GLADIATORS AT ROMAN COLCHESTER: RE-INTERPRETING THE COLCHESTER VASE

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL: THE INSCRIPTION

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This appendix provides details in support of the characterisation of the inscription in the printed text, both in relation to the lettering and to the names and supplementary information given for the arena performers. It also reviews some alternative interpretations of the inscription which constraints of space do not allow to be discussed in the main text. This appendix is intended to complement the printed text but in in places there is some limited overlap with the latter to maintain its coherence.

**Location and Lettering**

The text is cut in fine strokes in letters varying in height between 2 mm and 14.5 mm (table 1). The names of Secundus and Mario are crammed into the space between the whip-holding figure and the vessel rim (4–6.5mm in height); those of Memnon and Valentinus are rendered in larger letters at a greater distance from the rim, with the gap widening from left to right and with adjustments for local obstacles including gladiators’ heads and weapons. Letter height is more consistent in the latter names, being typically c. 7–8mm, though the I of Valentinus and L and S of *legionis* are elongated (up to c. 14.5 mm in height).

The lettering is executed in fluid rustic capitals with some cursive characteristics. Individual letters are generally cut in two or more straight or lightly curving strokes, the point of the stylus or similar instrument sometimes being lifted at a change of angle. Observation of these strokes under magnification often allows their sequence of execution to be established. Typically a short vertical or diagonal stroke is cut first, followed by further horizontal or diagonal strokes and comma- or hook-like serifs at either end. This is well illustrated in the cases of the unbarred A, S, E, and I, as well as M, N and R. Where a letter or adjacent letters comprise repeated opposed diagonals, the latter were typically created in series of repeated parallel strokes. For example, the first and third (numbering from left to right) diagonals of M and first diagonal of A in *Mario* were made before the second and fourth strokes of M. The three bottom-left to top-right strokes of X in *XXX* were cut before the opposed diagonals were incised over them and serifs apparently added at their feet. With regard to serifs, found on several letters, it is not always easy to see if and / or where the writing instrument’s point was lifted at changes of angle or whether the same stroke has continued; ambiguous cases include the stroke descending from the base of the second diagonal of A, at the curling ends of strokes on some Ms, or the hook-like serifs of the long I of *Valentinus* or the L of *legionis*. In some cases too the sequence of strokes is not easy to determine, for example on some Vs.

The writer’s skill is especially expressed in the captions for Memnon and Valentinus, where greater distance from the vessel rim allows for freer writing. It shows itself in some flourishes such as the lightly curved and tapering serifs at top and bottom of many diagonal and vertical strokes, e.g. E, I, N, X, M, or the curling leftward hooks at the top of L in *legionis* or I in *Valentinus*, reminiscent of the elongated letters in Vindolanda tablet address scripts. Similarly, the upward diagonal from the S of *legionis*, the curl of the bottom serif of R of *Mario*, and strokes of contrasting width for X in the legion’s number provide further examples of this skill.

The echoes of letter forms from Old Roman Cursive, as exemplified in wooden writing tablets and ostraca of first to third century date, demonstrate the familiarity of the writer with cursive writing.[[1]](#endnote-1) The S of *legionis* with its long upward diagonal and the extension of L in the same letter beneath the following letters as well as the leftward curl of the vertical stroke illustrate this affinity.[[2]](#endnote-2) G with its downward tail also resembles cursive letter forms;[[3]](#endnote-3) so too does I with its extension to the right at its base, a cursive trait seen elsewhere but here added separately, more like a serif.[[4]](#endnote-4) The extended I of Valentinus, probably expressing its quantity as a long vowel (A. Taousiani, pers. comm.), also finds echoes in cursive as well as capital texts.[[5]](#endnote-5)

The consistency of lettering makes it clear that the same hand is responsible for the whole text. The A and S demonstrate this best, but similarities also apply to most other letters, for instance E and I. The unbarred A with its lightly incised angular downstroke is quite distinctive, being usually associated with earlier texts.[[6]](#endnote-6) It is sporadically documented in other inscriptions on ceramics.[[7]](#endnote-7) The occurrences of O in very different sizes in *Mario, Memnon* and *legionis* offer an apparent exception to the homogeneity. However in each case the letter is formed on the same principle, by two strokes*,* the first curving, the second a straighter diagonal, similar to the execution of O in wax tablet texts and in some curse tablets.[[8]](#endnote-8) In early readings of the vase inscription (and occasionally more recently) the tiny O of *Memnon* was understandably mistaken for an interpunct.[[9]](#endnote-9) However observation under magnification confirms the reading as a letter, the shortness of the diagonal being dictated by the tightness of the initial curved stroke. The diminutive O is a common feature of cursive texts (e.g. Tab. Vindol. II 163) as well as of monumental inscriptions. However here, as Roger Tomlin (pers. comm.) points out, it was reduced to save space; the second N in Memnon is also compressed compared to its first occurrence.

The fine quality of the lettering is hard to parallels among other inscriptions incised on vessels after firing, the category among which RIB II includes it (Volume 5). Even among the rare examples of elegance identified by RIB’s editors, for example the beaker from Dunstable for the *dendrophori* of Verulamium or the *vas communis* from Ospringe, the typical stiffness of lettering scratched on pre-fired surfaces is far from the fluidity of the Colchester text.[[10]](#endnote-10) Instead the Colchester text’s suppleness is much more reminiscent of texts cut into clay before firing. Such *ante cocturam* texts are patchily attested in Britain, examples occurring in cursive lettering on vessels from St Albans and East Farleigh, as well as in in capitals on vessels and tiles from Holt and Binchester and in mixed lettering on an incense burner at Coventina’s well.[[11]](#endnote-11) The larger corpus of pre-firing inscriptions in Gaul, above all the kiln tallies at La Graufesenque as well cursive and capital texts on tiles, more fully illustrate the fluidity possible in the more plastic medium of drying clay.[[12]](#endnote-12)

The argument that the Colchester text was written before firing can be confirmed by examining the letters under magnification. It is hard to visualise how either the shorter or longer curving strokes, often showing a transition from thicker to thinner as less pressure is applied to the writing instrument, could be incised on a fired vessel. The deciding evidence however is the clear superimposition of the strokes which form individual letters. A raised edge or lip on the strokes which might be expected from execution in a leather-hard medium can at times also be faintly seen under magnification as lines of highlight and shadow. By contrast the ragged lines typical of *post cocturam* inscriptions produced by fracturing of surface slip are not visible.

**Table 1: letter height (mm) for Colchester vase**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **S** | 4.5 | **M** | 8 | **V** | 7 |
| **E** | 4 | **E** | 8 | **A** | 8 |
| **C** | 4.5 | **M** | 9 | **L** | 7 |
| **V** | 4.5 | **N** | 7 | **E** | 7 |
| **N** | 5 | **O** | 2 | **N** | 6.5 |
| **D** | 5 | **N** | 6 | **T** | 6.5 |
| **V** | 5.5 | **S** | 9 | **I** | 13 |
| **S** | 6 | **A** | 9 | **N** | 7.5 |
| **M** | 5 | **C** | 7 | **V** | 7.5 |
| **A** | 8 | **V** | 6 | **L** | 14.5 |
| **R** | 6.5 | **I** | 5.5 | **E** | 6.5 |
| **I** | 5.5 | **I** | 5.5 | **G** | 8 |
| **O** | 4.5 | **I** | 5.5 | **I** | 6.5 |
|  |  | **I** | 5.5 | **O** | 7 |
|  |  |  |  | **N** | 7 |
|  |  |  |  | **I** | 7 |
|  |  |  |  | **S** | 14.5 |
|  |  |  |  | **X** | 9.5 |
|  |  |  |  | **X** | 9.5 |
|  |  |  |  | **X** | 9.5 |

**Names and related information**

*Secundus and Mario*

It has sometimes been conjectured, partly from the positioning of the names, that Secundus and Mario are name elements for the same individual.[[13]](#endnote-13) However they are much more plausibly read as two separate names. Secundus is attested in 28 examples from Britain, and in many hundreds of examples beyond, especially in Italy.[[14]](#endnote-14) Its choice probably carries no specific significance, but it is not impossible that the potential connotation of the name as ‘favourable’ or ‘propitious’ (*OLD, secundus* A) may have had played some part. Alternatively, a position within the hierarchy of a group of beast hunters (the equivalent of a *secundus palus*), might have been intended.[[15]](#endnote-15) However the commonness of Secundus as a single name and *cognomen* cautions against advocating this possibility.

Mario is a much rarer name, attested only once in Britain, and only documented in c. 30 other instances.[[16]](#endnote-16) Rather than a Celtic name (*pace* RIB II) it is ‘un nom latin rarissime’, attested primarily among current and former slaves.[[17]](#endnote-17) [Cas]cellius Mario, freedman and *medicus* or Lucius Licinius Mario, freedman and *unguentarius*, provide good examples.[[18]](#endnote-18) It has sometimes been suggested in this case to be the dative of Marius, identifying the latter as the potential recipient of the Colchester vessel from Secundus.[[19]](#endnote-19) However this cannot be plausibly reconciled with the rest of the inscription and the name is most simply read as one of four names in the nominative case. Neither name is likely to relate to the animal baited by the two men; bears are occasionally named in *venatio* mosaics but with names typical of performing animals.[[20]](#endnote-20)

*Memnon and Valentinus*

In the conventional interpretation of this pair of names the inscription has been read as recording two different types of information, for Memnon his gladiatorial type and the number of fights and for Valentinus his ownership by the 30th legion. This interpretation is cautiously preferred in the printed discussion but the alternative, i.e. that the text might provide the same information in parallel form for both gladiators, i.e. (stage) name, ownership and number of fights, is rehearsed here.

This tripartite form would align the Colchester inscription with some other gladiatorial inscriptions with affinities with the vase. For example Campanian graffiti similarly sometimes name gladiators, their ‘school’ and the number of fights, such as the listing of the gladiators paired at diverse *munera* in Nola and Pompeii.[[21]](#endnote-21) Closer in time and space to the Colchester vase are the captions on ceramic medallions from the Rhône valley which sometimes list both ‘schools’ and fight numbers with the gladiators they show, for example *Xanthus Caesaris XV; Eros Caes(aris) XVI*.[[22]](#endnote-22) The implications of reading the Colchester inscription in this way, i.e. to conform to this tripartite formula, would be to identify SAC as an abbreviated name for the owner or trainer of a gladiatorial *familia* to which Memnon belonged and to identify Valentinus as belonging to a non-specified legion, with 30 fights behind him.

There are however two main objections to this alternative reading. The first is the difficulty of identifying SAC as a plausible abbreviation of a *familia* name. Names starting with SAC are not common, for example peregrine names or cognomina such as Sacer, Sacco, Sacconius and Saccus. Among such names no known *familia* owners can be identified.[[23]](#endnote-23) In fact while private *familiae* continued to exist in the 2nd century in the eastern Mediterranean (e.g. Carter 1999, 156-168), only imperial ownership, usually expressed in abbreviated form (IMP, CAES, AUG) is attested in the few references to gladiatorial *familiae* in the Roman north.[[24]](#endnote-24) SAL to SAC has sometimes been preferred as a reading, prompting alternative identifications of owners, but the third letter is clearly a C (see below). As for Valentinus, a record of 30 fights behind him would make the victory of the less experienced Memnon more memorable (see below). However to refer to a legion in an inscription without also giving its number is epigraphically almost without parallel, whatever the medium. In more than 200 attestations of *legionis* from Britain for example, where survival enables this to be assessed, on tombstones, altars, building stones etc, the number of the legion is absent in only two cases (RIB 2120 and 587), whether the inscription records the actions of individuals, centuries, cohorts, vexillations or the unit as a whole. The inclusion of a legion’s name on building materials, especially brick, to mark its production and its property invariably also includes its number. Thus we continue to prefer the numeral XXX as identifying the legion rather than recording fight history.

The small size of the O within the name of Memnon has occasionally prompted its identification as an interpunct (see above), leading Roach Smith and other readers to identify this as an abbreviation of Mem(non) or Mem(nius), followed by a stray N, expanded as a *n(umerus)* of *secutores*.[[25]](#endnote-25) However examination of the letter under magnification clearly reveals it to be an O, confirming the reading to be ‘Memnon’ inscribed in full with the O reduced in size and the N compressed because of the limited space adjacent to the *secutor*’s head (see above). In the few Latin examples of Memnon, it sometimes features as a *cognomen* of *liberti*, for example Sextus Aelius Memnon from Rome.[[26]](#endnote-26) In a rare instance from the north-west provinces a Memnon dedicates a now fragmentary altar at the Rhine mouth shrine of Colijnsplaat (AE 2001, 1500) but his other names and any reference to a profession are lost.[[27]](#endnote-27) Greek names with a heroic resonance documented in the Roman north include examples without any arena context, for instance Quintus Verrius Achillaeus, an Allobrogan potter, Hector, scratched in a shoe sole from the Walbrook, London, Menelaus on an epitaph from Langres, and Priamus and Nestor in potters’ stamps on sigillata from La Graufesenque.[[28]](#endnote-28) Given the context however we argue that the choice of this name for the *secutor* is best explained as a specific instance of the choice of a heroic model for a stage name. This well-attested phenomenon in the eastern Mediterranean is also sporadically attested in the western empire.[[29]](#endnote-29) For example, a Hector is remembered on a now lost epitaph from Moirans-en-Montagne (Jura), where a short inscription celebrates his three fights beneath a scene of two gladiators in combat.[[30]](#endnote-30) A lost second century mosaic from Augsburg pits an Ajax against Aprius in one of several combat scenes.[[31]](#endnote-31)

Memnon is described with the abbreviated term *SAC*. Its usual (correction) and expansion to *secutor* is admittedly problematic since A and E are not commonly confused in inscriptions. Indeed Hull read the letter C as an L, and thus read the name *Salvilli* or *Salvini*, taking the following characters as letters rather than numbers.[[32]](#endnote-32) Given the constraints on space in forming this letter, Hull’s reading is understandable, and cursive C and L are similar. However under magnification it is clear that the letter should be read as C, with its upper curve made as a distinct stroke and truncated by the proximity of the secutor’s sword. Yet even if SAC as a mistake for SEC can be accepted, the abbreviation of *secutor* to its first three letters is also unusual. While other gladiatorial type names are commonly reduced to three letters in inscriptions, most examples of SEC reference a military rank, i.e. the *secutor tribuni* or assistant to a tribune, documented for example in the urban cohorts.[[33]](#endnote-33) Among the very few memorials to gladiatorial *secutores*, only on the epitaph for Aureus at Salona, slain by a robber, is the term abbreviated.[[34]](#endnote-34)

An alternative might be to read SAC (as Matthew Magee suggests, pers. comm.) as a blundered abbreviation for *scaeva*, left-handed, a term occasionally documented in relation to gladiators, once as *scaev(a)* and a handful of times as *sc(aeva)*, for example on an epitaph from Rome of a *murmillo*, in marble plaques recording contest outcomes from Ferento, Tuscany and in a graffito from Pompeii, matched with an image of a left-handed fighter.[[35]](#endnote-35) Given Memnon’s left-handedness, a combat characteristic known for its trickiness, it is perhaps not much less implausible as an expansion than *secutor*, and may help explain why the type represented by Valentinus is not stated.[[36]](#endnote-36) To make SAC a blunder for CAES, i.e. the abbreviation for *Caes(aris)*, indicating ownership in an imperial school, is less plausible. Most importantly, however, the placement of SAC by the head of a *secutor* dispels doubts as to the abbreviation in this case. The numeral VIIII must refer to the number of bouts fought during his career to date by Memnon, the single numeral without further qualification having this significance from the late first century AD onwards.[[37]](#endnote-37) The expression of a number as (implicitly) a record of fights completed (*pugnarum)* is documented among contemporary Rhône valley vessels identified as comparanda for the Colchester vase (see below). The listing of fights completed is also a commonplace of gladiatorial epitaphs, occasionally in the northern provinces, for example the three fights of Lucius Tarquinius Primus, *murmillo* (Bourges) or the seven of Hylas (or Hylatis), *dymachaerus*, *essedarius* and later *rudarius* (Cologne) and commonly in the larger corpus from the Mediterranean.[[38]](#endnote-38) His tally places Memnon as a mid-career fighter at the time of his encounter with Valentinus. By the standards of Pardus from Rome, dead after nine bouts under his belt, Memnon might have qualified as a *veteranus*.[[39]](#endnote-39) Yet he had many still to fight to match the 33 contests racked up by the *murmillo* Ampliatus before the latter’s death at Cordoba aged 30; even higher numbers are documented, especially in Pompeian graffiti.[[40]](#endnote-40)

*Valentinus*

The omission of the final letter on this name is common in inscriptions incised on ceramics.[[41]](#endnote-41) Documented in six cases in Britain and widely beyond, this name reveals little of his biography.[[42]](#endnote-42) The affiliation of Valentinus to the 30th legion is discussed in the main text. Epplett and Wahl have argued that all the individuals named on the vase belonged to the legion.[[43]](#endnote-43) However it seems more likely that this would have been referenced in relation to each name, this being the convention for gladiator captions on the Rhône valley ceramic medallions or Pompeian graffiti (see above).

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*EAOR* *Epigrafia anfiteatrale dell'Occidente Romano*, Rome

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*ILingons Inscriptions de la cité des Lingons. Inscriptions sur pierre*, Y. Le Bohec 2003, Paris

*OLD Oxford Latin Dictionary*

*RIB The Roman Inscriptions of Britain*

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31. CIL III, 5835a = EAOR IX, 17. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Hull 1963, 96, fig. 51.3. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. CIL VI, 2659; 2987. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Hope 2000, 97, 102; Salona epitaph, ILS 5112 = EAOR IX, no. 14. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Rome, CIL VI, 10196 = EAOR 1, 95; Ferento, EAOR II, no. 53a, f; Pompeii, Coleman 1994. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. Bird and Crummy forthcoming. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. Ville 1981, 316–17. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. Primus, EAOR V, no. 61; Hylas, EAOR V, no. 62; the wider corpus, EAOR I. pp.133–4; Hope 2000, 103; Ville 1981, 321–2. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. cf. Ville 1981, 311–12 [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. Ampliatus, CIL II.7, 356 = EAOR VII,22. More widely, Ville 1981, 321–2. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. e.g. RIB II.8 2503 intro., pp. 18 and 24, table III. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. Kakoschke 2011, 622, no. 1402. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. Epplett 2001, 186; Wahl 1977, 55. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)