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For Epigraphist, Inscriptions Tell Timeless Tales

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By Bill Eichenberger, Dispatch Book Critic

Phryne was a slave of Tertulla in ancient Rome. She was, probably, a household seamstress. She was of African origin. And she died when she was 17.

What little we know about Phryne we learn from an inscription taken from the tomb where she was buried, an inscription translated by epigraphists such as Charles Babcock, professor emeritus in Ohio State University's Department of Greek and Latin.

"It's a whole life history in a few words. Those words are all that exist now of Phryne," Babcock said in his OSU office. Of the inscription, housed in the American Academy in Rome, he added: "I touch her (Phryne) every time I go back (to Italy)."

Poor, young, obscure Phryne enjoys -- along with the emperors and senators who were much more grandly inscribed -- a kind of immortality.

The study of such inscriptions -- most commonly found on buildings, monuments and tombs -- is known as epigraphy, a subject Babcock will discuss when he speaks tonight at a meeting of the Aldus Society.

Texts can be altered, mistranslated and misinterpreted, and mistakes can

be passed down from one generation of scholars to the next. But the inscriptions Babcock studies are a primary source of information.

"The inscriptions are real. Looking at them lets us be there, gets us as close to the individual Roman as we can get," he said.

Reaching across his desk, Babcock holds up a postcard from Italy of a baker's tomb: "His tomb is built in the shape of his oven, so he went out in style."

Though he's at work on the first revised edition of the American

Academy's epigraphy collection since 1931, Babcock is no stuffy scholar. He is thrilled by the inscriptions, and he approaches them in a nonacademic way.

"You don't look at it (an inscription) without letting it work on you in some way."

Many of the inscriptions were designed specifically to "work on" passers-by. Visitors today can walk parts of the Appian Way, an ancient road from Rome to Capua to Brindisium, and read burial inscriptions.

"Often, inscriptions speak directly to a person passing by," Babcock said. "A typical inscription might begin, 'Stop, traveler, and look!' And then it might say, 'I was once what you are now.' A lot of inscriptions remind us of our mortality."

It was common in ancient Rome for children to die young. Babcock is particularly moved by an inscription written by a father at his son's tomb: "What a son should have done for his father, the father has done for the son."

Babcock wrote his dissertation on a branch of epigraphy known as "erasure" -- those instances when inscriptions were altered after they had been completed.

"Mark Antony's name was condemned," Babcock said, and so erased from inscriptions throughout the Roman Empire. "Condemnation essentially eliminated you. It was a condemnation of your memory."

(Mark Antony's descendants eventually married into the imperial family and, in many cases, years after being "erased," his name was restored to inscriptions.)

Epigraphy is essential to the study of Roman civilization, which Babcock taught at OSU.

"You can't show them (students) the Pantheon without showing them the inscription," he said, launching into another fascinating story, this time about Hadrian and Marcus Agrippa.

Inscriptions speak down the years directly to Babcock, and to us, if only we'll listen.

"The Latin Club had these T-shirts made up," Babcock said, reaching into a cabinet by his desk, "with a quote from Cicero. Translated, it says, 'But not to know what happened before you were born -- that is to remain always a child.'

"I wish more students understood that -- that you can't eliminate the past just because you've got a new technology; that you shouldn't ignore the past just because it's old."

Which brings him back to his inscriptions:

"The inscriptions say so much about human nature. And they demonstrate how little human nature has changed," he said.