Inscriptiones Pseudocelticae. Wrong and premature ascriptions of inscriptions as Celtic*

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Abstract

This article continues, i.e. expands and corrects, my contribution to the proceedings of the 3rd Linzer Eisenzeitgespräche (Stifter 2009). In the paper from two years ago I discussed several inscriptions, found at sites across Austria, that had sometimes or frequently been claimed to contain Celtic 'linguistic' material. The conclusion of my study was that only one of the texts, the tile from Grafenstein in Carinthia (L-95), was authentically Celtic in language; another one, a fragment of a beaker from the Frauenberg near Leibnitz in Styria, belonged to the late La Tène period, but the two Venetic letters on it were not sufficient to support a Celtic character of the inscription (for the Frauenberg beaker, see also Stifter 2010: 237–239). The remaining two texts, the so-called 'writing tablet' from the Dürrnberg and the plate inscribed in the so-called Noric script from the Magdalensberg, will be subjected to a more detailed study in the present paper. This article will present additions and new insights concerning the texts, as well as necessary corrections to my previous study. In addition to this, the focus will shift slightly from the plain analysis of the texts to the elucidation of the interpretative backgrounds or environments which led previous scholars to believe that some of those texts were Celtic. In this context, 'Celtic' does not refer to their linguistically substantiated interpretation, but rather to the loose assignment of the inscriptions and of the objects on which they are engraved to a Celtic cultural context. Nevertheless, despite the prevalent vagueness of these ascriptions, subsequently more consequential conclusion were drawn from them than were warranted.

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Zusammenfassung

Dieser Beitrag ergänzt und erweitert denjenigen zu den Akten der 3. Linzer Eisenzeitgespräche (Stifter 2009). Damals behandelte ich mehrere Inschriften von unterschiedlichen Fundorten in Österreich, die manchmal oder öfters als Zeugnisse keltischer Sprache in Anspruch genommen wurden. Zwei dieser Texte, das sogenannte "Schreibtäfelchen" vom Dürrnberg und der im sogenannten norischen Alphabet beschriftete Teller vom Magdalensberg werden im vorliegenden Aufsatz einer eingehenderen Untersuchung unterzogen. Zusätzlich zu neuen Erkenntnissen über diese Texte werden auch einige Korrekturen der Vorgängerstudie vorgenommen. Zudem wird sich der Blickwinkel von einer reinen Analyse der Texte auf den Versuch der Erhellung des Forschungsumfelds ausweiten, in dem frühere Forscher diese Texte dem "Keltischen" zuweisen konnten. In diesem Zusammenhang bezieht sich der Begriff "keltisch" nicht auf die linguistisch abgesicherte Deutung der Texte, sondern auf die recht lockere Zuweisung der Inschriften und Inschriftenträger an eine keltische Kultur. Trotz der vorherrschenden Vagheit dieser Zuweisungen konnten jedoch in Einzelfällen folgenreichere Schlüsse daraus gezogen werden.

1. The 'writing tablet' from the Dürrnberg

The so-called 'writing tablet' from the Dürrnberg (ill. 1) was discovered in spring 1982 on the site of prehistoric workshops in the Ramsautal at the Dürrnberg above Hallein, Salzburg during emergency excavations. Because of the humidity of the location, the upper layers of the soil had to be pushed aside by a caterpillar. It was inside this heap of earth, and therefore in a disturbed archaeological context, that the object was found (Moosleitner & Zeller 1982: 30; Zeller 1984: 62–63, 77; Zeller 1988: 11). While a good copy of the object is on display at the Keltenmuseum Hallein, the original is kept in the archives of the Salzburg Museum in the town of Salzburg.

The object is remarkable in several respects. Apart from a few similar uninscribed pieces found in its company, its light, ochre clay has no parallel among the usual dark-gray La-Tène pottery on the Dürrnberg. The excavators Fritz Moosleitner and Kurt Zeller interpreted the object as the fragment of a writing tablet, that is, an object covered on one side by a thin layer of wax into which letters could be inscribed with a pointed stylus. A clay object of this kind, however, has no known parallel (Krämer 1984); the closest 'parallel' – if one may use the word parallel in this context at all



Ill. 1:The 'writing tablet' from the Dürrnberg (copyright Salzburg Museum)

– is the early Etruscan writing tablet from Marsiliana made of ivory (pers. comm. Bruno Reiterer). Consequently, the function of the object still remains to be determined.

On one side, the object bears fine scratches and marks that are hard to recognise with the naked eye. Studied under the microscope, it emerges beyond doubt that these scratches are deliberate and were meant to be writing. Clemens Eibner (pers. comm.) was the first at the excavations to suggest that the letters be read as Greek. In fact, some of the letters do bear a superficial resemblance to Greek writing. This suggestion has been repeated several times in the literature (Moosleitner & Zeller 1982: 30; Zeller 1984: 62-63, 77; Zeller 1988: 11; Zeidler 2003: 96. Meid 1996: 319 mentions the possibility that the writing is in Latin cursive), although none of these authors was able to come up with a reading. In my own contribution (Stifter 2009: 363), I spoke with unwarranted confidence about a possible late imperial Greek reading (Stifter 2009: 363), but, as will emerge below, this suggestion was premature and must be withdrawn.

The accompanying finds provided the basis for dating the object to the La Tène period: Moosleitner & Zeller (1982: 30) speak of the 3rd-2nd centuries, Pauli (1986: 272) of the 4th-2nd centuries, Zeller (1988: 11) of the 4th-3rd centuries B.C. The explanation on the showcase in the Keltenmuseum in Hallein, presumably written by Kurt Zeller, is more precise. It dates the find to the end of the 3rd century B.C. If this dating were correct, the inscription would contain the earliest text in the Greek alphabet north of the Alps. However, the presence of crosses at the beginning and the end of the text were the cause of much thought and headache already for the excavators (pers. comm. Clemens Eibner), and attention was also drawn to the crosses by Wolfgang Krämer (1984: 294) who remarked that the characteristics of the script evoked the Middle Ages rather than antiquity. Krämer cited a letter by the renowned palaeographer Bernhard Bischoff who, working only with an imperfect drawing of the inscription, thought that the writing style could be as late as the 10th-12th centuries. Guided by the assumption (wrong as it turned out) that the writing was late imperial Greek cursive script, I proposed a date in late antiquity (Stifter 2009: 363).

Kurt Zeller's statement (in 1984: 62–63) summarises conveniently the archaeologists' view of the cultural context of the object, a view expressed, with varying wording, also in other publications:

"Die Fundstelle im Bereich von Gewerbebauten ist sicher nicht zufällig, denn für Warenlisten und Handelsverträge etc.hatte die Schrift sicher die größte Bedeutung.

Über die Verwendung von Schrifttafeln bei den späten Kelten Galliens sind wir gut durch Cäsar (Bell. gall.I 29) unterrichtet, [...].

Für eine Ausstrahlung des griechischen Schriftgebrauches über Gallien und den helvetischen Raum hinaus weiter mehr nach Osten gab es bisher keine Zeugnisse, sodaß unsere Inschrift zweifellos das bisher älteste Schriftdokument aus dem Gebiet nördlich der Alpen darstellt."

The readers are left with the task to fill in the interpretative gaps, where the authors remained inexplicit or non-committal, with their own interpretations. The impression is created that the inscription on the Dürrnberg tablet contains the business notes of a local trader, written in Greek letters and thereby being the earliest piece of evidence for use of the Greek alphabet north of the Alps. The readers are induced to believe that the art of writing had been imported to the Alpine region in connection with long-distance trade, and that Greek literacy had been embraced by the local population for commercial purposes.

However, a written tradition a priori requires that the knowledge of writing be distributed among a considerable number of persons using it - a distribution that would normally be expected to have left its traces elsewhere in the archaeological record. Even though the archaeologists nowhere say explicitly that the inscription contains a Celtic-language text, it is natural to interpret their words in this manner. At any rate, this is what Wolfgang Meid does. He mentions the Dürrnberg tablet twice, every time briefly and sceptically. In a volume devoted mainly to archaeology (1996: 308-309), he speaks about a "mögliche keltische Inschrift". Since he was not able to read it, he classes it as "nicht aussagekräftig" for his search for written remains of Alpine Celtic. He nevertheless accepts the object as proof for the knowledge of writing in the northern Alps during the La Tène period. In the appendix to the article (1996: 319), published together with the main text of the article, but apparently written two or three years after it and after he had had the opportunity to study the object, Meid voices even graver doubts about

the Celtic character of the text, but refrains from dismissing it from the discourse altogether. Two years later, he mentions the inscription again in a linguistic journal (1998: 23). He confines himself to the general formulation: "Eine andere als keltisch vermutete Inschrift auf einem Tonfragment vom Dürrnberg ist dubios." Unfortunately, he does not specify the basis of his doubts. It can be surmised that the only thing that will linger in the memory of the occasional reader will be the vague notional connection between the Dürrnberg tablet and the label 'Celtic'.

Jürgen Zeidler mentions the Dürrnberg tablet in the context of other – reliable – early evidence for writing in the Alpine region (2003: 96). Following Zeller, he dates the difficult piece to the 4th or 3rd centuries B.C., but in parenthesis he adds Heiner Eichner's unpublished opinion that the inscription is Christian in character. However, the broader context of Zeidler's article doubtlessly reinforces the impression that the inscription belongs to the La Tène period and therefore is Celtic.

Even though the inscription was studied by many scholars over the first 25 years after its discovery, noone succeeded in presenting a reading of the text, not even of isolated letters. In Stifter (2009: 363), I published a partially deciphered Greek reading. Yet since this proposal fell short of a full understanding of the inscription, I felt the need to start a new attempt at it in June 2010. The curators at the Salzburg Museum kindly put the tablet at my disposal for an indepth investigation. With the combined expertise of the epigraphers Fritz Mitthof and Hans Taeuber, both from the Department of Ancient History, Papyrology and Epigraphics of the University of Vienna, it was soon realised that the previous interpretation of the text as orthographically Greek had been erroneous. Instead, after a long and exhausting session we concluded that the script was not late Greek cursive, but late Roman cursive script ('younger Roman cursive'). Nevertheless, several questions remained which could not be resolved with a standard microscope, let alone by staring at the scratches with the naked eyes. Therefore I contacted Alicona Imaging in Grambach near Graz (http://www.alicona.com). This company, which specialises in industrial applications, possesses powerful 3D-microscopes that permit surface measurement in

the range of nanometres. I had the most problematic sections of the inscription scanned under such a microscope. The examination did indeed help to clarify most of the issues raised by the inscription and confirmed the new analysis of the writing style as belonging to the younger Roman cursive script.

The palaeographic analysis will be explained in much greater depth in a forthcoming book (Stifter forthc.); here it shall suffice to present the main findings. Comparison with the cursive writing style on a range of other Roman inscriptions from various centuries leads to a quite clear-cut result: those letters on the Dürrnberg tablet which exhibit chronologically significant palaeographic variation find no parallels before the 2nd century A.D., with the best parallels appearing only in the 4th century (I refer to the specimens especially of the letters e, i and n in Thompson 1912: 335–337). This chronology finds support in the crosses which, used as textual markers for the beginning and end of texts, start appearing in the late 4th century in Latin texts (pers. comm. Fritz Mitthof and Hans Taeuber). Although they are derived from Christian symbolism, they bear no religious significance as such, but rather function much like modern punctuation. Nevertheless, the proposed date is far from definitive. It rather serves to point in the general chronological direction, in particular with the thermoluminescence study still pending.

It is particularly striking that the writing style is not that of ordinary graffiti, engraved with a stylus or a similar object into soft clay or hard-burned pottery, but that it instead imitates the style typical of writing in ink, executed on papyrus with pen or brush. This is particularly clear in the case of the e's, the ligatured i's, and the n. Ligature strokes make sense for the fluid transition from one letter to the next when writing with ink. When scratching into burned clay, they, like all curves and bends, require an unreasonable as well as unnecessary effort. This means that the scribe of the Dürrnberg tablet, who - to judge by the regularity of the incisions - seems to have had experience in scratching graffiti onto pottery, used the letter shapes of late antique book writing, not those typically encountered on ordinary instrumenta domestica. I cannot say what the palaeographic significance of this observation is.



Ill. 2: The inscription on the Dürrnberg tablet

I do not claim that the following reading and interpretation represent the final word on this inscription, but what follows is an internally coherent analysis and the most probable one under the current circumstances. The inscription can be read †esiugieni† (see ill. 2). The fourth sign is somewhat uncertain; theoretically, it could also be l, i.e. †eslugieni†. No palaeographic support could be found for other readings, however. Both readings are linguistically isolated in the epigraphy and philology of antiquity. The analytic approach must therefore be deductive: a priori, the language of a text written in the Roman alphabet in the late-antique western part of the Roman Empire should be assumed to be Latin. Since neither reading is even faintly reminiscent of a known Latin word, however, the next best assumption is that the text contains a Latinised personal name from another language. Under this assumption, the final -i finds a natural interpretation as genitive singular of a male name. In a late-antique inscription, influence from Vulgar Latin or Early Romance phonology may also be expected. All these considerations taken together lead to forms which can be best explained with recourse to Celtic anthroponomy.

In the case of *esiugieni*, which is the more likely reading, the name is reminiscent of the Gaulish personal name *Esugeno* (dat.). The name can be translated as 'conceived by (the god) (A)Esus' (once attested in Tullum, prov. Belgica, modern Toul; CIL 13, 4674). This analysis implies that the short e of the third syllable was accented (contrary to the rules of Latin accentuation) and had been subjected to the Vulgar Latin diphthongisation rule e > ie (Lausberg 1969: 156–157). This change occurred in the $3^{\rm rd}$ or $4^{\rm th}$ centuries A.D., the period from which the Dürrnberg inscription probably dates. I have no explanation for the sequence iu in the second syllable where simple u would be expected, however. Personal names containing the

element (a)esu-, probably identical with the Celtic theonym (A)esus (for the evidence for this ancient Celtic god see Hofeneder 2008, in particular pp. 321–323), are attested in great number from Britain over the Belgian, Gaulish and Germanic provinces to Noricum. The use of the theophoric personal name (A)Esugenos* in a late-antique Christian context is surprising, but the meaning of the name may have been forgotten or dimly remembered at this time (it should be noted that the synchronic, pragmatic meaning of a name is practically always independent of the diachronic and etymological meanings of its constituent parts).

If the text is to be read as *eslugieni*, the initial vowel could be the prothetic vowel i-/e- which appears in Vulgar Latin by the $2^{\rm nd}$ century A.D. before word-initial clusters of s + consonant (Lausberg 1967: 26–28). The $u = /\bar{u}$ / could be the Late Gaulish descendant of the Proto-Celtic diphthong * $o\mu$. In that manner, the Proto-Celtic construct *slougiijos can be extracted as the derivational core of the name, to which the Latin onomastic suffix - $\bar{e}nus$ has been added. *slougiijos can be analysed as a derived adjective of Proto-Celtic *slougos 'retinue, army, troop' (cp. Gaul. Catuslougi 'battle-hosts', OIr. slúag 'host', MW llu 'host'). While being morphologically acceptable, there is a semantic catch to this explanation: *slougos 'retinue, army, troop' is not otherwise attested in Celtic anthroponomy.

Whichever solution one prefers, the Celtic character of the name comes as a surprise. Celtic personal names, mostly those of women, disappear and reappear cyclically at the interval of a few generations in the epigraphic record of Noricum. This fashion seems to have persisted until the end of the Severan period (235) A.D.). After that, local names become very rare (pers. comm. Ingrid Weber-Hiden). This situation is different from that which obtained in neighbouring Pannonia where the vernacular naming tradition dies out in the 2nd century (thus Ingrid Weber-Hiden; slightly differently Meid 2005: 327-330). However, the lack of evidence could also be the result of the sharp decline in the production of inscriptions from the middle of the 3rd century onwards, itself a consequence of the economic decline of that period. The small overall number of inscriptions from after that date therefore does not really allow one to make reliable inferences about the relative distribution of Roman vs. vernacular names (pers. comm. Ingrid Weber-Hiden). It is quite possible that in remote or unaccessible areas, as the Dürrnberg may have been, vernacular naming traditions survived longer than in regions that were better connected with Romanised centres. However, the survival of Celtic naming traditions into the 4th century does not say anything about the survival of Celtic languages at the same time. Naming fashions are not intrinsically connected with the fates of languages. Furthermore, it must be remembered that both suggested interpretations of the Dürrnberg tablet suggest Celtic names that have undergone Vulgar Latin sound changes.

When the excavators and previous commentators put the tablet into a Celtic context (however vaguely defined), this ascription was a construct based on the archaeological context and on the place of discovery, Dürrnberg. It ignored the crosses framing the text and the fact that the colour of the object differs significantly from the ordinary La Tène pottery found on the Dürrnberg. The possibility had not been considered that an object from a younger phase had slipped into a La Tène stratum by accident (cp. Krämer 1984: 294). This was actually the case with other medieval and early modern objects at the same excavation (pers. comm. Bruno Reiterer). But while it seems that obviously anachronistic objects were immediately sorted out from the complex and were later forgotten, this was not the case with the ochre tablet whose chronological foreignness was not immediately recognised. This matter demonstrates that no conclusions, let alone far-ranging ones, should be drawn from inscriptions until a plausible palaeographic analysis (which admittedly was very difficult for this text), a coherent reading and a linguistic analysis have been made. It was a far-ranging conclusion to place the tablet in the context of longdistance cultural contacts of the ancient Dürrnbergers and to argue for the use of writing in the early salt trade. Literacy has various implications, e.g. that its use in trade relationships makes sense only when several participants in the trade rely on written documentation. However, if it were as old as alleged, the Dürrnberg tablet would be completely isolated in time and space - contrary to the implicational expectations.

The Dürrnberg tablet is not evidence for writing by Celts in the northern Alpine region in the La Tène period. Nevertheless, a Celtic interpretation of the inscription has come in through the back door. The new tentative ascription of the text of the tablet to a Celtic cultural background is derived from a thorough textual analysis, not from external, circumstantial evidence as with the previous interpretations. At the same time, this interpretation throws up new questions and creates new problems. First, I would not have expected a vernacular non-Latin name to show up as late as the 4th century A.D. in this region. Second, unless my interpretation is invalidated by another study, the usual historical and linguistic picture of the early and thorough romanisation of the province of Noricum may need revision. And finally, the local history of the Dürrnberg and Hallein will need revision because it has been a doctrine so far that the prehistoric settlement on the Dürrnberg and the local mining for salt ended with the annexation of the kingdom of Noricum to the Roman Empire under the Emperor Augustus. The present object may indicate that the occupation of the site continued on at least into late antiquity, and previous datings of other objects may require revision in this light.

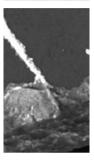
2. Rudolf Eggers's so-called 'Noric' inscriptions on a plate from the Magdalensberg

In my contribution to the 3rd Linzer Eisenzeitgespräche, I argued that a series of short graffiti found in or near the Magdalensberg in Carinthia which were regarded by Rudolf Egger as forming part of a corpus of texts written in a specifically 'Noric' alphabet must actually be regarded as a figment of the excavator's imagination (Stifter 2009: 363–367). Instead, these short texts that usually consist of not more than a single character are either part of the Roman literate culture or should be regarded as para-literate, i.e. the attempt of non-literate people to imitate writing. This judgement still holds true in its original formulation.

Regarding the only long text in the collection ('long' in a very relative meaning of the word), i.e. the fragment of a terra-sigillata plate with two graffiti of four and seven characters (Egger 1959: 135–139; 1968), I pointed out that the letters do not belong to a recognised family of alphabets, that they are clumsily executed, and that the inscription is isolated – all matters which







Ill. 3: A section of the plate from the Magdalensberg

Ill. 4: Detail of a notch Ill. 5: Detail of a notch

count against the inscription's authenticity. While the epigraphic and palaeographic evidence was clearly indicative of a fake, I lacked a material proof then that was less based on subjective interpretation and evaluation. I have this now. During a visit to the Magdalensberg in August 2010, Eleni Schindler-Kaudelka drew my attention to two sections on the broken plate where hastae of the letters had been drawn beyond the margin of the surface. If the graffiti were old and original, the scratches would be expected to thin out where the surface of the terra sigillata had broken away, but for a tiny length the grooves continue deep into the rough surface of the breakline, ending in distinct notches (see ills. 3–5). This is only possible if the graffiti had been scratched into the plate after it had been broken. Given that it would seem rather pointless to write possessor marks on a broken plate, combined with all the other, previously-noted oddities concerning the inscription, it must be concluded that the graffiti were scratched into the plate not in antiquity, but in modern times. It remains therefore my conviction that Rudolf Egger's 'Noric' inscription on the fragment of a terra-sigillata plate from the Magdalensberg is a fake, perhaps part of a practical joke played on him by some members of his excavation team in 1957.

This is not the first time that such a thing had happened to Egger. More than thirty years previously, one of the lay workers excavating a Celtic hill-top settlement on the Maria Saalerberg in Carinthia, a man called Herwig Merzinger, the member of an Alpine ranger regiment that had been dispatched to assist in the excavations, had planted a faked bone awl into which a sequence of random runic letters had been incised. Egger took the authenticity of the piece for granted and understood the text, which he read as xsetos, as the name of the alleged prehistoric proprietor of the awl (Egger 1927: 1-2). The inscription received a lot of attention from runologists over the following years, for if authentic, the Maria Saalerberg inscription would have been the earliest known runic text (see Mees 2000). Ultimately, the affair was not resolved because of any scholarly doubts concerning the authenticity of the nonsensical inscription, but because pangs of conscience started to torment the falsifier and eventually made him confess his deed at the Landesarchiv (provincial archive) of Carinthia (Pittioni 1937 and Gangl 1937; the story is presented in a slightly more favourable light in Egger 1936: 88-89; 91). In any case, Egger was part of a tradition in which faked inscriptions were a means of playing practical jokes on

archaeologists. This – and not an autochthonous ancient writing tradition – is the cultural context of the Magdalensberg plate. It was a well-known trait of his character that Rudolf Egger wanted to discover unusual inscriptions, so some of his students evidently did him the favour. He was too ready to discover a local Celtic writing system of his own to be restrained by a sober assessment of the facts.

Mutatis mutandis, everybody working in historical philology or adjacent fields may run the risk of stepping into comparable pitfalls. When working with texts like inscriptions, which by their very nature are difficult and problematic, it is imperative to approach the material with the utmost caution and reservation lest one fall victim to one's subconscious desires for exciting and sellable research results. Until a plausible

and consistent palaeographic analysis, a coherent reading and a consistent linguistic analysis have been made, conclusions, let alone far-reaching ones, should not be drawn from single inscriptions. The facts must be assessed carefully, and the results must be presented cautiously. As soon as opinions have entered the discourse - or even opinion-free phrases and expressions which may have been thrown onto the academic stage only to inflate an otherwise thin material report –, they can develop lives of their own, lives that draw their substance from the uncritical acceptance of received historiography, when instead the challenge is always to form opinions of their own, based on the inspection and reevaluation of the facts. These established opinions or false canons are the interpretative brambles in which we may find ourselves entangled.

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