Toward the Etymology of Latin *littera*

Václav Blažek  
(Masaryk University, Brno)

**Abstract**

In the present contribution the Latin word *littera* is analyzed from the point of view of etymology. First, the previous relevant etymological attempts are discussed. If none of them is convincing enough to exclude doubts, a new etymology is proposed. It is based on supposition that the script may also be named according to material, here namely “linen cloth”, really used in the ancient Mediterranean world. A source of Latin *littera* could be Greek acc.sg. *līta* “linen cloth”, mediated to Romans via Etruscans, adding the plural in -er-.

**Keywords**

Latin; Etruscan; Greek; Semitic; etymology; letter; script; linen cloth

The contribution originated under the auspice of the Fund for a specific research, Nr. 2817. Both anonymous referees formulated valuable comments, which were included into the definitive version of the text.
0. The Latin word *littera* and its derivatives belong to the most wide-spread cultural terms of Latin origin, adopted by almost all modern languages of Europe. In the present study its orthographic variants and existing etymologies are discussed. Finally a new etymological solution is proposed.

1. **Variants and the internal reconstruction:**

1.1. The Latin term *littera* is known first from the comedy *Tarentilla* [verse 79] by Naevius (c. 270–201 BCE), mediated by Isidore of Seville [Orig. 1.26.2]:

> Quasi *pila*
> in choro ludens datatim dat se et communem facit.  
> Alii adnutat, alii adnictat, alium amat alium tenet.  
> Alibi manus est occupata, alii pervellit pedem;  
> anulum dat alii spectandum, a labris alium invocat,  
> cum alio cantat, at tamen alii suo dat digito *litteras*.

“As though she were playing at ball, give-and-take in a ring, she makes herself common property to all men. To one she nods, at another she winks; one she caresses, another embraces. Now elsewhere a hand is kept busy; now she jerks another’s foot. To one she gives her ring to look at, to another her lips blow a kiss that invites. She sings a song with one; but waves a **message** for another with her finger.”¹

> Tossing from hand to hand in a ring of players like a ball, she gives herself and makes herself common. She embraces one, nods to another, and her hand is occupied with yet another, she pinches the foot of another, gives to another a ring to look at, calls another by blowing a kiss, sings with another, and to still others gives **signals** with her finger.”²

In a similar sense “script, scripture, writing, letter / Schrift, Schriftstück, Schreiben, Brief”, although with a rather metaphorical value, and with the geminate, the word was also used by Plautus (c. 254–84 BCE):

*Bacchides 3.2.5–6/389:* *ex Epheso huc ad Pistoclerum meum sodalem litteras misi*  
“from Ephesus I sent **letters** hither to my friend Pistoclerus”³

More frequently Plautus used the word in the sense “letter / Buchstabe”:

*Aulularia 1.1.37–39/76ff.* *neque quicumque melius mihi, ut opinor, quam ex me ut unam faciam litteram longam, meum laqueo collum equando obstrinxero*  
“... and there isn’t anything better for me, as I fancy, than to make one long capital **letter** of myself, when I’ve tied up my neck in a halter.”⁴

---

² Transl. by Stephen A. Barney et al. (2010: p. 52).  
³ Transl. by Henry Thomas Riley (1875: p. 171).  
⁴ Transl. by H. T. Riley (1875: p. 378).
Asinaria 4.1.22/767: aut quod illa dicat peregre allatam epistulam, ne epistula quidem ulla sit in aedibus nec cerata adeo tabula; et si qua inutilis pictura sit, eam vendat: ni in quadriduo abalienarit, quo abs te argentum acceperit, tuos arbitratus sit, comburas, si velis, ne illi sit cera, ubi facere possit letteras.

“Or, because she may affirm that the letter has been brought from abroad, there is not to be even any letter in the house, nor so much as a waxed tablet; and if there is any useless picture, let her sell it; if she does not part with it, within four days from the time when she has received the money of you, let it be considered as your own; you to burn it if you like; so that she may have no wax, with which she may be able to make a letter.”

1.2. One of the first editors of Plautus, Domitius Palladius (c. 1460–1533), printed some forms with the simple -t-: e.g. Bacch. 730 literas, Merc. 303 literarum (Persson 1917: p. 131).

The parallel situation is known from the epigraphic evidence, where both, -tt- and -t- occur:
- Geminated -tt-: littera [CIL I 588.10; 78 BCE], [CIL I 2 203.10].
- Simple -t-: leiteras [CIL I 2 198.34; 123/122 BCE]; litera [CIL I 2 207].

Weiss (2010) analyzes the conditions allowing the vacillation VT ~ VTT. He concludes, the rule VT → VTT is valid, if V is a high vowel and T a voiceless stop. This means that the primary starting-point of the analyzed forms should be *litera.

1.3. In Latin the process of monophthongisation *ei > *e > *i was completed around 150 BCE, although the spelling ei for i (and even i) was still applied in the first centuries CE (Leumann & Hofmann 1928: pp. 76–78, §57), e.g. ueiuam [CIL I, 1837] versus correetuiuam for *uiuam → *guHño; see Meiser (1998: p. 49, §39.4; p. 58, §47.2) and even seine [CIL I 583.54] for sîne (Persson 1917: p. 131; Leumann & Hofmann 1928: p. 78). In the inscription documented in CIL I 2, 1430, ivnone seispitei matri, there are three various realisations of the diphthong *ej (cf. Leumann & Hofmann 1928: p. 270, §189a; Kent 1946: p. 40, §251; Tronskij 2001: p. 169, §358).

2. Existing etymologies

There are several etymological attempts, beginning already from the ancient grammarians:

2.1. Diomedes, Ars grammatica (end of the 4th cent. CE): Littera dicta quasi legitera, quia legitur, vel quod legentibus iter ostendit, vel a litura quam patitur, vel quod legendo iteratur.

2.2. Ross (1853: p. 293): Adaptation of Greek διφθέρα “skin”, pl. “writing-material” (before import of papyrus) [Herodot 5.58] with the ‘Sabine’ change d > l (dingua [Marius Victorinus] : lingua [Lex XII], dacrima : lacrima [Andronicus], usually lacruma), or Latin Ulixes as the adaptation of Greek Ὀδυσσεύς.

---

2.3. Vaniček (1874: p. 137): Derivative of the Latin verb \( \text{лино}, \text{лёви}, \text{литум} \) “to daub, besmear, anoint, spread, rub over (also about script)”. The following development was reconstructed e.g. by Persson (1917: pp. 131–132) and Muller (1926: p. 235). They proposed as the starting-point the collective *леяFrançois, formed from the neuter s-stem *ленто. Persson (1917: p. 132), followed by Walde & Hofmann (1938: p. 815), added the semantic parallel in Hesychius’ gloss ἀλειπτήριον · γραφεῖον, Κύριοι, while the usual meaning of the word ἀλειπτήριον is “a place for anointing in gymnastic schools, or among the Romans at the baths, used also as a sudatory”. Painting letters is really very close to daubing or smearing. But the assumed morphological scenario was rejected by de Vaan (2008: p. 346).

Walde & Hofmann (1938: p. 815) quoted still two, less convincing, etymological attempts:

2.4. Wood (1926: p. 97) reconstructed *литера < *слитуру *“engraving” on the basis of the Gothic verb ga-sleipjan “to damage, harm”.

2.5. Güntert (1928: p. 135) thought about a connection with Latin литус “curved staff of augurs” [Ennius].

2.6. Most recently Weiss (2010: p. 1) derives Old Latin леiterа from the root *леит- “to scratch”. From the point of semantics such a development is quite natural, cf. Latin scribere “to write” [Naevius]: Latvian skripāt “to scratch, scribble, write down”, Middle Irish scrip(a)id “scratches” (cf. de Vaan 2008: pp. 546–547) or Old High German riz “scratching, line, letter” (Kroonen 2013: p. 597). But it is not clear, which concrete material led M. Weiss to this reconstruction.

3.1. There were various techniques of writing. Besides engraving or carving, usually on stone or wood, the letters were also painted, e.g. on cloth, papyrus, skin, bark or bast. And these materials could inspire new designations of writing or letters. A fitting example occurs in Germanic: Gothic boka ‘γράμμα’, i.e. “letter”, pl. bokos ‘βιβλος, βιβλιόν, γράμματα’, i.e. “written document, book”, Old Saxon bōk “writing-tablet”, Old High German buoh “book, script, scripture, letter” etc., all from Germanic *bōk(j)ō- “beech” (Lehmann 1986: p. 77; Kroonen 2013: p. 71). Perhaps Balkan Gothic is a source of South Slavic *буки “letter”, pl. “book, written document”, mediated via Church Slavonic into East Slavic (see the discussion by Pronk-Tiethoff 2013: pp. 80–82).

The Romans designated their books as liber [from Plautus], whose primary meaning was “bark of a tree”, confirmed by cognates in other Indo-European branches: Albanian labe “rind, cork”, Prussian lubbo “bast, plank, shelf”, Lithuanian луобас “bark, rind of a tree”, Russian lub “bast” etc. (de Vaan 2008: p. 337). In this perspective it is tempting to mention the Roman tradition described by Titus Livius on Liber linteus “Linen book”, which should be stored in the temple of Juno Moneta:


“Licinius Macer states, that they were found both in the Ardean treaty and in the linen books at the temple of Moneta.”

---

The tradition of writing long texts on linen cloth was borrowed by the Romans from the Etruscans, probably together with the script. After all, the longest known Etruscan text was done on linen. It is called as Liber linteus {Zagrabiensis} and was discovered in Croatian Zagreb (details see e.g. van der Meer 2008; Urbanová & Blažek 2008: p. 59). If the script had been brought into ancient Italy by Greeks, it would not be surprising, if the Greeks had also mediated linen-cloth as the writing-material.

3.2. There is a promising terminological candidate in Greek λῑτα acc.sg./pl., λῑτι dat.sg., “linen cloth” [Il. 18.352, 23.254; Od. 1.130, 10.353]. The term is identified already in the Mycenaean texts from Knossus as ri-ta adj. nom.pl.ntr. “linen” [KN L 567.2] (Aura Jorro 1993: p. 257). If the root λῑτo was adopted into Etruscan, it is expected that it would have been accommodated to the Etruscan substantive declension. In the nom.pl. it should look like *līter and in the gen.pl. like *līteras, cf. Etruscan nom.sg. ais “god”, nom.pl. aiser, gen.pl. aiseras (Steinbauer 1999: pp. 90, 395; about the possibility to identify here the Etruscan plural in -ar-, see Deroy 1975: p. 53; but his assumption to reconstruct Etruscan *litara “sign” is not convincing, cf. Lejeune 1993: p. 11).

3.3. A contamination of Latin līnum “flax plant, linseed; linen” [Naevius] and Greek λῑτo “linen cloth” could explain the rather enigmatic Latin linteum “piece of linen cloth, towel, sail” [Plautus], with shortening of i before -nt- in agreement with Lex Osthoff.

3.4. Finally, let us mention that Greek λῑτo & Mycenaean ri-ta are probably of Semitic origin, cf. Akkadian lītű / lētu / liṭtu, pl. liṭṭētu “a garment or cloth as bed covering” (CDA 183; see Astour 1965: p. 338; probably independently identified by Szemerényi 1977: p. 3; Rosől 2013: p. 188, with a detailed discussion and sources). Interesting is the New Assyrian homonym lītu / liṭtu “sketch, drawing” (CDA 183), which can develop from the material for drawing.
Bibliography


---

Prof. RNDr. Václav Blažek, CSc. / blazek@phil.muni.cz

Department of Linguistics and Baltic Studies
Masaryk University, Faculty of Arts
Arna Nováka 1, 602 00 Brno, Czech Republic