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THE INTERPRETATION OF *SOUXTUM* AT *TAB. VINDOL. II.301.3*

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THE INTERPRETATION OF *SOUXTUM* AT *TAB. VINDOL. II.301.3*

A major problem in recently published Vindolanda writing-tablets concerns the interpretation of *souxtum* (*saturnalicium*) at *Tab. Vindol. II.301.3*:

souxtum saturnalicium
(asses) *iiii aut seks rogo frater*
explices

The reading *souxtum* is absolutely certain, apart from the remote possibility that the *o* might be read as *e*. *Souxtum* would not as it stands seem to be a Latin term. Latin did not have an *ou*-diphthong at this period, and the combination *xt* is unusual, though not without parallel.

I believe however that *souxtum* is a Latin word, with a Celticised spelling. By making two substitutions, from Celtic (Gaulish) spelling to Latin, one arrives at a Latin term which fits the context perfectly.

(1) The combination *xt* (where *x* probably represents a velar fricative) is common in Gaulish.¹ Gaulish *xt* sometimes corresponds to *pt* elsewhere in Indo-European (including Latin): e.g. the ordinal *sextametos* ‘seventh’ at La Graufesenque = Lat. *septimus*, I.E. **sept-*.² Moreover the one certain manifestation of substrate (Gaulish) phonetic influence on the Latin of Gaul lies in the substitution in various lexical items of *xt* for *pt* and *xs* for *ps*: e.g. *captiuus* > **kaxtiuus* > Fr. *chétif*, *capsa* > **kaxsa* > Fr. *caisse*, *paraxsidi* < *paropsides* at La Graufesenque.³ The possibility therefore arises that a Celticising *xt* has been substituted for Lat. *pt* (or indeed *ps*).

(2) In Gaulish orthography there is some alternation between *ou*, *eu*, *u* and *o*,⁴ and moreover in Gaulish texts written in the Greek alphabet *ou* represents *u*.⁵

If we substitute *pt* for *xt* and *u* for *ou* we get *suptum*, a typical vulgar misspelling of *sumptum*, showing omission of the nasal before a stop (cf. e.g. *renutum* = *renuntium* at *Tab. Vindol. II.136*).⁶ A *sumptus Saturnalicus* would be a contribution towards the celebration of the Saturnalia. It is accusative, as object of *explices*: “I ask that you send, as your Saturnalian costs, . . .” Both writer and addressee are slaves. The writer (or scribe) will have come from an area where continental Celtic was spoken.

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¹ See P.-Y. Lambert, *La langue gauloise* (Paris, 1994), 44; R Marichal, *Les graffites de La Graufesenque* (Paris, 1988), 70.

² See Marichal, no. 19.1 (*tuθos sextametos*) at 143; see also id., 70, Lambert, 131–132.

³ Lambert, 46–47.

⁴ See G. Dottin, *La langue gauloise. Grammaire, textes et glossaire* (Paris, 1920), 60. On the possible phonemics behind the diphthong spellings, see C. Watkins, The phonemics of Gaulish. The dialect of Narbo-nensis, *Language* 31 (1955), 11–12.

⁵ See Watkins, 12.

⁶ See e.g. V. Väänänen, *Le latin vulgaire des inscriptions pompéiennes*³ (Berlin, 1966), 67–68.