



Towards the Interpretation of the Latin Inscription on a Fragment of a Roman Jug from the Territory of Ancient Nauportus

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Recently, a yet unpublished inscribed fragment of a Roman ceramic jug recovered from the Ljublanica river near the ancient Roman vicus of Nauportus (present-day Vrhnika) came under renewed attention of archaeologists and epigraphers.¹ Due to its squat lower

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1 The ceramic jug was found in the Ljublanica river near Vrhnika (ancient Nauportus) in the late nineteen-eighties, at which point the drawing of the inscription and the sherd itself was made by Dragica Knific Lunder. I was approached by Asst. Dr. Tina Berden to inspect the inscription in November 2023. Unfortunately, the paleographic and linguistic analysis had to be performed with the help of the drawing alone since the jug is currently missing and could so far not be relocated among the inventory held by the National Museum of Slovenia. Since, for this reason, an autopsy was impossible, I am careful about making any assumptions about the second inscription applied to the bottom of the pot (seemingly *ante cocturam* as is typical of potters' signatures), that one badly damaged. What can be established is that it uses the *capitalis* and that the last letter is *t*, so it almost undoubtedly represents a verb in the 3rd person singular. Based on the numerous parallels, the likeliest candidate is *fecit*, but judging from the drawing, the antepenultimate letter form can hardly represent a <c>. What can be established with certainty is that the two inscriptions do not belong together and form two separate units. They were applied in two different chronological phases, two different techniques, and two different Roman scripts. Typologically, the co-occur-

body, the jug can be broadly dated to the period between the last third of the 2nd century BC and the first half of the 1st century AD: since the neck and mouth are missing, as is the handle, a more precise date is impossible to establish. No local varieties of such vessels are on record, so the jug almost undoubtedly represents an Italic import.²

The bottom of the jug bears a Latin graffito arranged in an almost perfect semicircle (see Fig. 1). The inscription is exceptionally well preserved, with slight damage at the rightmost edge, where the upper part of the last letter has been broken off. Enough characteristic traits of the damaged letter form are still intact, however, for it to be undoubtedly recognized as an <s>.

The inscription consists of three words separated by two mismatching word dividers (represented in the transcription as = and –, respectively) scratched *post cocturam* in Old Roman cursive (i.e., cursive majuscule) and can be roughly dated to the 1st century AD. This is supported by the shape of the letter <a>, which is of the archaic, three-bar type with the medial articulus still attached to the right oblique hasta,³ the equally archaic-looking single-stroke <s> with a nondetached upper curve (prevalent in inscriptions dating to the period between the 1st c. BC and 2nd c. AD), and further corroborated by the conservative four-stroke <m> (1st c. BC–2nd c. AD), three-stroke <n> (1st c.–2nd c. AD), two-stroke <u/v>, all three with unattached strokes, the primitive bow-shaped <c>, and non-slanted <s>. These live side-by-side with the non-archaic lambda-like two-stroke <r>, which was gaining

rence of cursive or non-cursive inscriptions with potters' signatures is not uncommon.

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- 3 Note that this is not necessarily conclusive, as can be suspected based on the individual specimens of the three-bar <a> in later inscriptions reaching up to the beginning of the 3rd century AD (see Bakker and Galsterer-Kröll, *Graffiti auf römischer Keramik*, 13–14, and Wedenig, "Graffiti," 554 (Fig. 117, No. 94)).

ground in first-century Roman cursive inscriptions and became well-established by the 2nd century.⁴

The second, almost s-like <i> that extends into a prominent leftward tail is paleographically rather remarkable. Given that the first word is unambiguously a genitive singular of a male personal name, however, the reading <i> seems incontrovertible. Somewhat problematic is the last letter but two, which resembles the first <i> characterized by a short horizontal headmark. The fact that here the horizontal stroke cuts through the vertical hasta could, however, speak in favor of a <t>. The type of <t> with a short intersecting vertical hasta is well-attested in ancient graffiti.⁵ However, in the case of the graffito from Ljubljana, this would be the *lectio difficilior*, given that such a minimalistic representation of a <t> stands in stark contrast to the sixth letter form, which is marked by a pronounced vertical line (as is generally typical of Roman Cursive) and undoubtedly represents a <t>.

The reading can be established as an owner's mark formulated as the so-called "speaking object" inscription ("I am the x of y"):

amianti = svm – cvrtoꝛ

Typologically similar graffiti can be found on the bottom of coarse ware from all around the Roman empire, e.g., *Helueiti sum* (CIL 1, 2376 = 15, 5925, Rome),⁶ *Hyalissi sum* (CIL 15, 5926, Rome), *sum Marti(a)lis* (CIL 15, 5927, Rome), *Philerotis sum* (CIL 15, 5928, Rome), *Epaphroditum sum* (CIL 10, 8055.14, Pompeii),⁷ *Paris sum* (EDR 177101, Aquileia), *Romuli sum* (AE 1968, 304 = EDCS-09701573 = 54600377, Lugdunum),⁸ *Tiburtini sum* (AE 1958, 53 = EDCS-13500186, Peyrestortes),⁹

4 Cf. the typology of Old Roman Cursive used in Pompeii (CIL 4, p. 273), the *tabellae defixionum* discussed by Bartoletti, "La scrittura Romana," 43 (Fig. 1), Schiapparelli, *La scrittura*, 39–105, and the discussion of ORC used in the Roman writing tablets discovered in Vindolanda (Bowman and Thomas, *Vindolanda*, 51–71). Cf. also Mallon, *Paléographie romain*, and De Robertis, "Old Roman Cursive." For a periodization of the letter shapes typical of graffiti on Roman ceramic vessels, see Bakker and Galsterer-Kröll, *Graffiti auf römischer Keramik*, 13–28.

5 See Schiapparelli, *La scrittura*, 99, Fig. 1, No. 7.

6 The entire inscription reads *Noli me tollere. Helueiti sum* 'Do not steal me. I belong to Helveitus.'

7 *Epaphroditum sum. Tangere me noli* 'I belong to Epaphroditus. Do not touch me!'

8 *Romuli sum. Kaue fur* 'I belong to Romulus. Beware, thief!'

9 *Tiburtini sum. Fur, caue malum* 'I belong to Tiburtinus. Be careful, thief!'



Fig. 1: The Latin inscription scratched on the bottom of the Roman potsherd from the Ljubljana river. Drawing: Dragica Knific Lunder, © Narodni muzej Slovenije

Maximini sum (EDCS-48800014, Matrica),¹⁰ *Gaii sum peculiaris* (RIB 2502.2, Londinium), *Nat(alis) sum* (RIB 2303.352, Bremetennacum), *[---]i · sum [---]* or *[---]e sum [---]* (Wedenig 2000, No. 34, p. 56). In all of the enumerated cases, the object's designation is elided – clearly because it would have been obvious and could be supplied at any moment. Owner's marks of this type (i.e., consisting of a genitive of a personal name, usually the cognomen, and the verb *sum* 'I am') in which the speaking object explicitly names itself indeed seem to be an exception rather than the rule,¹¹ and there are barely any that one could directly compare to the graffito attested on the potsherd from Ljubljana. There is an example of a decorated drinking vessel from Ercavica (Hispania) that claims *[---]n(a)e pan(n)a sum* (EDCS-03700466) 'I am the *panna* of *[---]na*',¹² while the plate from Iuvavum (Wedenig, *Geschirrgraffiti*, 321, Fig. 3–4) is ambiguous and relevant to our case only if the reading is to be interpreted as *Luciaes Q. uas sum* (or, potentially, *Luciae sq. uas sum*) 'I am the dish of Lucia Q.' rather than the equally probable *Luciaes Quas. sum*.¹³ Additional two cases of a structurally parallel formula seem to be *Euces sum p[atera]* (CIL 1, 3405b) and *[---]cnnidi sum po[culum]* (Agostiniani, *Iscrizioni parlanti*, No. 601, p. 244).

The Roman cognomen *Amiant(h)us*,¹⁴ here attested in the possessive genitive *Amianti* 'of Amiantus,' is most widely attested in central Italy, particularly in Rome and at Pompeii, with sporadic occurrences in Venetia et Histria, Noricum, Dalmatia, Belgia, Germania, Hispania, and Africa proconsularis.¹⁵ The spelling *Amianthus* predominates and is about two times more commonly attested in Roman inscriptions than its varia lectio *Amiantus*.¹⁶ The geographical distribution of the

10 *Maximini sum. Refer me.* 'I belong to Maximinus. Give me back!'

11 But contrast this with the (equally rarely attested!) type *panna Balbi, Donati urciolus*, or *Pacui olola* (see Vavassori, "La personalizzazione," 94–99).

12 *[---]n(a)e pan(n)a sum. Pone.* 'I am *[---]*'s *panna*. Put (me) down!' vel sim.

13 The inscription *panna Uerecundaes empti uiges* from Flavia Solva (Noll, *Sigillataschüssel*, 149–52, cf. Wedenig, *Geschirrgraffiti*, 327) is irrelevant as a potential typological parallel, given that it is not in fact conceived as a "speaking object" inscription and rather refers to the price at which the vessel was bought.

14 The cognomen itself is based on a Greek personal name (see Pape, *Wörterbuch*, 73; Solin, *Sklavennamen*, 411; Solin, *Die griechischen Personennamen*, 785).

15 For the attestations see OPEL 1 s.v.; EDH s.v.; EDCS s.v.; Alföldy, *Dalmatia*, 147; Lochner von Hüttenbach, *Steiermark*, 15; Kakoschke, *Germania*, 98; Kakoschke, *Noricum*, 250).

16 For Latin <th> see Leumann, *Lateinische Laut- und Formenlehre*, 159–63.

spelling variants does not seem to form any significant patterns.¹⁷ However, the genitive singular *Amianti* is nearly always attested with a <ɿ> (eight out of eleven examples harvested by the EDCS read *Amianti* rather than *Amianthi*).

Much less straightforward, and the real crux of this inscription is the word *curtos* <ɿrtos> that follows the copula *sum*. Given the typology of the inscription, the syntax here requires a nominative singular, but in an inscription datable to the 1st century AD, a nominative singular ending -os is entirely out of order in a word like *curtos*. In the Classical Latin period (1st c. BC to late 3rd c. AD), -os would only be expected and/or justifiable in a Latin transcription of a Greek word and in native words after consonantal *u* (i.e., the *seruos*, *saluos* type).¹⁸ One could potentially think of some embryonic Vulgar Latin development since a putative *curtos* < **curtus* would be the expected outcome of the development of Latin (unaccented) *u* to Vulgar Latin *ɔ*,¹⁹ but even so, *curtos* would be a unique example of such a spelling. There are only three examples of Latin (i.e., non-Greek) nominative singular -us (after consonants other than *u* /*w*/) being spelled <-os> on the wall graffiti from Pompeii (all male personal names), viz. *Habitos* (CIL 14, 6709),²⁰ *Uenustos*²¹ (CIL 4, 3959), and *Seueros*²² (CIL 4, 8956),²³ the majority of <os> being again limited to cases like *seruos* (once even spelled *seruo* with final *s*-drop) for Classical Latin *seruus*.²⁴

Nevertheless, even if the unexpected and, on the whole, an exceptionally sparsely attested ending -os in *curtos* were explained along the

17 Note that none of the immediately adjacent attestations (both nominatives) has this variant; Waldstein, see CIL 3, 2362: *Iulius Dii lib(ertus) Amianthus*, and Aquileia, see Lettich, *Aquileia*, No. 120: *Amianthus an(norum) V*.

18 See Leumann, *Lateinische Laut- und Formenlehre*, 49; 423. The territory of Emona itself has two examples of this phenomenon, viz. *Flauos* (CIL 3 10775 = Šašel Kos, *Roman Inscriptions*, No. 51 = Šašel Kos, *Emona*, No. 78), dated to the first third of the 1st c. AD, and *Primitiuos* (CIL 3, 3893 = Šašel Kos, *Emona*, No. 235), which is datable to the second century AD.

19 See Lausberg, *Romanische Sprachwissenschaft*, 204; Väänänen, *Latin vulgaire*, 36–37.

20 Questionable since marked as already invisible by CIL 4, though on record in EDCS (EDCS-27400100), EDR (EDR-180552), and AGP.

21 Note the coexistence of apparent -us > -ɔs in the unaccented final position with the absence of simultaneous lowering of accented *u* > *ɔ*, exactly like in *curtɔs* < **curtus*.

22 If not, in fact, *Seuero s(alutem)* as tentatively suggested by CIL.

23 Väänänen, *Inscriptions pompéiennes*, 28–29.

24 Väänänen, *Inscriptions pompéiennes*, 77–81.

lines of incipient Vulgar Latin pronunciation of the type observable in Pompeian *Uenustos*, the central problem remains that Latin *curtus* does not seem to be attested in substantival use in any of the extant sources. The TLL 4.7 (s.v. *curtus*) gives the meanings ‘truncated, cut (off), short, low; mutilated, shattered, broken’ (“*truncus, lacer, fractus*”), all of which derive from the basic meaning ‘cut, shortened’ and are chiefly used to describe broken or damaged vessels (“*praecipue de uasis*”). In the eight attested examples, however, *curtus* is always used adjectivally:

- (1) Juvenal, *Satires* 3.270/71: *rimosa et curta uasa* ‘cracked and broken pots’
- (2) Lucilius, *Satires* 13.467: *Samio curto catino* ‘on a broken Samian plate’
- (3) Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura* 4.1026: *dolia curta* ‘chamber-pots’ < ‘low pots’
- (4) Martial, *Epigrams* 1.92.6: *curtus calix* ‘a broken cup’
- (5) Martial, *Epigrams* 3.82.3: *curta testa* ‘from a broken/cracked jar’
- (6) Martial, *Epigrams* 12.32.13: *matella curto rupta latere meiebat* ‘a broken chamberpot (*matella curta*) was leaking through its shattered side (*curto latere*)’
- (7) Propertius, *Elegies* 4.75 *curto uetus amphora collo* ‘an old amphora with broken neck’
- (8) Ovidius, *Fasti* 2.645 *curto testu* ‘on a potsherd’ < ‘(piece of) broken earthenware’

Since the jug is broken off right after *curtos*, the inscription might have been originally longer, terminating in a substantive, to which *curtos* would be the attributive adjective (e.g., *curtus uasus* vel sim.). If, however, the apparent nearly perfect semicircular organization of the inscription is premeditated, one would then have to reckon with something like a substantivized (via ellipsis) *curtus* to designate a *specific type* of short vessel, for which there does not seem to be any substantial proof in the attestations (except for *dolium curtum* ‘chamberpot’).

Another option, then, is to think along the lines of *curtus* being used metonymically for ‘pot’ (cf. Old Church Slavonic *črěpъ* ‘earthenware, pot; shard’ or Slovene *črep* and *črepinja* ‘idem’, which go back etymologically to ‘(pot)sherd’).²⁵ However, based on the available

25 See Bezljaj, *Etimološki slovar*, 87–88 s.v. *črep*, Snoj, *Slovenski etimološki slovar*, s.v. *črep*.

evidence, such a possibility, even though theoretically still within the realm of plausibility, remains unsubstantiated for Latin, and neither does it seem to be supported by the linguistic data from Romance languages.²⁶

Be that as it may, the fact is that in our inscription, the object possessed by *Amiant(h)us* explicitly names itself. In contrast, typological parallels on Arretine pottery show that this was not usually the case but that the obviousness of what was owned rather obviated the need to express it. This would support the idea that <curtos> is not, in fact, the obvious or indeed, the common designation of the object at hand.

Since -os in post-second-century inscriptions can be most straightforwardly explained along the lines of a Latinate transcription of an Ancient Greek word, as already pointed out above, an additional possibility presents itself, namely that <curtos> stands for Greek κύρτος ‘weel, fish trap’ (cf. κύρτη).²⁷ Greek upsilon (υ) was regularly transcribed as <u> in Latin borrowings up to the Augustan era, which finally saw the introduction of <y> (alongside <z>), but the use of simple <u> for <υ> was still commonly used well into the 1st c. AD,²⁸ so that <curtos> for <cyrτος> should not be too surprising.²⁹ One can imagine ceramic pots being (re-) used as fish or, more specifically, eel traps. However, what seems to be inferable from the archaeological finds, combined with the depictions of fishing gear on Roman mosaics and supported by modern-day practices in the Mediterranean, is that fishing pots were used predominantly to catch octopus and cuttlefish.³⁰ Since an ordinary clay jar used as a fishing pot would not be specifically marked as such (none of the preserved pots bear any comparable inscriptions), a repurposed ceramic jug might be unconventional enough to have merited the designation. The main problem with this is that the shape and size of such pots do not match the find from the Ljubljana river. Based on the low and squat, somewhat

26 See Meyer-Lübke, *Romanisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*, 225, for the attestations across Romance.

27 I owe the suggestion to Michael Weiss, University of Cornell (E-mail correspondence, 12/12/2023).

28 Väänänen, *Inscriptions pompéiennes*, 32–33.

29 For typological reasons at least, it is significantly less likely that this could be a Latinate spelling of the Greek adverb κυρίως <curios> ‘legitimately, properly’ (with <i> as the *lectio faciliior*, for which see above).

30 See Montebelli, *Halieutica*, § *Ollette fittili*, and cf. Bernal-Casasola, “Fishing Tackle in *Hispania*,” 124–26.

globular body and a broad ring base, the vessel was probably a Roman single-handled jug similar to a *lagynos*, which would typically terminate in a longish vertical neck and rounded mouth.

The only remaining solution would be to assume that the graffito does not terminate after <curtos> and abandon the *lectio difficilior* in favor of <curios>. This opens the possibility of reading the inscription as a bi-partite sequence and restoring *curios[e]* ‘with care, carefully’, which was probably followed by an imperative, cf. the inscription *poni curiose* ‘Put me back/down with care’ from Gaul (CAG 2, 492, EDCS-42000208), and – for a less striking typological parallel – *Pone me. Domnae sum* ‘Restore me / Put me down! I belong to Domna’ (AE 2003, 1145 = EDCS-68300116, Latara). If our inscription is interpreted to stand for something like *Amianti sum. Curios[e pone]* ‘I belong to Amiantus. Put me back with care’ vel sim., this would neatly obviate the problem presented by the apparent substantive use of *curtos*, its dubious lexical meaning, the issues around the unexpected ending -os, and the fact that there are very few convincing parallels in the typologically comparable inscriptions to support the syntactic structure ‘I am the x of z.’

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ABSTRACT

A Latin possessor inscription was discovered scratched on the bottom of a Roman potsherd (datable to the period between the Late Republic and the Julio-Claudian dynasty) recovered from the Ljubljanka river near Vrhnika. The inscription reads *amianti sum curtos* in Old Roman cursive. Based on paleographical characteristics, the inscription can be tentatively dated to the 1st c. AD. Several good typological parallels of possessor inscriptions consisting of a genitive of a personal name and the verb *sum* are found on ceramic vessels across the Roman empire. However, the type in which the object explicitly names itself is rare. The Roman cognomen *Amiant(h)us* is well attested, especially in Italy, so the only problematic part of the inscription is *curtos*. Given that the pot is damaged, it is possible that the inscription was originally longer and that *curtos* stood in attributive position to a word like *calix/uasus/urceus* et sim. If this is not the case, however, it can only be understood as a substantivization, potentially signifying something like a '(pot) sherd' > 'pot'. In support of this, however, Latin epigraphical and literary sources are silent. An additional problem is raised by the final -os, which in the Classical period would only be justifiable after *u*. The attested form *curtos* for expected *curtus* could potentially be explained as a reflex of Vulgar Latin development of *us* to -os, which is sporadically attested in Pompeian graffiti, or assumed to be a letter-for-letter Latin transcription of the Ancient Greek word κύπτος '(fish)trap'. The latter solution runs into the problem of the pot from Ljubljanka not matching what we know of ceramic pots used for fishing in terms of shape and dimensions. Given its shape, the vessel was probably a single-handled Roman *lagynos*. Allowing for the fact that the inscription does not terminate after <curtos> and that the <t> should be read as an <i>, which indeed seems to be the *lectio facilior*, another possibility is to restore *curios[e]* 'with care, carefully' and assume a bipartite text such as *Amianti sum. Curios[e pone]* vel simile.

KEYWORDS: Latin epigraphy, possessor inscriptions, paleography, Old Roman cursive

K interpretaciji latinskega napisa na odlomku rimskega vrča z območja antičnega Navporta

IZVLEČEK

Na dnu rimskega keramičnega vrča, datiranega med poznorepublikansko in klavdijsko obdobje, ki je bil odkrit v reki Ljubljanici v bližini Vrhnike, je vpraskan dobro ohranjen latinski napis v starejši rimski kurzivi *amianti sum curtos*, ki se ga da na podlagi paleografskih značilnosti datirati v 1. stol. po Kr. Napis ima številne tipološke paralele na rimski keramiki, vendar v lastninskih napisih tega tipa, torej takih, ki vsebujejo osebno ime v roditeljski in glagol *sum*, predmet, ki je v posesti, samega sebe praviloma ne omenja eksplicitno. Rimski kognomen *Amiant(h)us* sicer prednjači v Italiji, a je dobro izpričan po celotnem imperiju, tako da kot izrazito problematična ostaja le beseda *curtos*. Ker je dno vrča poškodovano, je teoretično mogoče, da je *curtos* prvotno stal v atributivni poziciji, npr. *curtos (calix/uasus/urceus ...)*, sicer pa bi ga bilo treba razumeti v posamostaljeni funkciji (eventualno 'črepinja' > 'posoda'), a za to v latinskih epigrafskih ali literarnih virih ni vzporednice. Poleg tega ostaja odprto vprašanje končnice *-os*, ki bi jo v klasičnem obdobju dejansko pričakovali zgolj v položaju za *u*. Obliko *curtos* za pričakovano *curtus* bi bilo sicer mogoče razložiti kot odraz vulgarnolatinske glasovne spremembe *us* > *-os*, kakršna je že v 1. stol. po Kr. izpričana na pompejanskih grafitih, ali pa sklepati, da gre v resnici za latinsko transkripcijo starogrške besede *κύπτος* 'past (za ribe)'. Ob taki rešitvi sicer nastopi težava, da vrč iz Ljubljane tipološko ne ustreza vrčem, ki so bili v rimskem obdobju v uporabi za lov na hobotnice in sipe, saj gre najverjetneje za enoročajni rimski vrč tipa *lagynos*. Če sprejmemo možnost, da je napis poškodovan, ter zadnjo ohranjeno besedo interpretiramo kot *curios[e]* 'previdno' (ob upoštevanju dejstva, da po paleografskih značilnostih <t> v odnosu do branja <i> dejansko predstavlja *lectio difficilior*), bi ga bilo mogoče razumeti tudi kot dvodelno besedilo, npr. *Amianti sum. Curios[e pone]* ali podobno.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: latinska epigrafika, lastninski napisi, paleografija, starejša rimska kurziva