‘Interpreting’ at Vindolanda: Commercial and Linguistic Mediation in the Roman Army

By RACHEL MAIRS

ABSTRACT

A fragmentary tablet from Vindolanda (Tab. Vindol. II, 213) contains an occurrence of the verb interpretari (‘interpret’, ‘explain’, ‘mediate’) in an apparently commercial context, relating to the grain supply for the Roman fort. This usage is paralleled in a text on a wooden stilus tablet from Frisia in the Netherlands. ‘Interpreters’ and their activities make rather infrequent appearances in the Latin epigraphic and documentary records. In the Danubian provinces, interpreters (interpretes) are attested as army officers and officials in the office of the provincial governor. ‘Interpreters’, in both Latin and Greek inscriptions and papyri, often, however, play more ambiguous roles, not always connected with language-mediation, but also, or instead, with mediation in commercial transactions.

Keywords: Roman army; Vindolanda; interpreters/translators; Latin language; trade/exchange

INTRODUCTION

Interpreters and translators, and their professional activities, are mentioned only infrequently in historical sources from the Roman Empire.¹ They are also difficult to trace in the epigraphic and documentary records. Semantic ambiguity in the Latin and Greek terms for ‘interpreter’

¹ I am grateful to Professors Alan Bowman (Oxford) and Klaas Worp (Leiden) for making the references to ‘interpreting’ in the Vindolanda documents and in the text formerly known as the ‘Frisian Ox Sale’ known to me, and to the anonymous referees for their helpful comments and criticism.

The following abbreviations are used:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AE</td>
<td>L’Année Épigraphique (1888– )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BGU</td>
<td>Berliner Griechische Urkunden (1895– )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CIL</td>
<td>Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum (1863– )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CLE</td>
<td>Carmina Latina Epigraphica (1897–1926)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CPR</td>
<td>Corpus Papyrorum Raineri (1895– )</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
often makes discerning the precise role of any individual ‘interpreter’ rather difficult. There is a small corpus of Roman soldiers from provinces along the Danube commemorated as ‘interpreters’ (Latin interpres) in inscriptions, and various other officials named as ‘interpreters’ (Greek hermêneus) in the papyri of Roman Egypt. In addition, there are two occurrences of the verb ‘interpret’ in documentary texts from the north-western marches of the Empire which merit further consideration. These references to ‘interpreting’ — one from northern Britain in the Vindolanda Tablets (Tab. Vindol. II, 213) and the other from the Netherlands on a stilus tablet — offer, at first glance, a chance both to enlarge the small corpus of attested Roman official interpreters, and to shed light on their professional activities and position within administrative hierarchies. The reference in the Vindolanda text is not, however, to an individual interpres, but is an instruction to an unnamed individual that he should ‘interpret’ with regard to a commercial transaction. Likewise, the person who ‘interprets’ in the document from the Netherlands appears to be acting as an intermediary of some sort. It is, therefore, difficult to associate these persons directly with those Roman army officers who served as interpretes in the Danube provinces. However, these two references fit neatly with the evidence we possess for both the para-interpreting activities of language-mediators — who might run commercial ventures during or after their military service — and for those individuals who are designated as ‘interpreters’ without fulfilling any obvious linguistic role at all.

The discussion begins with the Vindolanda tablet in question and its parallel, the document from the Netherlands appears to be acting as an intermediary of some sort. It is, therefore, difficult to associate these persons directly with those Roman army officers who served as interpretes in the Danube provinces. However, these two references fit neatly with the evidence we possess for both the para-interpreting activities of language-mediators — who might run commercial ventures during or after their military service — and for those individuals who are designated as ‘interpreters’ without fulfilling any obvious linguistic role at all.

The discussion begins with the Vindolanda tablet in question and its parallel, the document from the Netherlands appears to be acting as an intermediary of some sort. It is, therefore, difficult to associate these persons directly with those Roman army officers who served as interpretes in the Danube provinces. However, these two references fit neatly with the evidence we possess for both the para-interpreting activities of language-mediators — who might run commercial ventures during or after their military service — and for those individuals who are designated as ‘interpreters’ without fulfilling any obvious linguistic role at all.

The discussion begins with the Vindolanda tablet in question and its parallel, the document from the Netherlands appears to be acting as an intermediary of some sort. It is, therefore, difficult to associate these persons directly with those Roman army officers who served as interpretes in the Danube provinces. However, these two references fit neatly with the evidence we possess for both the para-interpreting activities of language-mediators — who might run commercial ventures during or after their military service — and for those individuals who are designated as ‘interpreters’ without fulfilling any obvious linguistic role at all.

The discussion begins with the Vindolanda tablet in question and its parallel, the document from the Netherlands appears to be acting as an intermediary of some sort. It is, therefore, difficult to associate these persons directly with those Roman army officers who served as interpretes in the Danube provinces. However, these two references fit neatly with the evidence we possess for both the para-interpreting activities of language-mediators — who might run commercial ventures during or after their military service — and for those individuals who are designated as ‘interpreters’ without fulfilling any obvious linguistic role at all.

The discussion begins with the Vindolanda tablet in question and its parallel, the document from the Netherlands appears to be acting as an intermediary of some sort. It is, therefore, difficult to associate these persons directly with those Roman army officers who served as interpretes in the Danube provinces. However, these two references fit neatly with the evidence we possess for both the para-interpreting activities of language-mediators — who might run commercial ventures during or after their military service — and for those individuals who are designated as ‘interpreters’ without fulfilling any obvious linguistic role at all.

The discussion begins with the Vindolanda tablet in question and its parallel, the document from the Netherlands appears to be acting as an intermediary of some sort. It is, therefore, difficult to associate these persons directly with those Roman army officers who served as interpretes in the Danube provinces. However, these two references fit neatly with the evidence we possess for both the para-interpreting activities of language-mediators — who might run commercial ventures during or after their military service — and for those individuals who are designated as ‘interpreters’ without fulfilling any obvious linguistic role at all.

The discussion begins with the Vindolanda tablet in question and its parallel, the document from the Netherlands appears to be acting as an intermediary of some sort. It is, therefore, difficult to associate these persons directly with those Roman army officers who served as interpretes in the Danube provinces. However, these two references fit neatly with the evidence we possess for both the para-interpreting activities of language-mediators — who might run commercial ventures during or after their military service — and for those individuals who are designated as ‘interpreters’ without fulfilling any obvious linguistic role at all.

The discussion begins with the Vindolanda tablet in question and its parallel, the document from the Netherlands appears to be acting as an intermediary of some sort. It is, therefore, difficult to associate these persons directly with those Roman army officers who served as interpretes in the Danube provinces. However, these two references fit neatly with the evidence we possess for both the para-interpreting activities of language-mediators — who might run commercial ventures during or after their military service — and for those individuals who are designated as ‘interpreters’ without fulfilling any obvious linguistic role at all.

The discussion begins with the Vindolanda tablet in question and its parallel, the document from the Netherlands appears to be acting as an intermediary of some sort. It is, therefore, difficult to associate these persons directly with those Roman army officers who served as interpretes in the Danube provinces. However, these two references fit neatly with the evidence we possess for both the para-interpreting activities of language-mediators — who might run commercial ventures during or after their military service — and for those individuals who are designated as ‘interpreters’ without fulfilling any obvious linguistic role at all.
‘interpreters’ in the Roman Empire as a whole; an assessment of the Danubian evidence for military interpreters (who might also be engaged in commercial activity); and finally a summary of the evidence, mostly from Egypt, of ‘interpreters’ whose primary role was participation as agents in economic transactions. Although those ‘interpreters’ whose role was primarily economic may well also have drawn on linguistic skills, it is evident that both the Latin and Greek words commonly rendered into English as ‘interpreter’ were semantically rather flexible, and covered a range of functions — and permit a range of translations.

**TAB. VINDOL. II, 213: ‘UT INTERPRETERIS’**

The relevant tablet dates to Period 2 of Vindolanda (c. A.D. 92–97), and is therefore roughly contemporary with the earliest of our Danubian interpretes, Q. Atilius Primus, whose epitaph dates to the second half of the first century A.D. (on which see below).3 There are, however, some important differences, which mean that we cannot consider the Vindolanda reference as part of the Danubian group, or as a product of the same administrative and social context. Rather than interpres as a military or professional title, we find here interpretari as a verb. The context is clearly commercial, and the text concerned is documentary, a letter relating to the day-to-day business of the camp, not a stone epitaph which reflects the professional self-definition of an individual, or the ascriptive choices of his commemorators.

```plaintext
i
1. Curtius Super Cassio suo
   Salutem
   [.].[.].[.].[
   .].

ii
4. ut interpreteris
   et ut hordeum commer-
   cium habeant a te [
   [.].].1.be.m ..ua.e
8. ]e.da
   .
   .

Back
1. Cassio Saecu-
   [lari]
   .
   .

Curtius Super to his Cassius, greetings. . . so that you may interpretari and so that they may get from you barley as commercial goods . . . (Back) To Cassius Saecularis (trans. adapted from Tab. Vindol. II, 213, http://vindolanda.csad.ox.ac.uk/TVII-213)
```

The letter takes the form of a diptych, complete at the head and at both margins, but damaged at the foot. It belongs to the correspondence of Cassius Saecularis,4 an officer who was stationed at Vindolanda at least in Period 2, but quite possibly for longer. We do not know his rank, but the editors suggest that he was an optio, decurio or centurion, with his concern with supplies indicating that optio may be most likely.5 Curtius Super is not known from elsewhere in the tablets. The letter relates to a transaction involving barley, which Curtius Super suggests some persons should obtain from Saecularis.

The crucial phrase ‘ut interpreteris’ is translated by the editors as ‘so that you may explain’. As they note, there are three broad senses — in approximate order of probability — in which the verb

---

3 Kolnik 1978.
may be read here: in line with the sense of *interpre* as ‘agent’ or ‘go-between’; in a general sense as ‘explain’; or with the specific linguistic meaning of ‘interpret’ with non-Latin-speakers. We may, in the view of the present author, be more confident in the reading and treat the sense here as ‘so that you may act as intermediary’. As the material considered in the following sections will demonstrate, there are present good parallels for *interpre*/*interpretari* and *hermêneus/hermêneuein* being used to relate to activities which are solely or partly commercial in nature. The *interpre* Q. Atilius Primus in Pannonia Superior was also, at some point in his working life, a *negociator*. The clearest parallels are those Egyptian documents where *hermêneus* has a commercial sense.

The present text obviously relates to commercial activities, although their precise nature remains unclear: are we dealing with transactions on the open market, or with systems of official requisitioning? On *commercium*, the editors ‘presume that it is here used in apposition, “barley as commercial goods”, in distinction to something for personal use’. (There is another possible occurrence of *commercium* in the same sense in Tab. Vindol. III, 581, l. 41, but this is very doubtful and should more probably be read as the beginning of a personal name.) Although we do not know much more about the individuals mentioned in this text, others from among the published material from Vindolanda testify to the role of civilian traders and military officials in provisioning the army.⁶ Tab. Vindol. II, 180 (http://vindolanda.csad.ox.ac.uk/TVII-180), for example, is a lengthy private account apparently kept by a civilian supplier rather than a bureau within the military — although it was discovered in a room within the barracks. ‘The evidence for the involvement of civilians in army supply, and especially in the supply of wheat, the basic commodity, is of considerable importance and contributes to filling an important gap in our knowledge. The unknown author of this account must have been a crucial link between the producers and the army personnel who authorised the distribution within the unit.’⁷ Many other accounts relate to supplying the fort with food and other necessities, often through intermediaries whose status as military or civilian is not clear. Tab. Vindol. II, 192, for example, records foodstuffs and textiles received from an agent named Gavo, who appears in a couple of other accounts.⁸

Given Vindolanda’s position in Britain, and moreover on the northern frontier, it is tempting to posit that the reference here is to interpreting with native Britons, locally or in the territories to the north. Whatever role military interpreters of indigenous languages may have played in Britain, however, this text is not evidence for them. As in some of the other texts which will be discussed below, a person engaged in ‘interpreting’ in a commercial sense may also have been capable of operating in more than one language, but this is not the sense of the present text.

A PARALLEL (OR PRECURSOR) FROM FRISIA: ‘QUADRATUS INTERPRETAVIT’

A new reading of an old text now supplies an interesting parallel for Tab. Vindol. II, 213, in a Latin loan-note on a fragmentary stilus tablet excavated in the early twentieth century at Tolsum (Frisia) in the Netherlands.⁹ Digital imaging techniques have been used to yield a fuller and more accurate text than was hitherto possible. Like the Vindolanda document, the context is both military and

---

⁶ On administration and trade in general at Vindolanda, see Tab. Vindol. II, pp. 32–5, with a tabulation of commodities, quantities and prices in the tablets in Tab. Vindol. III, pp. 15–16.
⁸ Tab. Vindol. II, 207 and possibly also 218.
⁹ The new edition of this document in Bowman *et al.* 2009 contains earlier bibliographic references, an account of the imaging techniques used to provide the new readings, and further textual and historical commentary.
economic, but the Frisian text is rather earlier, with a consular date of A.D. 29, supported by radiocarbon dating. The tablet was previously known as the ‘Frisian Ox Sale’, but the new edition reveals that it was a loan-note in which oxen did not figure: the ‘bovem’ of earlier editions is now to be read as a simple ‘quem’.

Front:
Çařo ɿuilia(e) Secundaē  
quos ea red(d)ere  
deb(e)o qua diê petie-  
rit aut at quem  
ea res pertinebi(t)  
Actuµ VII K(alendae) Mar-  
tia(s) ɿiµ.c,emium  
C(aio) FuÇo Gemin-  
{i}o co(n)s(ule).  Înterpreta-  
Quadratus –vit (vacat)

Back:  
(Right panel)  
(Left panel)  
T(itus) Cassius  
Mil(iunni).  
Batavō  
(vacat)  
Caturix  
(... from?) Carus(?) slave of Iulia Secunda which I am obliged to repay to her(?) or to whomsoever this matter pertains on the day on which s/he(?) shall ask for them. Transacted on 23(?) February at ... in the consulship of C. Fufius Geminus. Quadratus acted as interpreter (or intermediary?).

(Back)  
(2nd hand) Titus Cassius, tribune of the fifth legion.  
(3rd hand) Mius(vi)() soldier of the unit of Batavians, of the century (or decury?) of Bonumotus(?).  
(4th hand?) Caturix, slave of the said Secunda(?).  
(Text and translation: Bowman et al. 2009, 161–2)

This text is sixty to seventy years earlier than Tab. Vindol. II, 213, and from another part of the Empire, but there are certain parallels to be drawn. The transaction is a somewhat more private one than in the Vindolanda document, but the persons involved were apparently all members of or attached to legio V Alaudae, at a time when it was based at Vetera on the Lower Rhine. Once again, we know little of the one who ‘interprets’, other than his name, Quadratus. His role in the transaction may be that of literal ‘interpreter’ between languages. Like the Vindolanda document, this loan-note comes from a region on the north-west marches of the Roman Empire at that date, and the slave Carus(?) — even his creditor, whose name is not preserved — may not have spoken Latin. But, again, the most economical (in both senses of the word) explanation is to make Quadratus an agent or go-between, whose role in the transaction was to facilitate and mediate between the parties. Quadratus may well also have spoken more than one language and put this expertise to use in his role as mediator — the

10 Bowman et al. 2009, 156 and 159.
ambiguity of *interpretavit* may, indeed, be conscious — but the description of his activities here does not absolutely require this to be the case.

INTERPRETERS AND THE ROMAN AUTHORITIES

Searching for interpreters of foreign languages in the Latin and Greek literary, historical, epigraphic and documentary records as a whole is a frustrating business. Two circumstances conspire to make language mediators ‘invisible’: the semantic ambiguity in the Greek and Latin terms (*hermêneus, interpēres*) used to refer to interpreters and translators; and a general neglect or reluctance on the part of our sources to record that mediation between languages, through active agents, had taken place at all.\(^\text{11}\) Despite the linguistic expertise needed to control and administer a multilingual empire,\(^\text{12}\) and manage relations with peoples beyond imperial frontiers, we find only a handful of explicit references to individuals who served as interpreters within Roman military and civilian administrative hierarchies: this is true of both the literary-historical and the epigraphic-documentary records. These references have a slight but notable tendency to ‘clump’.\(^\text{13}\) As already mentioned, there are inscriptions recording a number of army interpreters in the provinces along the Danube, mostly of the late second and early third centuries A.D. Cicero provides accounts of the doings of various interpreters within late Republican provincial bureaucracies: loyal and trusted interpreters whom he himself employed in Cilicia, such as M. Marcilius who he considered his ‘*amicus atque interpēres*’;\(^\text{14}\) and the nefarious agents of C. Verres in Sicily, who were interpreters also in the broader sense of agents and go-betweens.\(^\text{15}\) Other, more isolated inscriptions record the presence of interpreters in imperial service in Egypt,\(^\text{16}\) Syria,\(^\text{17}\) and Germania Inferior.\(^\text{18}\) Those sources in which we might expect to find more frequent reference to interpreters or translators who mediated between local people and the Roman authorities in fact furnish very few examples. The archives of Babatha (c. A.D. 94–132) and Salome Komaise (c. A.D. 125–31) from Arabia contain signposted translations, such as the translated subscriptions to census declarations of both the parties and the presiding Roman official, but no indication of the authors of such translations.\(^\text{19}\) In Egypt, we find occasional reference to interpreters employed in law cases before Roman courts.\(^\text{20}\) Only one of these interpreters is identified by name, and this is most

\(^{11}\) For an interesting discussion of the figure of the ‘invisible’ (written) translator, and the fiction of transparency in modern translation, see Venuti 2008.

\(^{12}\) Eck 2004.

\(^{13}\) It is not the author’s intention to provide a thorough treatment of interpreters in Classical literary and historical sources, not least because the small number of references which exist are widely spread in time and space, and give us scant information about interpreters’ position and professional activities. Certainly, there is little truly informative, useful sociolinguistic data: commentators tend not to dwell on the languages spoken by individual interpreters, how they acquired them, or the minutiae of the transactions they mediated and their precise role in them. For a compendium of references and general, though largely uncritical, discussion, see Wiotte-Franz 2001. A monograph is currently in preparation, by the present author and Maya B. Muratov, Adelphi University, on interpreters of foreign languages in the epigraphic and papyrological record throughout the Graeco-Roman world and its peripheries. A preliminary report on the project and its scope is to be given in Mairs forthcoming a. On the figure of the interpreter as traitor in Classical tradition, see Mairs 2011.

\(^{14}\) Cicero, *Fam.* 13.54.

\(^{15}\) Cicero, *Verr.* 1.1.36; 2.4.49; 2.2.54; 2.2.108; 2.3.85; 2.4.58.

\(^{16}\) *hermēneus kai grammateus*: O. Berenike II, 121, A.D. 113–17.

\(^{17}\) *hermēneus epitropōn*: Le Bas and Waddington 1870, no. 2143, n.d.

\(^{18}\) *interpēres*, probably military: *CIL* XIII, 8773, n.d.

\(^{19}\) Cotton 2003; Cotton 1995.

\(^{20}\) *SB* XVIII, 13156, l. 7, early second century A.D.; *P. Ant.* II, 87, l. 12, late third century A.D.; *BGU* VII, 1567, Fr. B, l. 15, third century A.D.; *P. Sakaon.* 32, ll. 23–4, A.D. 254–68; *P. Oxy.* XLII, 3074, l. 7, first half of the third century.
likely because he was also one of the presiding officials at the hearing in question.\textsuperscript{21} We also sometimes encounter translations of Latin legal documents in which legal experts claim authorship and responsibility for the accuracy of the translations,\textsuperscript{22} but such references are really very few.

\textbf{ROMAN MILITARY INTERPRETERS IN THE DANUBIAN PROVINCES}

There follows a relatively brief summary of the Latin inscriptions from the provinces of Pannonia Superior, Pannonia Inferior and Moesia Superior which mention interpretex, without venturing into questions of the ethnic background of these men or the peoples whose languages they spoke (Dacians, possibly also Sarmatians and Germans). They all, at any rate, bear ‘colourless names typical of soldiers’\textsuperscript{23} including some imperial gentilicia. These men are without exception Roman soldiers, and most of them hold ranks above that of simple miles. Another inscription, mentioned above, from Germania Inferior may also commemorate a Roman military interpreter, but this epitaph is fragmentary, of uncertain date, and apparently no longer extant.\textsuperscript{24} The recorded text lacks any indication of military position, but given that Roman soldiers were the most prolific generators of Latin inscriptions in the provinces, it seems likely that the man commemorated was a soldier.

The military ranks held by these interpretex were as follows (in bold text):

1. Q. Atilius Primus (Kolnik 1978; \textit{AE} 1988, 938; Mosser 2003, no. 13, 171; Pannonia Superior, near Carnuntum; second half of the first century A.D.).

\begin{verbatim}
Q(uintus) Atilius
Sp(uri) f(ilius) Vot(uriae) Pri-

mus interpretex

leg(ionis) XV idem (centurio)

negotiator an(norum)
LXXX h(ic) s(itus) e(st)
Q(uintus) Atilius Cocta-
tus Atilia Q(uinti) l(iberta) Fau-
sta Privatus et
Martialis hered(es)
l(iberti?) p(osuerunt)
\end{verbatim}


\begin{verbatim}
M(arco) Ulp(io) q(ondam) Romano mil(iti)
praet(oriano) et primoscr-
inio praef-
f(ectorum) qui vi-
\end{verbatim}

\textsuperscript{21} P. Col. VII, 175.
\textsuperscript{22} BGU I, 326, ll. 22–3, late second century A.D.; SB VI, 9298, ll. 24–9, A.D. 249.
\textsuperscript{23} Mócsy 1974, 157.
\textsuperscript{24} CIL XIII, 8773.
M(arcus) Ulp(ius) Cele-rinus
leg(ionis) I Ad(iutricis)
P(iae) F(idelis) interpres
Dacorum vivus sibi
et filio suo s(upra) s(critpto) carissimo
f(aciendum) c(uravit)


D(is) M(anibus)
M. Aur(elio) Flavo m[iliti] leg(ionis) II Ad(iutricis) du[pl]i(cario)
[e]t interpetri [sic.] Ge[rmanoru]m
off(iicii) co(n)s(ularis) et M. Aur[(elio) ... an(norum)] XIII
filio communi Aurelia Q-
u[i]aeta (?) marito et filio dulcissi-
is scribi in memoriam iussit


...[PA]IL[...]
[...] et Iulio Dig[...]
[...] patri paga[(no) ...]
[...] Ulpi(a)e Homenat[...]
[...n(a)e so(ro)ribus [...]
[...] Gaius mil(es) leg(ionis) [II Ad(iutricis)?]
[...] interpres S(armatarum?) e[x[...]
[...o]fici(i) co(n)s(ularis) sib[i et]
[...] parentibus H[or]-
mus filius eius


l. 11: C(aius) Val(eri)us Valens int(erpres) R(atiarum)25
l. 40: M(arcus) Ulp(ius) Mar(tialis) int(erpres) Sc(upis)

With the exception of No. 5, a list of discharged veterans of legio VII Claudia, all are funerary inscriptions.

Q. Atilius Primus (No. 1) was in addition a negotiator. Whether this was concurrently with or subsequent to his military career is not specified, which leaves the two equally interesting possibilities that he was a negotiator for the army, involved in provisioning in some way,26 or that he was a retired soldier-turned-trader on the frontier. Since he lived to the age of eighty, Atilius

26 Austin and Rankov 1995, 28, suggest an expansion to ‘centurio negotiator(um)’, implying supervision over traders rather than necessarily direct participation in commercial activities himself.
had ample time to have established himself as a trader after his retirement, whether or not he had also been involved in provisioning the army during his active service, or in trading as a sideline. Atilius was buried beyond the Danube, in an area where the archaeological evidence reveals considerable adoption of or engagement with Roman architecture and material culture by the local population at this date. As well as providing an environment in which Atilius’ commercial venture might flourish, in this ‘contact zone’ language skills will have been key in enabling him to conduct business. His professional life as an interpreter may, therefore, have stood him in good stead.

M. Ulpius Celerinus (No. 2) appears in another inscription from Brigetio, a dedication to Jupiter where he is described simply as salariarius legionis I Adiutricis, without mention of the fact that he was an interpreter. The salariarius was an officer who, from the time of Septimius Severus, was responsible for stores and provisioning. His son, M. Ulpius, was a person of some distinction: a member of the Praetorian Guard (effectively disbanded by Septimius Severus in A.D. 193 and re-formed with heavy recruitment from the Danubian provinces) and primicerius, a chief financial officer in the Prefectoral administration.

M. Aurelius Flavus (No. 3) was a duplicarius, on double pay. Flavus and Gaius (No. 4) served on the staff of the provincial governor. The officium consularis, in addition to its regular personnel, could include other officials with special functions, such as haruspices, or those general dogsbodies who described themselves simply as milites of the officium. Six inscriptions from Pannonia Inferior, including the two inscriptions here, record officials officii consularis. The others are a miles of legio I Adiutrix a responsis officii consularis; two adiutores officii consularis; and a miles of legio II Adiutrix who was a strator (‘groom’) officii consularis. The language skills of our interpretes were evidently as useful to the governor’s office as they were to the army.

These inscriptions, aside from their shared military context, display a fair degree of correlation between designation as an interpreter, bureaucratic roles and trading or provisioning. These commercial activities may be part of their military or administrative duties, or personal ventures. We should suspect that the dividing line between these spheres was not always clear: M. Ulpius Celerinus (No. 2), the salariarius, for example, would have been ideally placed to conduct his own operations on the side, or to set himself up as a businessman after his discharge from the army. The location of the inscriptions of all of these linguistic-commercial (or commercial-linguistic) mediators on the Danube frontier is significant. This area was a contact zone where the Roman Empire and its inhabitants interacted with groups beyond the frontier — and vice versa — and where the Roman army and Roman officialdom might seek to monitor and control such interaction.

Negotiatores, interpretes and the Roman army and bureaucracy could be bound up in any number of ways. For example, Roman civilian negotiatores and their Greek colleagues on Delos in the second century B.C. mostly dealt with the language contact issues inherent in trading enterprises through bilingualism, a fact which is reflected in the complex intersections of languages in their epigraphic production. In the first century B.C., in Sicily, at least one of

---

27 See Wilkes 2005, 139, updating material in Mócsy 1974, 89–91. I would like to acknowledge the particular help and input of one of the anonymous referees on archaeological matters.
28 CIL III, 10988.
29 Roth 1998, 274.
30 Cassius Dio 75.2.6.
31 Discussed by Rankov 1987, 33–4; Rankov 1999.
32 Rankov 1987, 54.
35 CIL III, 10315 = AE 2005, 12.
36 Adams 2002.
Verres’ interpreters is also described by Cicero as a *negotiator* (see above), and language skills and expertise as a middleman went naturally together. Epigraphically-attested *negotiatores* in Pannonia Superior of the first century A.D. were often freedmen of Aquileian trading families, sent to manage regional operations along the Amber Route. However, the professional title *negotiator* also commonly appears applied to men who had dealings with the army, often supplying common military requirements such as weapons and clothing, or belonging to it themselves.

**COMMERCIAL INTERPRETERS–MIDDLEMEN**

The most frequent attestations of ‘interpreters’ who play no obvious language-mediation role, although they were possibly, or indeed probably, also multilingual, come from Greek papyri from Egypt. ‘Interpreters’ (*hermêneis*) appear in various connections in texts throughout the Hellenistic and Roman periods, and it is not possible to see much evolution in the semantic range of the term: at all periods it may have either linguistic or commercial implications, or both. In the Zenon Archive, of the third century B.C., most if not all of the *hermêneis* mentioned are demonstrably brokers or commercial agents, involved in carrying out or facilitating transactions. A ‘measure of the *hermêneus*’ is used to regulate dry goods in a small number of texts from the Arsinoite nome, dating between A.D. 14 and 151. In texts of the Roman period, a good proportion of the few references to *hermêneis* implicate them in commercial activity. A tax-inspector’s report of the early second century A.D. mentions a ‘tax on brokerage (*telos hermêneis*)’. In Theadelphia in A.D. 155 ‘clothing-merchants and brokers (*himatiopôlai kai hermêneis*)’ are found involved in the manufacture of garments for the state, paid through the public bank.

Such *hermêneis* are patently go-betweens, middlemen, but this does not compromise the reading, in other texts, of *hermêneus* as ‘interpreter of foreign languages’. The semantic range of the Greek term, just like that of the Latin *interpretes*, was rather different from that of the English ‘interpreter’, although the English term encompasses its own range of meanings, concerned with the exposition of difficult or arcane information. An ‘interpreter of Trogodytes’ appears in a text from Thebes of 134 B.C. The ‘interpreter and secretary (*hermêneus kai grammateus*)’, Papiris, who dedicates to Isis on behalf of the imperial family at Berenike on the Red Sea coast is a literate bureaucrat, although it would be interesting to know a little more about his precise position within the Roman administration. In Hellenistic and Roman legal documents, translation is indicated by variants of the verb *hermêneuein*, and very similar formulae are used to introduce such translations, of whatever period. The unnamed

---

37 Discussed in Mócsy 1974, 78; see also Künow 1980 on *negotiatores* in German lands outside the Empire; freedmen *negotiatores* are also well-attested elsewhere, e.g. *CIL* VI, 9664 (Rome).
38 e.g. a *miliit negotiatori*, *AE* 1899, 159, and *CIL* III, 14927 (Dalmatia); *negotiatoris veteranorum*, *CIL* III, 5308 (Noricum); a *negotiator* and *vestiarius* commemorated by his brother, an *aquilifer* of *legio III Italica*, *CIL* III, 5816 (Raetia); a veteran of *XXII Primigenia* who was a *negotiator gladiarius*, *CIL* XIII, 6677 (Germania Superior); another veteran of *XXII Primigenia* commemorating his brother, a *negotiator*, *AE* 1982, 709 (Gallia Lugudunensis); a soldier of the German fleet and *negotiator cervesarius*, *AE* 1941, 168 (Belgica).
39 *e.g.* *PSI* IV, 332, l. 6; for an introduction to this archive, belonging to Zenon, estate-manager of the finance minister (*dioikêtês*) Apollonios, see Pestman 1981 and Clarysse and Vandorpe 1995.
40 Mairs 2010.
41 *P. Oxy.* XXVII, 2472, l. 3.
43 *UPZ* II, 227.
44 *O. Berenike* II 121, A.D. 113–17.
45 Hellenistic: see e.g. Mairs and Martin 2008–9; Mairs forthcoming b; Schentuleit 2001. Roman: *P. Cair. Masp* I, 67031; *PSI* XIII, 1325; *BGU* VII, 1662; *P. Lips.* I, 9; *CPR* VI, 78; *P. Oxy.* I, 35; *P. Harr.* I, 67; *BGU* VII, 1662; *P. Oxy.*
interpreters mentioned in Roman trial protocols are described as *hermēneis*, and all are quite clearly assisting individuals who cannot speak the language of the proceedings (for references, see above).

Since the overwhelming majority of papyri are in Greek or Egyptian, with a much smaller number in Latin, there is a lack of primary source material to examine applications of the Latin *interpres* or *interpretari* in documentary texts. But even from the literary and epigraphic material already cited, it should be clear that the semantic range, and contextual application, of the Latin term is similar to that of the Greek. *Interpres* may imply an interpreter of foreign languages, an interpreter of dreams or oracles, or an agent, often in an expressly commercial sense (e.g. Verres’ *interpretes*, see above).

It is, therefore, unnecessary for the ‘interpreting’ transaction in *Tab. Vindol. II, 213* to bear any implications of language mediation, although such a commercial middleman, involved in the supply of barley to the Roman fort, will doubtless have either spoken Latin and the local language himself, or worked with other bilingual agents who did. This person is unlikely to be a formal army *interpres*, like those commemorated along the Danube frontier, or at least is not likely to have shared the bureaucratic side of their professional role. The unnamed recipient of the letter, who is to ‘interpret’ and get hold of grain, is hardly a former interpreter in the *officium consularis* down on his luck. He is not, it should be recalled, named as an *interpres* at all. Where he does have something in common with these Danubian interpreters, however, is in his place in the army supply chain, like the *negotiato* Q. Atilius Primus and the *salariorius* M. Ulpius Celerinus. Even within the Roman military, and even within a single military career, ‘interpreting’ could take place on a number of levels.

*Merton College, University of Oxford*

rachel.mairs@gmail.com

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


Barkóczi, L., and Mócsy, A. 1972– : *Die römischen Inschriften Ungarns*, Budapest/Bonn


Clarysse, W., and Vandorpe, K. 1995: *Zenon, un homme d’affaires grec à l’ombre des pyramides*, Ancorae 14, Louvain


LXIV, 4435; *P. Oxy. XIX*, 2231; *PSI V*, 450; *P. Oxy. I*, 43; *P. Oxy. XX*, 2276; *P. Oxy. XII*, 1466; *P. Oxy. IX*, 1201; *P. Sakaon* 34; *BGU I*, 326; *P. Select. 14*; *P. Diog.* 9; *SB XX*, 14952; *SB VI*, 9298; *P. Oxf. 7*; *P. Oxy. XXXIV*, 2710; *P. Oxy. IX*, 1205; *P. Ryl. II*, 62; *P. Giss. I*, 40; *P. Oxy. XVIII*, 2187.

46 *Interpretatio* of oracles: e.g. *RIB I*, 1579 (Britannia); *AE* 1976, 782 (Mauretanitania Tingitana); *AE* 1986, 119 (Latium); *AE* 1990, 545 (Hispania Citerior); *AE* 1991, 564 (Sannium); *CIL III*, 2880 (Dalmatia); *CIL VIII*, 8351 (Numidia). *Interpretatio* of dreams: e.g. *AE* 1975, 722 (Dacia). An *interpres* of laws: *CLE* 2046 (Pannonia Inferior). An *interpres* and *vatum* (soothsayer): *CLE* 1964 (Rome). Latin, Greek and English are not the only languages to display this kind of semantic range in terms for ‘interpreting’ words and information: cf. the extension of the Demotic Egyptian w3ḥ ‘unravel’ to mean ‘interpret’ languages or dreams, see Ray 1987.


Mairs, R. 2010: ‘An early Roman application for lease of a date crop (P. Duk. inv. 85) and the “Six-Choinix Measure of the Hermeneus”’, Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik 172, 183–91


Mairs, R. forthcoming b: κατὰ τὸ δυνατόν: Demotic-Greek translation in the Archive of the Theban Choachytes, in J. Cromwell and E. Grossman (eds), Beyond Free Variation: Scribal Repertoires in Egypt from the Old Kingdom to the Early Islamic Period, Oxford


Roth, J. 1998: The Logistics of the Roman Army at War (264 B.C.—A.D. 235), Leiden


