

# Christian Latin Verse Inscriptions: Endearment Towards Children

As a starting point for this investigation serves a remarkable dipole; on the one hand, the deep effect of massive child mortality -especially up to the age of ten- on Greek and Roman societies was responsible for shaping an emotional distance towards children. On the other hand, since the appearance of the first patristic texts, the special role of children in the theology of the early Church becomes evident. Also, in general in Late Antiquity and afterwards (4th-5th cent.), under the influence of Christianity, Christian ideas of the afterlife are starting to take their place in epitaphs -especially the verse ones - alongside traditional material from popular philosophy. Taking these into account, our aim is to investigate what the level of endearment expressed by parents towards their deceased children is, as well as the ways and the terms used to signify their affection for them, in the framework of a corpus of selected Christian Latin verse funerary inscriptions of Italian origin, derived from the CLE collection.

## Following the Pre-existing Epigraphic Tradition

The most common way of expressing parental love in burial inscriptions, prose and metrical, is the use of typical epithets, a tradition that Christian epigraphy also follows. The presence of *merens* / *meritus*, in their various forms, is very common in the commemoration of deceased people of any age. However, in funerary inscriptions that concern infants and children in particular, the use of adjectives *innocens* (e.g., CLE 00211 ad n., 1-3: [*Hic est positus*] / [*innocens*] / [*O*] *nensimus*...), *dulcis* (e.g., CLE 00658, 3-5: ...*dulcis infans obiit modica q(ue) vita peregit / novennem puerum eripuit cum mensib(us) octo / et dies XVI quib(us) superfuisse videtur*...), *carus* (e.g., CLE 00733, 2-5: ...[*c*] *um subito nobis carorum trium prolis aufertur / Agaton [a]mabilis teque defleam Yppolite dulcis / nec non et tu omni[b]us istis carior Petronalis / o atra dies a qua tumulus sus[c]epit funus germanum*...) and *pius* (e.g., CLE 00857, 1: [*Hic s]ita sunt pia natorum dua cor[pora cara]*...) - in all their degrees - is of high frequency in the commemoration of children, from the youngest infants to the adulescentes accordingly, with a profound preference to the second one.

## The Dashing of Hopes

Focusing our attention on the many possibilities offered by the development of verse inscriptions, we can extend our research beyond the limited field of use of specific terminology, to broader topics that may appear in the context of funerary inscriptions and express parental love. One of the commonest is the grieving of the lost possibilities of a deceased child, of the hopes of the parents for the child's full potential that have been proven vain. Typical is the lament for two children, *Gerontius* and *Constantius*, of about 4 ½ and 2 ½ years accordingly (CLE 01400, 5-10: ... *quam male de vobis fallacia gaudia vidi / et decepturus me iugulavit amor / reddebar teneris in vultibus ipsaque per vos / tempora credebam lapsa redisse mihi / sentio quid faciat spes inrita pessima sors est / supplicii afflicto quem sua vota p[ro]t[er]taemunt ...*; see Fig. 1), or that for young adulescens *Simplicius*, of 14 ½ years (CLE 00649, 8-10: ...*de cuius spe promittens sibi plurima mater / immeritos potius suscepit casta dolores / nec valere preces quas fuderat anxia caras*...). Although it is not difficult to detect the parental love from such declarations, we should not disregard that the mourning here is a manifestation not only of the sorrow for the loss of a beloved child, but also of the grief for the loss of the personal hopes and the security for the future, as children in the Greco-Roman world were generally considered as an investment for the family's future.



Fig. 1: CLE 01400;  
Photo: © Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum – BBAW



Fig. 2: CLE 00656;  
Photo: EDCS Epigraphik-Datenbank Claus / Slaby

## New Christian Ideas

Another element frequently found in the Christian inscriptions is the expression of parental affection through the praise of the virtues of the children themselves, even of the youngest ones, and not only the lament of their potential that has been frustrated. Indeed, notable is the case of the commemoration of *dulcis Severa* who is praised for her admirable wisdom and abilities, although her young age which has not completed 10 years (CLE 00656, 8-9; see Fig. 2). In contrast to the dominant belief in the Greco-Roman world according to which children were symbols of irrationality, in the case of *Severa*, not only remarkable mental abilities are commended, but also, they are projected as gifts of *Dominus*, shaking thus the aforementioned belief, which many patristic dictations of the early Christian times do as well. Furthermore, among her other qualities, the purity of her soul is distinguished, a virtue which was repeatedly exploited in patristic speeches as an element of superiority of children over adults, since it brings the former closer to God. Such examples on the one hand, are strong indications of the parents' affection for their children and the consequent intense grief for their loss, and on the other hand, they show traces of a gradual increase of the value of children in general in the consciousness of society, a fact in which the spread of Christianity seems to be an important factor.