapidarium, which is followed by a glossary explaining the words that appear in several different places in the guide (e.g. epigraphy, ligature, stele, milestone, inventory number).

The guide's main part is composed of four worksheets arranged according to the level of difficulty from the easiest to the most demanding. On the first worksheet, students review general information about the lapidarium by circling the correct answers, and during their walk through the lapidarium search for motifs typical for certain monuments (a dolphin, rosette, bear, or the motif of a funerary banquet). Worksheets nos. 2–4 focus on selected monuments where children observe their motifs and primarily their inscriptions written in the Latin language and accompanied by the Slovenian translation. They record the monument's basic data, such as measurements, material from which it is made, inventory number, date, etc. Simpler grammatical exercises help them gradually acquire new Latin words, the explanation of names as well as the basics of onomastics. The importance of the guide is not merely in its pedagogical role but in the fact that this is the first such guide to a lapidarium for primary school students.

13.6. Conclusion

A long tradition of teaching Latin and, in particular, the more than two decades of the pedagogic work of Aleksandra Pirkmajer Slokan



Fig. 13.8. Exhibition of the pictures made by the school children of the Prežihov Voranc Primary School in Ljubljana

have elevated the teaching of the Latin language at the Prežihov Voranc Primary School in Ljubljana to a level unparalleled in Slovenia. Selected themes from epigraphy used by Pirkmajer Slokan in her classes (also the epigraphic section of the textbook 'Lingua Latina') [PIRKMAJER SLOKAN 2007] to diversify the learning of Latin and introduce the children to authentic Roman inscriptions, Roman culture and civilisation have proven to be an important link within the pedagogic work. The immediate vicinity of the lapidarium of the National Museum, research camps, research papers, and other extracurricular activities have helped children to enjoy visiting the dark space of the lapidarium. *The Guide to the lapidarium for primary school* has taken a further step and brought the place where Roman monuments are kept closer to younger people. This school is far from lacking ideas and interest; they are talking to the Slovenian School Museum about the joint exhibition on the teaching of Latin in the Slovenian eight-year primary school (1958–2008), which should help the school once again prove its unique role in Slovenia.



Fig. 13.9. *A walk through the Roman lapidarium of the National Museum of Slovenia: a guide for young people*

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