

An Early Christian Inscription in the Musei Capitolini

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At Rome's Via Latina a marble inscription was found. Its fragments are preserved at the Musei Capitolini in Rome.

ἴτρα δ' ἐμοὶ παστῶν δαδουχοῦσιν συ(
ἀπίνας πεινοῦσιν ἐν ἡμετέρο(
γοῦντες γενέτην καὶ υἰέα δοξάζον(
γῆς ἔνθα μόνης καὶ ἀληθείης ρύ.¹

After C. Scholten² rekindled the debate about the Valentinian character of this epigraph, a fresh look is needed. I will try to fill in the blanks and to translate:

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- 1 Cf. L. Moretti, "Iscrizioni greche inedite di Roma": *BCACR* 75 (1953-55), 83-86; M. Raoss, "Iscrizione cristiana-greca di Roma anteriore al terzo secolo?": *Aevum* 37 (1963), 11-30; A. Coppo, "Contributo all'interpretazione di un'epigrafe greca cristiana dei Musei Capitolini": *RivAC* 46 (1970), 97-138; M. Guarducci, "Valentiniani a Roma": *MDAIR* 80 (1973), 169-89; Guarducci, "Ancora sui Valentiniani a Roma": *MDAIR* 81 (1974), 341-43; Guarducci, "Iscrizione cristiana del II secolo nei Musei Capitolini": *BCACR* 79 (1963-64), 117-34; P. Lampe, *Die stadtrömischen Christen in den ersten beiden Jahrhunderten* (Tübingen: Mohr, 2nd ed. 1989), 257-61. Manlio Simonetti (orally) was the first to suspect a Valentinian origin of the inscription, followed by M. Guarducci.
 - 2 "Gibt es Quellen zur Sozialgeschichte der Valentinianer Roms?": *ZNW* 79 (1988), 244-61.

Co(brothers; συνάδελφοι) of the bridal chambers celebrate
 with torches the (ba)ths (λουτρά) for me,³
 They hunger for (ban)quets (εἰλαπίνας) in ou(r) rooms;
 ἡμετέροισι δόμοισι,⁴
 (La)uding the Father⁵ and praisin(g; δοξάζοντες)
 the Son;
 O, may there be flow(ing; ῥύσις εἴη) of the only (sp)ring (πηγῆς)⁶
 and of the truth in that very place (or: then).

The length of the completions at the left and right margins fits well, as I cross-checked by means of a computer-assisted photo montage, using letters from within the inscription itself to fill in the blanks (see plate II at the end of the article).⁷

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- 3 In connection with an accusative, *δαδονχέω* ("to carry a torch, to illuminate") means "to celebrate" (e.g. "to celebrate mysteries" Them. Or. 5.71a). —Instead of *συνάδελφοι* an analogous term could be read too, e.g., *σύντεκνοι* "co-children," "foster-siblings" (*Corpus fabularum Aesopicarum*, ed. A. Hausrath – H. Hunger, 147.2.9; *Ancient Greek Inscriptions in the British Museum* 1010). Metrically this reading would create a spondaic hexameter.
 - 4 This is the epic meaning of *δόμος*. Cf., e.g., H. G. Liddell – R. Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 9th edition 1982), s.v. The meter requires a plural form. Another possibility would be "in our dining rooms" (*ἡμετέροις ἀναγαίσις*), cf. Mark 14:15. *ἡμετέροισι δόμοισι*, however, fits better in its length, having one letter less.
 - 5 Possible parallel terms to *δοξάζον-* are *ἑμνοῦντες*, *αἰνοῦντες*, or *σεμνοῦντες*.
 - 6 Other possibilities would be: "of the only light" (*ἀγῆς*), or even the Valentinian technical term *σιγῆς* ("of the only silence"). —Moretti ("Iscrizioni," 83) proposed *στοργῆς*. But a) if we filled in four missing letters at the beginning of the line, this line would be too long, starting further to the left than the previous lines. b) Moretti's translation of *νῆα δοξάζοντες στοργῆς* as "compiacendosi col figlio per l'amore" hardly is convincing. c) "Spring" better matches the metaphor of "flowing." —Moretti (*ibid.*, 83) also pondered *μονῆς* ("abiding") instead of *μόνης*. But how does line 4 make sense this way? By translating *μονῆς ... ῥύ[σις μοι]* (sic) as "è per me la difesa della tranquillità" Moretti only provokes questions. If there is the possibility for another, smoother reading, we definitely should choose it. —*ἔνθνα* denotes either place or time (Liddell – Scott, s.v.).
 - 7 Photos, however, cannot help to decide about the reading of individual letters, as Scholten assumes ("Quellen", 246 and 249 n. 21). For the deficiencies of this method, see, e.g., E. Meyer, *Einführung in die lateinische Epigraphik*, (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1983), 103.

Also metrically the completions fit well. The four epigraphic lines represent hexameters:

λουτρά δ' ἐμοὶ πασῶν δαδουχοῦσιν συνάδελφοι
 εἰλαπίνῃας πεινοῦσιν ἐνῆμετέροισι δόμοισι
 ὕμνοῦντες γενέτην καὶ υἰέαδοξάζοντες
 πηγῆς ἔνθα μόνης καὶ ἀληθείης ῥύσις εἴη.⁸

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Paleographically the inscription most likely dates into the 2nd century at the time of the Antonines, as M. Guarducci has shown comparing several hundred texts.⁹ If the inscription is Christian, it represents one of the earliest epigraphic Christian documents. A detailed discussion of the epigraph therefore is justified.

I.

C. Scholten has questioned the Valentinian interpretation proposed by M. Simonetti, M. Guarducci and myself (notes 1 and 2). Scholten denies a Christian (M. Raoss) or religious reading. Instead the epigraph is supposed to represent a pagan wedding inscription, as one learns from scattered hints in his article (pp. 253, 250, 247). Scholten does not inform us which secular wedding inscriptions could be seen in parallel to our epi-

8 For καὶ as short sound, cf., e.g., Homer *Il.* 5.300. Guarducci ("Valentiniani," 170), following Coppo, "Contributo" completes with ῥύσις ἐστὶν at the end. ἐστὶν, however, would make line 4 too long in comparison with the other lines.

9 M. Guarducci ("Valentiniani," 169-70, and "Iscrizione," 127-32) outdates older attempts to date: 1st-2nd cent. C.E. (Moretti, "Iscrizioni," 83); 3rd cent. C.E. or later (J. and L. Robert, reviewing Moretti in *REG* 71 [1958], 359-60; Raoss, "Iscrizione," 30).

graph. He does not try to show how the praising of father and son (line 3) and the flowing of truth (line 4) could be interpreted in the framework of a secular nuptial inscription. In fact, Scholten does not even make an effort to fill in the missing letters in order to obtain a text that makes sense. His alternative is no real alternative, as long as he does not take the trouble to spell out a complete reading and translation on his own and to find parallels that could make his version plausible. Any attempt to disprove other readings runs aground as long as no solid alternative is offered.

As Scholten did not do it himself, we must test a pagan secular reading on our own.

(a) In the first line one clearly can read “of the bridal chambers” and “they celebrate with torches for me.” How do both fit into a sentence that makes sense?

At a pagan wedding the bride’s way from her parental house to the groom’s house—i.e., to the nuptial chamber—was indeed illuminated with torches at nightfall; torch-bearers led the procession.¹⁰ In Plautus *Cas.* 1.1.30 this custom is called *lucere novae nuptiae facem*. In a pagan interpretation thus the “for me” in our inscription would have to be spoken by a bride.¹¹ At the beginning of the line we would have to read λέκτρα,¹² if the line were to make sense: They “carry torches to the beds of the bridal chambers for me.” δε in this case would be the enclitic particle -δε, which is added to an accusative in order to denote motion towards something (e.g., Homer *Od.* 8.292 λέκτρονδε = “to bed”).

Very quickly, however, difficulties arise for a pagan reading of this line.

- The plurals in “beds” and “bridal chambers” would be awkward, since only one bride (“for me”) is guided to her nuptial bed.
- Wedding songs used to be sung by friends and not by the bride herself.¹³

10 Cf., e.g., the materials in J. Marquardt, *Das Privatleben der Römer*, I (1886; Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, reprint of the 2nd ed. 1975), 53-56.

11 Not by the groom, as Moretti (“Iscrizioni,” 84) assumed. If the groom were referred to in our epigraph, this would be in line 3 in the third person—if at all.

12 Or φίλτρα (“love”)? Moretti’s (“Iscrizioni,” 83) reading στοιβάδ’ ἐμοί (στοιβάς “bed”) is impossible. Moretti falsely reads an Iota, where there clearly was a Γ, Τ, Ε or Σ.

13 Cf., e.g., Catull *Carm.* 62; 61.36-40; Marquardt, *Privatleben*, 54. Already Moretti (“Iscrizioni,” 84-85) admitted that our poem does not match well with the Greco-Roman wedding customs.

• In the pagan nuptial procession young boys carried the torches for the bride,¹⁴ not any “co-(...)” In which way could the torch-bearers be labelled “co-” in relation to the bride in a pagan nuptial setting?

• In a pagan setting the festive banquet used to take place *before* the procession with torches, not after, as our epigraphical lines 1 and 2 would suggest.¹⁵

On the whole a pagan reading of line 1 does not seem plausible. Our Christian reading “baths” at the beginning of the line, on the other hand, does not create problems. βάπτισμα and λουτρόν are interchangeable, in both Valentinian and other Christian texts (cf., e.g., Justin *Apol.* I 61.3; Clem. Alex. *Exc. ex Theod.* 4.78). According to Justin (*Apol.* I 65), Christian baptism used to take place *before* the congregation celebrated the eucharist, which matches the sequence of baptisms (line 1) and “banquets” (line 2) in our inscription.

After a Christian provenience of line 1 has been conceded, the question of the particularly Valentinian character has to be raised. With πασσοῖ (“bridal chambers”), a Valentinian keynote is hit. Not only is the nuptial theme a predominant subject in Valentinianism, the Valentinian motif of the “bridal chamber” stands for the eschatological union of the pneumatics (the “images”) with their angels in the *pleroma*. In this world this union is anticipated in the sacramental rituals.¹⁶

The expression “co-brothers / co-children of the bridal chambers”

14 *tollite, o pueri, faces*: Catull *Carm.* 61.114. See the materials in Marquardt, *Privatleben*, 55-56.

15 See, e.g., Catull *Carm.* 62.3 and Marquardt, *Privatleben*, 52-53. —The next meal for the guests was not served before the following day at the after-celebration called *repotia* (cf. Marquardt, *ibid.*, 57). But line 2 cannot refer to the *repotia*, since both lines 1 and 3 focus on the wedding day itself (procession, wedding songs). —Morretti (“Iscrizioni,” 85) quoted texts which talk about a dinner given by the groom (Cic. *ad Quint. fr.* II 3.7; Juv. 6.202). Marquardt (*ibid.*, 53 n. 1), however, put these texts in the right light. According to the usual custom, first the banquet in the bride’s paternal house took place and afterwards the bride’s procession from there to the groom’s house.

16 E.g. Iren. 1.21.3-4; 1.13.3,6; 1.7.1,5; Clem. *Exc. ex Theod.* 63.2; 64; 65.1; 36.2; Heracleon in Orig. *CommJohn* 13.11; 10.19; *Gos. Phil.* from Nag Hammadi (NHC II 3) logia 68; 76; 87; 102; 122; 124; 126-127; 60-61; 66-67; 73; 79; 80; 82; 95; cf. also *Tri. Trac.* NHC 15 (122, 122ss); Clem. *Strom.* 3.1.1; Tert. *adv. Val.* 30-32. J.-M. Sevrin (“Les nocces spirituelles dans l’évangile selon Philippe”: *Muséon* 87 [1974], 143-93) correctly observed that the sacramental anticipation of the eschatological “bridal chamber” probably did not take place in a separate “bridal chamber” sacrament, as many scholars have thought (this possibility, however, is not totally ruled out by Sevrin 192), but rather in the rituals of anointing, baptizing, eucharist and liturgical kiss.

(see n. 3) corresponds well to the Valentinian self-description as “children of the bridal chamber” in *Gos. Phil.* logia 87; 102; 127.

If probability points in the Christian-Valentinian direction, we have to cross check whether the rest of the line can be understood in a Valentinian light. $\delta\alpha\delta\upsilon\chi\omega$ (“to illuminate with torches,” “to celebrate with torches”) denotes the celebration of the Eleusinian mysteries in Clemens Alex. *Protrep.* 2.12; Themistius *Or.* 5.71a and other texts. And Tertullian, indeed, reproaches the Valentinians for Eleusinian influence (*adv. Val.* 1).

Baptisms (λουτρά, “baths”) are celebrated by the Valentinians¹⁷ as one form of anticipation of the eschatological “bridal chamber.”¹⁸ The torches fit this well. They are not only a traditional Roman nuptial symbol: for the Valentinians the “bridal chamber” is also particularly characterized by light and the receiving of light,¹⁹ so that the torches could have a double symbolic value.

The plural in “bridal chambers” is a problem for *any* reading of the inscription, but in the Valentinian frame of reference it seems to create the *smallest* problem: In the *pleroma* the pneumatics unite themselves with their angels (plurals), which might have inspired the unprecedented plural in our epigraph.

(b) Line 2 by itself is neutral when it comes to deciding between a Christian and pagan reading. Festive dinners were of course celebrated both in pagan and Christian contexts. In a Christian framework $\epsilon\iota\lambda\alpha\pi\eta\eta$ might allude to the eucharistic meal, as it parallels $\lambda\upsilon\tau\rho\acute{\nu}$ /baptism in line 1. Christian $\epsilon\iota\lambda\alpha\pi\acute{\iota}\nu\alpha\iota$ are mentioned in Justin *Dial.* 10.1: Justin quotes the pagan defamation that “after the banquet” ($\mu\epsilon\tau\grave{\alpha}$ τὴν $\epsilon\iota\lambda\alpha\pi\acute{\iota}\nu\eta\eta$) the Christians extinguish the lights and practice improper sex. True, the epic-poetic $\epsilon\iota\lambda\alpha\pi\eta\eta$ would be only a periphrastic term for the eucharist; there is no certain evidence for a technical eucharistic usage of $\epsilon\iota\lambda\alpha\pi\eta\eta$ before the 7th century C.E.²⁰ But this does not rule out a possible eucharistic reading of our line. In a poetic text like ours, nobody with

17 Cf., e.g., *Gos. Phil.* logia 68; 76; *Iren.* 1.21.3; Clemens Alex. *Exc. ex Theod.* 78.2.

18 See Sevrin, “Les noces,” in n. 16.

19 *Gos. Phil.* logia 127; 122; for further references see Sevrin, “Les noces,” 169-71. For the torch as Roman nuptial symbol, see Marquardt, *Privatleben*, 55. For those who want to maintain the hypothesis of a separate Valentinian “bridal chamber” sacrament, it also would be possible to read $\lambda\acute{\epsilon}\kappa\tau\rho\alpha$ (“couches,” “bridal beds”) in line 1 as a direct reference to this sacrament.

20 See Raoss, “Iscrizione,” 28 n. 53.

some sense for the genre would require a technical term for the eucharist.

In itself line 2 is open for both pagan and Christian interpretations. Because of line 1, however, we have to cross check whether line 2 can be understood in a Valentinian light. This creates no problem. Eucharistic celebrations by the Valentinians are evidenced in, e.g., *Iren.* 1.13.2; *Gos. Phil.* logion 68; Clemens Alex. *Exc. ex Theod.* 82.1. Like the baptism, the eucharist anticipates the eschatological “bridal chamber” for the Valentinians.²¹

(c) The praising of Father and Son in line 3 is easily understood in a Christian frame of reference. Scholten (246-47) claims that γενέτης does not denote God in Christian texts before Gregory of Nazianz. This is not true. Jews in Egypt and Christians sang of God as γενέτης much earlier. In Egypt in the 2nd cent. B.C.E.,²² the Jewish Sibyl (III 604; cf. also III 550) called God the γενέτης of all human beings. Between 80 and 130 C.E. in Egypt,²³ the Jewish Sibyl prayed to God as “begetter of all” (παγγενέτωρ; V 328). The hymn to Christ in Sibyll. VI starts out: “I speak from my heart of the great famous son (υἰόν) of the Immortal, to whom the Most High, his begetter (γενέτης), gave a throne to possess:”

Ἀθανάτου μέγαν υἰὸν αἰίδιμον ἐκ φρενὸς αὐδῶ,
 ᾧ θρόνον ὑψιστος γενέτης παρέδωκε λαβέσθαι.

These are hexameters as in our inscription. The hymn sings about Christ’s life, his baptism in the Jordan River, and his cross. Lactantius (*Div. Inst.* 4.15.3,25; 4.13.21; 4.18.20) quotes this song; it therefore was composed some time *before* ca. 300 C.E. As the metric quality is better than in most texts of the 3rd century, we might want to date it into the 2nd century C.E., without certainty however. The geographical provenance is unknown.

As Scholten did not even try to spell out a pagan reading of line 3, we have to test this alternative on our own. Anyone would have a hard time finding pagan nuptial inscriptions in which the bride’s father-in-law was praised²⁴ or in which the groom was revered as “son.” I see, however,

21 See n. 16.

22 For place and date, see J. J. Collins, “Sibylline Oracles”: *OTP* 1 (1983), 354-55.

23 For place and date, see Collins, *ibid.*, 390-91.

24 If at all, the bride’s father could be honored (Claudianus *Fescennina* 13). The bride’s father, however, is not mentioned by our inscription: Line 3 talks about a son and not about a daughter.

the possibility of interpreting "son" as Hymen(aeus), the god of marriage, who could be sung of at weddings (e.g. Catull *Carm.* 61-62) and who was called son of the Muses (Schol. Pindar *Pythia* 4.313) or "Urania's offspring" ("*Uraniae genus*," Catull *Carm.* 61.2). The γενέτης would be Hymen's father (Apollo or Dionysus). However, even this reading has serious problems. Why is there only mention of the father and not of the mother? Even stranger would be for Hymen to be referred to only by his sonship, and not by his name or any other title. Metrically it would have been possible to say Ὑμένα (accusative of Ὑμήν) instead of υἱέα. As Hymen's name was a frequent refrain in wedding songs (e.g. Catull. *Carm.* 61-62), it would have been unusual to paraphrase this god's identity without mention of his name. Not even the father's name is given. The absolute "Father" and "Son" are much more easily understood in a Christian reading of line 3 than in a pagan one.

The last step will be again to cross check whether the line remains plausible in a Valentinian framework. The combination Father – Son – Bridal Chamber, indeed, occurs again in, e.g., *Gos. Phil.* logion 82. And in Clemens' *Excerpta ex Theodotò* (1.6-7) the Valentinians refer to the son (υἱός) as Μονογενής of the father (πατήρ), which comes at least close to the terminology of our epigraphical line. "Father," "Son" and "Monogenes" are also dealt with in the *Valentinian Exposition* Nag Hamm. XI 2.22-25, 28, 36-37. Moreover, in the liturgical fragments of a Valentinian celebration of baptism and the eucharist (Nag Hamm. XI 2.40, 43) glory is sung "to thee, the Father in the Son." "Jesus Christ" is referred to as "the Monogenes," and the Valentinian celebrants of the eucharist sing "O Father ... [Glory] be to thee through thy Son [and] thy offspring (ΜΙΣΕ, γεννητός) Jesus Christ." True, the specific term γενέτης itself does not occur in the few Greek Valentinian texts that we have. In Valentinus' Egyptian homeland, however, the Jews had been calling God γενέτης for a long time, and Christian hymnic hexameters picked up this term, as we saw above.

(d) In line 4 the pendulum swings again into the Christian direction. So far we have no single pagan wedding text in which the "flowing of truth" plays a role. A Christian reading of line 4 on the other hand runs smoothly. The "flowing of the only spring" is a common Christian motif derived from Judaism. The Septuagint calls God πηγὴν ὕδατος ζωῆς (Jer 2:13; cf. also, e.g., *Barn.* 11.2; Ezek 47; Isa 55:1). Justin quotes Jer 2:13 and interprets Christ as πηγὴν ζωῆς (Dial. 19.2).²⁵ According to 1 Cor 10:4, Israel "drank from" Christ. But we do not even have to interpret the

spring narrowly as Christ. John 4:14 leaves the identity of “spring” and Christ unsettled. According to Rev 21:6 (cf. 7:17), “he who sat upon the throne ... will give from the fountain (πηγή) of the water of life.” This spring is the site of abundance from which the life prepared by Christ flows. μόνη is easily understood in this light. And μόνη πηγή is paralleled by several Christian and Jewish texts, even in connection with ἀλήθεια (“truth”) as in our epigraphical line.²⁶

We have to ask our Valentinian cross-check question again. Like line 3, line 4 represents common Christian motifs and therefore is possible also as a Valentinian verse if line 1 suggests a Valentinian reading of the whole poem. It was characteristic of the Valentinians to use common Christian language (“*similia enim loquentes fidelibus*” Iren. 3.17.4; “*communem fidem adfirmant*” Tert. adv. Val. 1).

Again, the poetic, metric form fits well with Valentinus’ style. Even Ionic dialect (ἀληθείη) is echoed,²⁷ just as in Valentinus’ only preserved poetic fragment (Hipp. ref. 6.37.6-8) where an ionic form (αἴθηρης) can be found.

For the Valentinians, ἀλήθεια “existed since the beginning” (Gos. Phil. logion 16). It is nutrition for eternal life given by Jesus (93). It can be interpreted christologically (47), and the “bridal chamber” is for those who have the ἀλήθεια (110 + 73; 127; 123-125). More than six motifs of our poem, ἀλήθεια, “co(children) of the bridal chambers,” water (“baths,” “spring,” “flowing”), fire and light (“to illuminate with torches”), “Father,” and “Son,” are found again in logia 66-67 (“It is from water and fire and light that the child of the bridal chamber [came into being] ... Truth did not come into the world naked ... The bridal chamber and the image must enter through the image into the truth: this is the restoration. Not only must those who produce the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit do so ...”).

To sum up the Christian reading of the marble epigraph: In the first person a host (line 1), opening his or her rooms (line 2) for Christian ritu-

25 In Justin’s version of the OT text God talks about the “living spring” in the third person; αὐτόν, therefore, only can denote Christ. —In the previous sentence Justin talks about τὸ βάπτισμα τὸ τῆς ζωῆς (19.2), which is also called λουτρόν in 13.1; 14.1. Justin’s combination of βάπτισμα/λουτρόν and Christ-πηγή parallels our inscription.

26 Eriphanus *Haer.* GCS 25, 157.22-23: ἥτις μόνη ἐστὶ πηγὴ σωτηρίας καὶ πίστις ἀληθείας. Athanasius *Epist. ad Afros episcopos* PG 26.1033.12-13: καταλείψαντες τὴν μόνην πηγὴν τοῦ ζῶντος ὕδατος. Cf. also Philo *vit. Mos.* 1.48.8 (ed. Cohn): λόγον, ὃς μόνος ἐστὶν ἀρετῶν ἀρχὴ τε καὶ πηγή; Athanasius *Contra Sabellianos* PG 28.97.30ss; PsOrigenes *Fragmenta in Psalmos* 58.17,18 (ed. Pitra).

27 Cf. Guarducci (“Valentiniani”), 181; ἀληθείη as in Homer.

als, speaks.²⁸ At the host's residence, the congregation regularly celebrates baptisms (line 1) and looks forward to the eucharistic meals afterwards (line 2), singing praise to the Father and the Son (line 3). When and where the rituals are celebrated, there is "flowing of the only spring and of the truth" (line 4), the speaker hopes. The image of flowing at the end fits well with the baptismal baths at the beginning of the poem.

The most logical conclusion is that the epigraph was displayed in the room where the baptisms took place. The eucharists were celebrated in this room and/or in adjacent accommodations of the same house, with line 2 b using the plural. The inscription fits Justin's description (*Apol.* I 61; 65), according to which Christian eucharists were celebrated *after* the baptismal rituals and often in *different* accommodations, since the baptisms required a locality with a water supply.

The Valentinian character is suggested by verse 1, and the following lines can be easily understood in a Valentinian frame of reference. Valentinians celebrated the sacraments as anticipations of the eschatological unions ("bridal chamber") of the pneumatics with their angels.

II.

The δέ in line 1 does not suggest that the four verses once were part of a larger poem. The letter δ was inserted for poetic reasons to avoid an hiatus between the two vowels α and ε. Also epigrams by Pittacus and Timon, e.g., start out with an unexpected δέ, without reference to a previous context (Μεγαρεῖς δὲ φεῦγε πάντας· εἰσὶ γὰρ πικροί: *Anthologia Graeca*, ed. H. Beckby, 11.440; 11.296). Likewise in Homer *Od.* 4.400, a story is begun with δέ.

On our marble slab clearly neither a previous nor a subsequent text was inscribed. Except for occasional abrasions, the slab's upper edge runs parallel to the first row of letters. More importantly, the free space between the upper edge and this first row equals the height of two epi-

28 The dative ἐμοί in line 1 can be interpreted as "for me," "in my interest," "to my delight" (*dativus commodi*) or as *dativus ethicus*. The latter denotes that a speaker is mentally and emotionally involved in the action, i.e. the baptisms, that he or she talks about. Cf., e.g., R. Kühner – B. Gerth, *Ausführliche Grammatik der griechischen Sprache: Satzlehre*, I (Hannover: Hahnsche Buchhandlung, 4th ed. 1955), 423 with numerous examples where μοι is used in this way. —ἐμοί hardly indicates that the speaker talks about his or her own baptism. The end of line 2 strongly advocates that a host is speaking. —ἡμέτερος can stand for ἐμός from Homer's time to the third century C.E. (Liddell - Scott, *s.v.*).

graphical lines, i.e. the height of two rows of letters plus the free space between these two rows. We thus observe the result of a stone-mason's calculations, and the preserved upper edge of the slab is more or less identical with the upper edge that the stone-mason had in his hands. No previous text has broken off.

The same is true about the end of the epigraph. The margin below the last row of letters is more than 25 percent higher than the said upper margin. This layout makes it highly improbable that our four verses were followed by more text. Taking the extant epigraphical evidence into account, usually big spaces were not left in between paragraphs. Space was expensive, especially on marble slabs which had to be imported to Rome. In Rome therefore marble was used much less often for inscriptions than at other places such as Greece.²⁹

Scholten's speculations after all are unfounded. He objected (253 n. 43) that our epigraph could be "the rest of a bigger inscription" and that this larger text could have been not only a pagan nuptial, but alternatively also a funereal epigraph (without specifying the details of this other reading either). No, our inscription represents a rounded-off unit, without conventional grave inscription formulas, without names.

In spite of the handicap that no internal clue hints at a funereal interpretation, let us hypothesize for a moment that external evidence pointed into this direction. Let us hypothesize that the epigraph was attached to a mausoleum and not to a suburban house at the Via Latina, as we concluded above. How could the epigraph be understood on the basis of this assumption? The implied author of the inscription would be a deceased person speaking about his or her own funeral: "Co(brothers) carry torches to beds of bridal chambers for me." True, torches are not only a symbol of the wedding, but of the funeral as well.³⁰ But an explicit nuptial motif (here *παστῶν*) usually is absent in burial contexts. Only in one text (Herodas 4.56) is there a *question* whether or not the term *παστός* could mean "shrine." In which 2nd century frame of reference would it be possible to state that death gave access to "beds of bridal chambers?" On the basis of a funereal hypothesis, again the Valentinian perspective would give possible meaning to this line—if at all.

What would *ἔνθα* mean in line 4? Where and when is there "flowing of the only spring and of the truth" in a funereal context? *ἔνθα* could

29 Cf., e.g., Meyer, *Epigraphik*, 17, 84. Already Moretti ("Iscrizioni," 83) observed correctly that parts of the slab's original *lower* edge are also preserved.

30 Cf., e.g., Marquardt, *Privatleben*, 55, 343-45.

refer back to the "beds of bridal chambers" in line 1, and then again only a Valentinian reading of verse 4 would be plausible to some extent, with a specific funereal aspect, however, missing in this line.

The "banquets" in line 2 could be interpreted as the funeral repast and the annual meals at the grave. The tomb would be referred to as "our rooms."³¹ But why would anybody "hunger" for these repasts, as line 2 states? A hunger for non-funereal, eucharistic meals in a suburban house ("in our rooms") makes much more sense.

At the pagan funeral the *deceased* was praised,³² not the "Father" and the "Son." Whoever wants to maintain a funereal hypothesis, probably has to admit that a Christian reading of line 3 remains the most probable one, and that a specific funereal aspect is absent in this verse.

In conclusion, the epigraph was a Valentinian inscription at the Via Latina. Rather than at a burial site, it was displayed in a suburban house where Valentinians celebrated sacramental rituals. Only this latter interpretation allows a coherent understanding of all lines, running into the least number of difficulties compared to the other alternatives.

III.

The Valentinian congregation at the suburban section of the Via Latina adds to the number of known second-century Valentinian groups in Rome—if it was not identical with one of them. These Roman Valentinian groups gathered around teachers such as Valentinus, Heracleon, Ptolemaios and Florinus.³³

Our epigraph exemplifies what has been shown from other sources: Early Christianity in Rome consisted of "minorities," i.e. of various house churches with different theological orientations. Second-century Rome saw: Christian groups following Valentinian, Marcionite, Carpocratian, Theodotian, Modalistic, Montanist, or Quartodecimanian teachings; Cerdo-followers; house churches of (what was only later called) "orthodox" faith; a Jewish Christian circle which still observed the Torah; groups with a logos-theology that was too complicated for less educated Christians; circles which believed in the millennium and others which did not.³⁴

31 Cf., e.g., Marquardt, *Privatleben*, 378-85, 369. For the tomb as "domus" cf., e.g., CIL III 2165; 3171; V 2255; VIII 7541; 8751; 9949.

32 Cf., e.g., Marquardt, *Privatleben*, 352, 357-60.

33 See Lampe, *Die stadtrömischen Christen*, 251-68.

34 For this multicolored spectrum, see Lampe, *ibid.*, 316-18, 321-24, 455.

All these groups met in private homes.³⁵ There was no local center for Roman Christianity. The individual house churches, scattered over the city, were loosely connected.³⁶ Some sent portions of their eucharists to other Christian islands in town to express church unity with them. Also letters were sent between the Christian groups in the city.³⁷ Communication with persons or congregations *outside* of Rome often was coordinated among the groups. As a result, outsiders could perceive the various Roman house churches as "the Roman church."³⁸ A monarchical bishop, however, who oversaw at least the "orthodox" house churches in the city, did not come into existence before the second half of the second century. Earlier, the various house churches were led solely by their own presbyters,³⁹ who met only occasionally at conventions on a level above the local house church.⁴⁰

On the whole, the various Christian groups in town tolerated each other. With few exceptions,⁴¹ no Christian group in town labelled another as heretical before the last decade of the second century. It was not until bishop Victor (ca. 189 – 199 C.E.) that house churches, which thought of themselves as orthodox, started to excommunicate other groups on a larger scale. Victor cut the ties to the Quartodecimanians, Montanists, Theodotians—and to the Valentinians.⁴²

The Valentinians themselves always emphasized their feeling of unity with the other "psychic" Christians. For "pneumatic" Valentinians, the "psychic" understanding of the Christian faith was not wrong, it

35 See *ibid.*, 306-20.

36 See *ibid.*, 317.

37 See *ibid.*, 324-35, 339.

38 See *ibid.*, 335-36.

39 See *ibid.*, 334-45.

40 See the material in Lampe, *ibid.*, 338-39.

41 See Lampe, *ibid.*, 330-32, 456. Marcion and his adherents were excluded from church community with the other Christian groups in town in the 140s C.E. Cerdo was not excommunicated but withdrew *himself* from this community in the 130s. The circle of Torah-observing Jewish Christians isolated itself in order to maintain its purity. For the relationship between Justin's group and the Valentinians, see n. 42.

42 See Lampe, *ibid.*, 324-34. For the Valentinians, see *ibid.*, 327-29. Irenaeus had called Victor's attention to the danger of Florinus' convictions. The advocates of the logos-theology (Justin, Irenaeus) were the first to fight the Valentinians. Justin attacked the Valentinians not in his *Apology* but in his later *Dialogue* (35.5-6), assuring that his own house church had no sense of community with Valentinians. However, Justin's critical attitude does not seem to have infected other house churches in Rome. Even Victor still expressed church unity with Florinus in his first years of office, until Irenaeus alerted him of the Valentinian "heresy."

only was deepened in the esoteric Valentinian gatherings.⁴³ Valentinians were eager to stress the continuity between the normal Christians' faith and their own. The Valentinian Roman teacher Ptolemaios used common Christian language in his letter to the lady Flora.⁴⁴ Our Valentinian inscription in lines 3 and 4 picks up common Christian motifs. The Valentinian "minorities" hated the label "Valentinian," which was attached to them by outsiders.⁴⁵ They did not want to be anything other than Christians.

Plate I

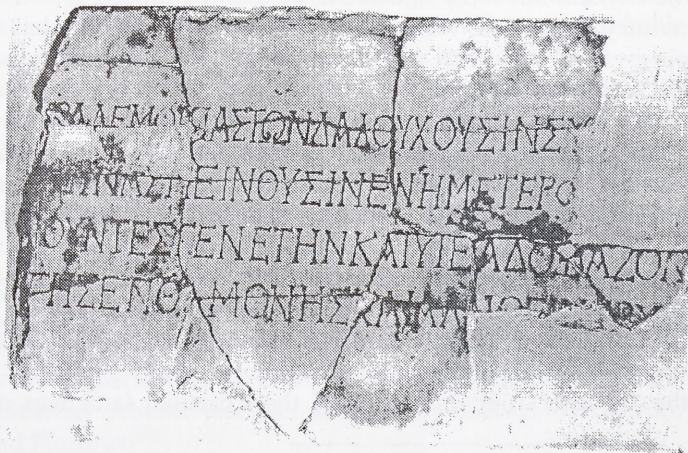
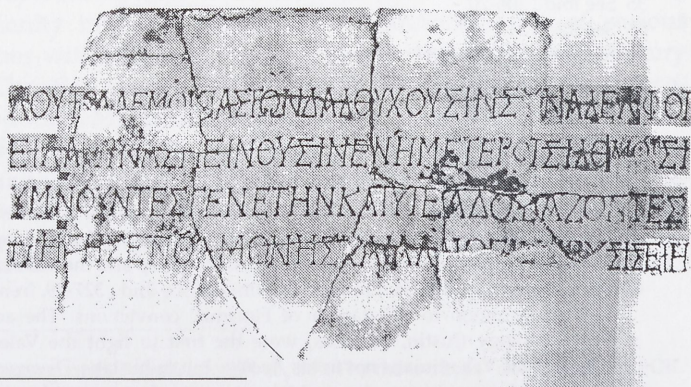


Plate II



43 See Lampe, *ibid.*, 325-29, 255-56.

44 See *ibid.*, 256.

45 See *ibid.*, 326, n. 76.