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The <o/u> graphemic oscillation in Latin epigraphy : some preliminary sociolinguistic remarks

The <o/u> Graphemic Oscillation in Latin Epigraphy. Some Preliminary Sociolinguistic Remarks

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ČLÁNKY / ARTICLES

Abstract

This paper deals with some particularly interesting *o*-spellings attested in Latin inscriptions dating back to the late Republican age (and to the first Imperial period) and attempts to determine whether they may provide some evidence of an anticipation of the (Proto) Romance merger of the Classical Latin back-vowels /o:/ and /u/ as a close /o/. All the inscriptions have been analysed in detail by taking into account the dating, geographical origin and typology of the single epigraph, while particular attention has been paid to the possible presence (or absence) of other deviant spellings within the same texts. The results suggest that the phenomenon investigated here might actually date back to the late Republican age, at least within some substandard varieties of the language.

Keywords

Latin inscriptions; <u/o> graphemic confusion; Vulgar Latin

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1. Framing the problem

The vowel system of Classical Latin (henceforth CL) differs from that of the Romance Languages in at least one fundamental feature. Indeed, since the former was based on a phonological opposition of vowel quantity, none of the Romance Languages (whose vowel system is based on distinctions of vowel quality) has retained the distinctive length contrast of the mother language.[1]

Nevertheless, a large body of evidence allows us to infer the existence of an allophonic tense – lax differentiation for phonemic long – short vowels even within the so-called spoken Latin,[2] «along the lines usually described in the comparative literature in phonetics for languages such as English, German or Czech».[3] The list includes: several passages in Latin grammarians attesting that the pronunciation of Latin (especially mid) vowels varied according to whether they were long or short;[4] the use of the grapheme <ε> to represent the Latin /i/ in some Greek transcriptions of the 2nd–1st centuries B.C. (e.g. Τεβέριος for *Tĭberius*);[5] along the same lines, the Latin realization of the Greek *o* with the grapheme <u> in some loanwords (e.g. Lat. *empŭrium* = Gk. ἐμπόριον).[6] Finally, the spelling <e> for the CL short /i/, and the corresponding inverse spelling (viz. <i> used for /e:/) confirm that the Latin short /i/ was closer to the long /e:/ «in the acoustic-articulatory space»[7] than it was to the long /i:/. Analogously, a symmetrical tendency must also have emerged on the velar side of the vowel system, with the short /u/ pronounced as [ʊ] (or, already, as [o]) and thus closer in quality to the long /o:/ than to long /u:/.[8]

This shift in quality of the CL short, high vowels ([i, u] > [ɪ, ʊ] > [e, o]) contains the seeds of the subsequent Romance developments. Indeed, along with the loss of contrastive distinctions in vowel quantity,[9] the merger of the outcomes of the CL long /e:/ and short /i/ as a close /e/ occurred in most of the Western Romania, while the outcomes of CL long /o:/ and short /u/ merged as a close /o/ (with the known exceptions being Sardinian, Rumanian and some dialects in southern Italy).[10]

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1   See Loporcaro (2011b: p. 110), Adams (2013: p. 37).

2   Loporcaro (2011b: p. 112).

3   Loporcaro (2011b: p. 110).

4   Loporcaro (2011b: p. 110 and nt. 3), Loporcaro (2015: p. 32).

5   Coleman (1971: p. 175).

6   Sturtevant (1968: p. 118), Allen (1978: p. 49).

7   Loporcaro (2011b: p. 110).

8   Loporcaro (2011b: pp. 110–112). As this scholar rightly points out, the very first case of an *e*-spelling attesting the phonetic shift [i] > [ɪ] (> [e]) in the pronunciation of the Latin short /i/ appears to be the writing *Tempestatebus* (for CL *Tempestatĭbus*) which is carved on Lucius Cornelius Scipio's grave (*CIL*, I² 9 = VI 37039c), who was consul in 259 B.C. For an overview of the question, see Adams (2013: pp. 41–43).

9   Whether contrastive vowel quantity was already lost in spoken Latin during the 3rd century B.C. or the 1st century A.D will not be addressed in this paper. For an overview of the question (and related bibliography) see Loporcaro (2011a: p. 57).

10   A detailed overview of the question is found in Loporcaro (2011b: pp. 110–119). See also Weiss (2009: pp. 508–510), Adams (2013: pp. 39–41).

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Yet, a problem of relative chronology arises. Indeed, «there is a widespread view»[11] according to which the merger of the CL /oː/ and /u/ as a close /o/ occurred later than the corresponding merger on the front vowel axis everywhere. In particular, according to Straka (1959: pp. 178–180) and Adams (2013: p. 67), that merger is unlikely to have taken place in Latin before the 3rd century A.D., viz. after what Straka (1959: p. 180) calls «the linguistic separation of Dacia».[12]

Arguments often invoked by scholars who agree with this view are largely the same: that Rumanian and some southern Italian dialects merged the outcomes of the CL short /i/ and long /eː/, but not those of the CL short /u/ and long /oː/; that in both epigraphic and literary sources, "deviant" spellings concerning <i/e> often occur less seldom than those concerning <u/o>.

Some objections may be raised against these two points. Firstly, epigraphic evidence collected by Herman (1990 [1985]: pp. 72–79)[13] within a corpus of inscriptions dating from the mid-2nd to the 4th century A.D. proved that «graphic confusions between <o/u> balance those between <e/i>» in some areas, namely «north-eastern Italy (*Regio X*) and nearly so in parts of Campania».[14] This kind of evidence is particularly important. Indeed, Herman was able to show that the asymmetrical mergers observed in Eastern Romance cannot be assumed to describe the Romania as a whole; conversely, the back-vowel merger is likely to have occurred «earlier in some areas than others».[15]

Moreover, as Adams (2013: p. 63) rightly points out, Herman's count[16] also highlights the fact that «the phonemes /ẽ/ and /ĭ/ are twice as numerous ... as /ŭ/ and /ŏ/» in Latin, which means «a lower incidence» of graphic confusions concerning <u/o> within epigraphic (and literary) sources «is to be expected». As a result, the mere «frequency of misspellings affecting the front vowels relative to that affecting the back vowels» in Latin sources «may be misleading».

Nevertheless, reliable evidence of <o/u> graphic confusions often appears to be lacking and contradictory, which is particularly true for inscriptions dating back to the (late) Republican age and to the first Imperial period. Indeed, as Adams (2013: p. 63) rightly points out, most of the *o*-spelling in these kinds of inscription may be dismissed as being merely archaising, while other spellings might be regarded as «special cases» and are thus «irrelevant to developments in the later vowel system».

In his fundamental essay concerning the Vulgar Latin of Pompeian inscriptions, Väänänen (1966: pp. 27, 130) had already noticed that most of the *o*-spellings attested in his epigraphic material were confined to the nominative or accusative endings of names

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11   Adams (2013: p. 41). See also p. 63.

12   Loporcaro (2011b: p. 111).

13   See also Herman (1990 [1971]: pp. 138–146).

14   Loporcaro (2011b: pp. 114–115).

15   Adams (2013: p. 63, nt. 32). In Herman (1990 [1971]: p. 143) own words: «Nos matériaux permettent d'apporter un léger correctif à la conception largement répandue selon laquelle le regroupement des timbres dans la série vélaire était plus tardive que celui dans la série palatale. Cela semble vrai pour certaines regions ... mais certainement pas pour toutes».

16   Herman (1990 [1968]: p. 197).

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of the second declension, which meant it was impossible to determine with certainty, he says, whether such misspellings were supposed to indicate the phonetic realization as [ʊ] of the CL short /u/, or whether they were to be regarded as simply archaising.[17] In addition, even the very few instances of <o> for the CL short /u/ cited as certainly not archaising were of very doubtful interpretation, according to the author.[18]

More detailed information on this issue is now found in Marotta (2015), who focuses on the graphemic alternation <i/e> and <u/o> within a corpus (*CLᴀSSES I*) of 386 inscriptions dating from 350 to 150 B.C. According to the data collected, <u/o> confusions occur in the final syllable of the word in 87% of the items showing <o> for the CL short /u/, while the word classes affected most are names (56%), common nouns (30%)[19] and verbs (7%).[20] As the author points out, some of the *o*-spellings found within *CLᴀSSES I* might actually indicate the current phonetic realization of CL short /u/ as [ʊ] (or, even, as [o]) rather than a merely archaic writing, and are thus viewed «as clues for sociolinguistic variation».[21] In particular, the latter interpretation would fit in above all with ordinary words, typical of the everyday language. Nevertheless, as the author herself admits, resorting to archaism seems more reasonable in many other cases (such as proper names, nouns referring to public positions and roles or items belonging to formulaic writing of the epigraphic register), which occur very often within the corpus considered.[22]

The picture described here is therefore fairly similar to the one we previously observed in Väänänen: while some *o*-spellings found in inscriptions might actually indicate the (relative) open phonetic realization of the CL short /u/, most of these <o/u> confusions should be regarded as archaising or, at least, as being of very doubtful interpretation. Thus, as Adams (2013: p. 37) rightly suggests «the individual tokens must be examined» in detail, while alternative explanations must be taken into account.

The next section will analyse some problematic late Republican (and early Imperial) dating instances of <o> for the CL short /u/ in detail in an attempt to determine whether they provide any evidence of an anticipation of the (proto) Romance merger of the CL /u/ and /oː/ as a close /o/.

2. Some problematic *o*-spellings

1) *CIL*, I² 1834.

Q(uintus) Pescenn[ius —] / colomnas (!) III / de suo dat / Feroneae (!), / et crepidinem / ante colomnas (!) / ex lapide.

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17   See also Väänänen (1981: pp. 36–37).

18   Väänänen (1966: p. 27). On this point see also Adams (2013: p. 65).

19   Both names and common nouns mostly belong to the Latin second declension. Marotta (2015: p. 48).

20   Marotta (2015: pp. 45, 48–49).

21   Marotta (2015: p. 51).

22   Marotta (2015: pp. 53 and 52–55).

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The inscription, carved on a pillar made of travertine marble, refers to the gift of three *columnae* (one is certainly the one bearing the text) and of a *crepido* to the Republican sanctuary of Feronia in Trebula Mutuesca, near Rieti (80 km north-east of Rome).[23] In particular, the shrine located in Trebula was one of the main shrines devoted to the worshipping of this Italic deity, who is sometimes related with Juno.[24] In charge of this donation there is a certain *Quintus Pescennius*, about whom no further information could be gathered from either epigraphic or literary sources. Yet, it is conceivable that our giver may have been a freedman.[25] Indeed, this would be perfectly in keeping with a donation provided to a deity such as Feronia, whose cult was particularly popular among slaves and freedmen.[26]

The inscription attests the *o*-spelling *colomnas* (for CL *columnas*). This improper spelling is repeated twice in our text (lines 2 and 6), and cannot consequently easily be regarded as a mere slip of the writer.

Nevertheless, the etymology of the CL term *columna* remains uncertain, despite the many attempts of interpretations proposed by various scholars. In particular, *columna* has occasionally been cited as a possible old, middle-passive participial form. According to WH (p. 250),[27] for instance, this stem would continue PIE **kel-o-meno-* 'who towers up', connected with Latin *-cellō* 'to raise oneself'. Yet, as De Vaan (2008: p. 127) rightly points out, «this verb goes back to **kel-n-*, and there is no other evidence for a present PIE **kelH-(e/o-)* in Italic with the meaning 'to rise'».

Otherwise, *columna* may also be seen as continuing a PIE participial form **kʷel-o-meno*, going back to a present **kʷelH-e/o* (continued by latin *colō*) in its former meaning of 'going around'.[28] Nevertheless, as Weiss (2009: p. 291, nt. 129) rightly states, it would seem fairly difficult to separate this noun from the *-men* stem *columen* (< **kelH-men-*).[29]

Indeed, the close relationship between these two terms seems to be confirmed by the fact that both *columen* (whose main meaning is 'top/summit/roof') and *columna* are already used with the same meaning of 'support' in Plautus, Ennius and Terentius (e.g. *Pla. Cas.* 536, *Epid.* 188; *Ter. Phorm.* 287; *Enn. ann.* 345).[30]

It does not thus seem implausible to interpret *columna* as a Latin derivative in **-ā-* from *columen*, female and coexisting with the corresponding neutral *-men* stem, which would make it impossible to regard the misspelling *colomnas* in our text as merely an archaic form.[31]

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23 Vallarino (2007: pp. 370–373).

24 Di Fazio (2012: p. 384).

25 As proposed in Vallarino (2007: p. 372).

26 Di Fazio (2012: p. 396).

27 PIE forms and meanings are taken from De Vaan (2008: p. 127).

28 This hypothesis was first proposed by R. Thurneysen, see WH (p. 250), but is also read in *TLL* III, 1737, 51–54. See now De Vaan (2008: p. 127).

29 It should be added that, as De Vaan (2008: p. 127) rightly states «the semantic shift from 'going around' to 'pillar' is difficult (although not impossible...)».

30 Perrot (1961: p. 172). See also EM (p. 134, *s.v. columen and columna*).

31 This hypothesis was proposed for the first time by Porzig (1924: p. 267), but is accepted as a valuable alter-

In any case, even if CL *columna* were considered to continue an old PIE participial form, this would not be enough to dismiss the misspelling *colomnas* in our text as merely archaising. Indeed, with the exclusion of the text into exam, such an improper spelling does not seem to occur within the epigraphic sources before the 3rd century A.D.[32]

Secondly, this spelling is also found within the *Appendix Probi* (Rome, about mid-5th century A.D.), where it is quoted precisely as incorrect, in the typical binary form *columna, non colomna*,[33] thus indicating that the CL short /u/ were realized as [o] by that time.

Thirdly, since the text does not contain any other archaic form, there is nothing to suggest why the writer might have decided to resort to an archaism in this case. Conversely, the spelling *Feronea* (for CL *Feronia*), showing the opening of /i/ > /e/ in the hiatus position, is found on line 4. As Coleman (1990: p. 11) points out, this is a sub-standard feature, characteristic of some Latin dialectal varieties (such as the Latin of Praeneste, Sabinian and Faliscan), and represents a «non-Roman» development «beyond the point reached in Roman, but not significant for the subsequent history of Latin» in general.

In view of the evidence, it seems thus fairly possible to regard the *o*-spelling *colomnas* in our text as possibly anticipating the merger of the CL short /u/ and long /o:/ as a close /o/, as has been previously proposed by, among others, Sturtevant (1968: p. 116) and Pisani (1975: p. 21).

Moreover, our text dates back very precisely to the mid-2nd century B.C., when the portico and particularly the colonnade of the sanctuary in Trebula Mutuesca underwent major repair work (to which the donation of *Quintus Pescennius* actually refers).[34] Thus, the text is likely to date from a period that is not very far from *CIL*, I² 9, viz. the very first inscription attesting the phonetical shift [i] > [ɪ] (> [e]) in the pronunciation of the CL short /i/ (see above).

2) *CIL*, I² 1214.

Eucharis Liciniae l(iberta) / docta erodita (!) omnes artes virgo vixit an(nis) XIIII. / Heus oculo errante quei aspicis léti domus, / morare gressum et titulum nostrum perlege, / amor parenteis (!) quem dedit natae suae, / ubei (!) se reliquiae conlocarent corporis. / Heic viridis aetas cum floreret artibus / crescente et aevo gloriam conscenderet, / properavit hóra tristis fatalis mea / et denegavit ultra veitae (!) spiritum. / Docta, erodita (!) paene Musarum manu...[35]

Metric epitaph in iambic senarii of the freedwoman Eucharis, a stage performer who died at the very early age of fourteen. The text (from Rome) dates back to the mid-1st century B.C., as indicated by the typology, the material and the sentence *graeca in scaena prima populo apparui* on line 13. Indeed, as Bücheler (CLE 55) points out, women first

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native to that of regarding *columna* as continuing an old PIE participial form also by Perrot (1961: p. 171) and, apparently, even by EM (p. 134).

32 Only two instances of *colomna* for CL *columna* are registered within the *LLDB* database: *AE* 1900, 741 (*Germania Inferior*; 218 A.D.) and *CIL* VI 8460 (Rome; mid-5th century A.D.).

33 *GL IV*, 193–204, 5.20¹ e 5.20².

34 Moreover, this dating would be perfectly in keeping with the characteristics of our inscription, including the typology and palaeography. See Vallarino (2007: pp. 372–373).

35 The inscription is here quoted as far as line 11. Reading according to EDR 108621.

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appeared on the stage in the age of Sulla, while this kind of performance only became public during Caesar's dictatorship.[36]

The inscription is considered here on account of the *o*-spelling *erodita* (CL *erŭdīta*), which cannot be ascribed to mere archaism.[37] Moreover, since this misspelling occurs twice in this text as well (lines 2 and 11), it seems fairly difficult to regard it as a mere slip of the draftsman.

A possible solution to the problem has been proposed by EM (p. 579), who suggest that this particular spelling should be regarded as pseudo-archaising. It must be said that this explanation would fit in perfectly with an inscription such as the one being considered. Indeed, a certain degree of literary affectation is very common within poetic epitaphs of this kind and this may certainly have encouraged the author to resort to an archaism (even intentional).

Nevertheless, it is also true that (as already highlighted by all modern editors)[38] the given text, even if written in poetry, cannot easily be regarded as truly learned. The writer has in fact merely limited himself to collecting some topical (and very well known) motifs concerning the Latin elegiac tradition, which prevents us from placing him within the educational scale with any degree of certainty.

Moreover, not every written form within this inscription can be dismissed as simply being archaising. This applies, in particular, to the spellings *veitae* (CL *vītae*: line 10) and *parenteis* (CL *parentĭs*: line 5). Indeed, the digraph <ei> is used to represent an original monophthong in the first case (CL *vīvo* < PIE *g^wih_3-ue/o-*)[39] and a short /i/ in the latter. Both these graphic tendencies go back to the monophthongization of the Old Latin /ei̯/ diphthong which merged with the original /iː/ phoneme around 150 B.C., determining such reverse writings. In particular, in the case of the short /i/, the use of the digraph seems to have spread from archaising writing (such as *sibei* or *ubei*) for words whose original /iː/ had undergone iambic shortening.[40] Note that while such writings (even within this same text)[41] may be regarded as typical of the highest level of literary affectation (above all in inscriptions), the spelling <ei> used to render an original /iː/ (or /i/) is extensively attested in our epigraphic material even at a low sociolinguistic level[42] and that the problem of how to properly render the phonemes /iː/ and /i/ has been discussed in depth by Latin grammarians such as Accius, Lucilius, Nigidius Figulus and Varro.[43]

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36   See also Sanders (1985: p. 54) and Frascati (1997: p. 71).

37   *Erudio* is a denominative compound from *rŭdis* 'unwrought/not cultivated', which is likely to continue the PIE *i*-stem adj. *h_1rud^h-i-* which is often taken from compounds. De Vaan (2008: pp. 527–528).

38   See, for instance, Sanders (1985: p. 54) and Frascati (1997: p. 69).

39   De Vaan (2008: p. 685).

40   Leumann (1977: pp. 62–64), Allen (1978: pp. 53–56), Wachter (1987: p. 250). An alternative explanation is provided in Benedetti (1996: p. 53) (after "Wachter (1987: p. 250).

41   See, for instance, *quei* (line 3), *ubei* (line 6) and *heic* (line 7).

42   See Benedetti (1996: pp. 53–57).

43   The problem is discussed at length within Cipriano (1985).

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Nevertheless, since it might be possible to regard even the spellings *veitae* and *parenteis* as pseudo-archaising, both the interpretations proposed for the spelling *erodita* (viz. to regard it merely as a pseudo-archaising writing or as showing the actual phonetic realization as [ʊ] of the CL short /u/) seem to be equally convincing. The comparison with another inscription (see below) that dates back to the mid-1st century A.D. and attests the same spelling may thus have been decisive to the choice.

3) *CIL*, VI 10127 II

Phoebe / Vocontia, / emboliaria, artis (!) / omnium erodita (!), / hunc (!) fatus suus (!) pressit. / Vixsit (!) annis XII.

Funerary epitaph of Phoebe, a stage performer (*emboliaria*: line II 3) of Gallic origin (*Vocontia*: line II 2) who died at the early age of twelve. The inscription (Rome; first half of the 1st century A.D.)[44] also remembers a certain *Publius Fabius Faustus* and a *Pompeia Sabbatis* (both freedmen), who shared the young girl's *locus sepolturae*. As in *CIL*, I² 1214, the *o*-spelling *erodita* is also read within this epigraph (line II 4). It is noteworthy that this text displays a certain degree of resemblance to the Republican inscription discussed above (*CIL*, I² 1214). Indeed, both texts happen to remember two stage performers who both died at a very early age, with even the sentences used to refer to them being fairly similar, with the two accusatives *omnes artes* (*CIL*, I² 1214 line 2) and *artis omnium* (lines 3–4) dependent on the adjective *erudita*.[45] Yet, these two texts do not share any other similarities. Indeed, while the former (*CIL*, I² 1214) is a poetic epitaph that even expresses a certain degree of literary affectation (albeit not truly "learned", as mentioned above), the text being discussed here only appears to be a personal inscription that lacks any literariness and even displays some graphic uncertainties (see, for instance, the spelling *vixsit* for CL *vixit* at line II 6),[46] and presumably indicates the writer's use of a substandard variety of the language.

Particularly interesting, from this point of view, are the use of the masculine for neuter and the shift between feminine and masculine within the sentence *hunc fatus suus pressit* (for *hanc fatum suum pressit*) on line II 5. Indeed, as Adams (2013: p. 422) points out, such gender changes (those concerning neuter and masculine in particular) are well attested not only within epigraphic sources (especially from Rome), but also in Petronius' *Satyricon*,[47] where the masculine *fatus* is used in a sentence that «is almost identical» to the

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44 See EDR 109189.

45 This construction of the PPP *eruditus* with the accusative (rather than with the ablative), albeit rare, has some literary attestations: e.g. *Gell.* 2, 21, 3: *Graecas res eruditi erant* (see *TLL* V, 2, line 832, 67–69). Along the same lines, the accusative ending *-is* (for *-es*) for the names of the Latin third declension survive in Latin prose until the first imperial period. See Leumann (1977: pp. 436, 440). Yet, is not impossible that the expression *artis omnium erodita* within the given text may also represent a mechanical case confusion (accusative used for ablative) under the influence of sentences like *Hyg. astr.* 2.6: *eruditus omni genere artium* (I thank professor Béla Adamik for this suggestion).

46 For the use of the so-called *scriptio plena* for the consonant cluster /ks/, see Leumann (1977: p. 15) and Wachter (1987: pp. 294, 497–498).

47 Adams (2013: pp. 420–423) lists fifteen instances of masculine for neuter, while the reverse only happens four times.

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one quoted above (*Petron.* 71.1 *etiam si illos malus fatus oppresserit*). Adams (2013: p. 419) also highlights that every example of such gender changes in Petronius is confined to the dramatical frame of the *Cena Trimalchionis* and that almost all are found in speeches by freedmen. Thus, «Petronius must have been conveying a sociolinguistic judgment. He can only have been suggesting that confusions of the types he incorporates were a feature of sociolects spoken by characters who were well down the educational scale».[48]

It thus seems unwarranted to regard the *o*-spelling *erodita* as pseudo-archaising, at least within the text being discussed here. Indeed, such archaising writing would hardly fit in with the substandard linguistic features exposed here. On the other hand, since there is no compelling reason to justify this spelling as a pseudo-archaism in one case (*CIL*, I² 1214) and as a phonetic writing in another, it seems reasonable to assume that this particular *o*-spelling actually indicates the open realization of the CL short /u/ as [ʊ] in both inscriptions considered here, as has previously been proposed (for *CIL*, I² 1214) by Väänänen (1981: p. 36, nt. 2) and Campanile (1971: p. 28).

4) *CIL*, VI 17992

T(itus) Flavius Aug(usti) l(ibertus) Alexander, / fecit sibi et / T(ito) Flavio Epagatho filio / et Iuliae Coetonidi, / uxori bene merenti, libertis, libertabus(que) / posterisqu(ue) eorum. Huic mon<<o>>mento (!) cedit / custodiae causa, qua^e est iuncta tab^ernae (!) cum / aedificio et horto, plus minus iugeru(m) V. Quitquit (!) iuris est / eius sepulchri, ita ne ve^ndere liciat (!), set (!) colere. / H(oc) m(onumentum) et aedificium h(eredem) non s(equetur).

Funerary inscription of a certain *Titus Flavius Alexander* and of his family. This man was a freedman of a Flavian Emperor (line 1) who was apparently rich enough to be able to afford the construction of a large funerary complex (*hortus*) that is also referred to on lines 6–8.[49] The epigraph (from Rome) dates back to between the very end of the 1st and the first quarter of the 2nd century A.D., as suggested by onomastics, typology, formulaic expressions and palaeography.[50]

Apart from the spelling *mon«o»mento* (CL *monumento*), which will be analysed at length, this text also attests other misspellings that may bear testimony to the writer's use of a substandard variety of the language. The form *liciat* (CL *liceat*) on line 9, for instance, indicates the pronunciation as [j] of /e/ in the hiatus position, according to a tendency that later becomes very common in Romance.[51] Along the same lines, the spellings *quitquit* (CL *quidquid*) and *set* (CL *sed*) on lines 8 and 9 highlight the devoicing process that the final stops (dental especially) undergo in spoken Latin; this tendency is extensively represented even in Pompeian inscriptions and is continued by subsequent developments in Romance.[52]

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48   Adams (2013: p. 419).

49   For the *horti sepulchrales* within the Roman word, see Gregori (1987–1988: pp. 183–185).

50   See Giacomini (1976: p. 68) and EDR 151990.

51   See Weiss (2009: p. 512, nt. 56).

52   Väänänen (1966: p. 70).

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Moreover, as rightly pointed out by Giacomini (1976: pp. 67–68), this text even attests some graphic uncertainties that the draftsman tried to emend, though not always successfully. On line 7, for instance, the loss of the diphthongization in *quae* (viz. *que* for *quae*) was corrected by joining together the letters <u>, <a> and <e> in a nexus, while the same expedient was used even for the grapheme <n> in the word *vendere* (line 9).

Another particularly interesting feature, from this point of view, is the use of the digraph <ae> used to represent the nominative singular ending of the Latin first declension (-ă) in the word *taberna* (line 7). The misspelling in this case might be due to the influence of the ending *-ae* (also nominative, female and singular) of the preceding relative pronoun *quae* written on the same line.

Lastly, we can clearly distinguish a former <u> grapheme written under the superimposed <o> in the word *mon«o»mento* on line 6.[53] This misspelling cannot obviously be ascribed to archaism, even bearing in mind the dating, typology and substandard linguistic features of the text in question.[54] It must also be borne in mind that, in this particular case, the draftsman appears to have corrected what was the correct spelling of the word (viz. *monumento*); had the reverse occurred, the original mistake could have been dismissed as a mere slip.[55]

It thus seems almost safe to conclude that the writer here deliberately decided (not without some uncertainties) to adopt the spelling that was closest to what was (for him at least) the actual phonetic realization of the word *monumento*. In other words, this misspelling appears to reflect the open pronunciation of the CL short /u/ phoneme as [ʊ], thereby providing strong evidence of an anticipation of the (Proto) Romance merger within the back-vowel axis (well before the presumed introduction in the 3rd century A.D.).

3. In lieu of conclusion

We may therefore conclude that it is far from easy to find examples of <o/u> graphemic confusions that point to an anticipation of the (Proto) Romance merger of the back-vowels /oː/ and /u/ as a close /o/ within epigraphic sources dating back to the late Republican (or even to the early Imperial) period. Indeed, most of the *o*-spellings collected from these sources should be regarded as archaising or (at least) as special cases, as has been shown. Nonetheless, this does not always appear to be the case.[56] In fact, there are

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53   Giacomini (1976: p. 67).

54   Moreover, the short /u/ in the second syllable of the word *monumentum* does not go back to a former short /o/. Conversely, this vowel (which also avoids a difficult-to-pronounce consonant cluster) represents a further development of the vowel weakening process that the thematic vowel (/i/ or /e/) of the verb *moneo* underwent in the unstressed, non-final position. See Leumann (1977: p. 87) and Meiser (2006: p. 68). In this particular case, it seems likely that the rounded vowel /o/ in the first syllable of the word favoured /u/ over /i/ within the so-called *sonus medius*. See Palmer (1977: p. 270).

55   That is what happened in *CIL*, I² 1214, line 3, where we can perfectly distinguish a <o> grapheme superimposed over a <e> letter written before in the word *oculo*. In this case, the slip seems to be due to the fact that <e> was the first letter of the following word: *errante*. See Frascati (1997: p. 69).

56   As is well pointed out by Campanile (1971) and, more recently, Marotta (2015).

some rare instances in which the <o> written for /u/ may actually suggest that the pronunciation of the CL short /u/ as [ʊ] (or, even, as [o]) in Latin started from as early as the late Republican age. Moreover, the fact that the investigated *o*-spellings occur above all in personal (viz. not official) inscriptions and often along with other "deviant" writings may suggest something about the sociolinguistic value of this particular graphemic oscillation: namely, that this phenomenon may have spread, at least at the beginning, within some substandard varieties of the language before becoming increasingly common during the later period.

Img. 1: *CIL*, VI 17992[57]

Abbreviations

CIL	*Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*, I–. Berlin 1863–.
CLASSES	*Corpus for Latin Sociolinguistic Studies on Epigraphic textS* (retrieved 25.09.2017 from http://classes-latin-linguistics.fileli.unipi.it/en).
CLE	Buecheler, F. (Ed.). (1985). *Carmina Latina Epigraphica*. Lipsiae: Teubner.
EDR	*Epigraphic Database Roma* (retrieved 25.09.2017 from http://www.edr-edr.it).
EM	Ernout, A., & Meillet, A. (1959). *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue latine*. Paris: Klincksieck.
GL IV	Asperti, S., & Passalacqua, M. (Eds.). (2014). *Appendix Probi (GL IV 194–204)*. Firenze: Sismel Edizioni del Galluzzo.

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57   Courtesy of Museo Civico Archeologico, Bologna.

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LLDB   B. Adamik et al., *Computerized Historical Linguistic Database of Latin Inscriptions of the Imperial Age* (retrieved 25.09.2017 from http://lldb.elte.hu/).

TLL   *Thesaurus Linguae Latinae*, I–. Leipzig 1900–.

WH   Walde, A., & Hofmann, J. B. (1982[5]). *Lateinisches etymologisches Wörterbuch* (Vol. I–III). Heidelberg: Winter.

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