JAIME B. CURBERA

VENUSTA AND HER OWNER IN FOUR CURSE TABLETS FROM MORGANTINA, SICILY


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In 1962 and 1963 the American excavations at Morgantina, Sicily, produced a group of ten lead tablets written in the 2nd or 1st cent. B.C. They were found in a chthonic sanctuary to the east of the theater. The nature of these texts has been the object of a recent debate, but today it is generally accepted that they are curses27. Three tablets are hardly legible and one is uninscribed. Of the remaining six, four contain curses against a slave called Bevoústa28. They are addressed to the same chthonic deities but use different verbs and tenses. Since the name of Bevoústa’s owner varies in the different tablets, some scholars have thought that there was more than one victim. The aim of this paper is to show, with two simple restorations, that these four tablets were written against the same person.

In the first two tablets our victim is called τάν Βενούσταν τοῦ Ῥοῦφου τάν θεράπαιναν. The names Venusta and Rufus (the first typical of slaves) are two of the most frequent Latin cognomina29, so that a name like Βενούστα Ῥοῦφου ἀ θεράπαινον, “Venusta Rufi serva”30, should have been an ambiguous name. As a slave, Venusta has no family name, while her owner Rufus certainly had, but it is not expressed in these two tablets. A third text, SEG XXIX 932, runs as follows:

Γά Ἐρμιά θεοί
καὶ[A χόνιοι]
ἀπαγάγετε τάν Βενού[σταν]
4 τοῦ Ῥοῦφο[υ ... Ἧου]

Following a suggestion of L. Koenen, Chr. A. Faraone (l. c.) reads τοῦ Ῥοῦφο[υ τάν] δού[λον], but this restoration does not fit either the space or the traces preserved. At the end of the text there is the genitive of a word ending in -τος. The Greek suffix -τος usually transcribes the Latin suffix -ius, characteristic of the Latin family names. We may assume, in

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* My thanks to David R. Jordan for his suggestions and for improving my English
28 These four texts are the following: i. N. Nabers, AJA 83 (1979) p. 464 no. 5 (= SEG XXIX, 931); ii. R. Stillwell, AJA 67 (1963) p. 165 (= M. Guarducci, Epigrafia Greca IV p. 250) and N. Nabers, AJA 83 (1979) p. 464 no. 4; iii. N. Nabers AJA 83 (1979) p. 464 no. 6 (= SEG XXIX, 932); iv. N. Nabers, AJA 83 (1979) p. 464 (= SEG XXIX 933). In D. R. Jordan’s catalogue (GRBS 26, 1985, pp. 179–180) they have the numbers 118–121.
29 See I. Kajanto, The Latin Cognomina, Helsinki 1965, p. 73 (Venusta) and p. 30 (Rufus). In Sicily there are at least six examples of Rufus: IG XIV 572 (Hadranum); CIL X 7460 (Halaesa); CIL X 6980 (Messina); CIL X 7317 (Panormus); CIL X 7156 (Syracuse); CIL X 7441 (Thermae).
30 M. Guarducci, Epigrafia greca IV p. 251, wrongly supposes that Venusta was the daughter of Rufus.
consequence, that the last letters belonged to Rufus’ family-name, omitted in the two previous tablets. One may object that the normal order is to place first the nomen and then the cognomen, but from the end of the Republican period the inversion in the order of nomen and cognomen is well documented.\footnote{See O. Salomies, \textit{Die römischen Vornamen}, Helsinki 1988, pp. 317–318, and the examples of p. 317 n. 1: Μαρκέλλος Κλαύδιος (SIG\textsuperscript{3} 774a), Λέπεδος Αίμιλιος (IG II/III\textsuperscript{2} 4142), etc.}

A fourth tablet, SEG XXIX 933, mentions also a Venusta, but not a Rufus. Nabers’ text is:

\begin{verbatim}
Γάρ ΄Ερμᾶ θεοί καταχθόνιοι

\footnote{The family name \textit{Sextius} is well documented in Sicily. In 73–71 B.C. a \textit{Sextius} was the first lictor of Verres in Sicily (Cic. \textit{Verr.} 2.3.67, etc.). An inscription from Buscemi, Syracuse, of I A.D., mentions the Syracusan ἀμπελόκηρος “Ἀπρος Σέξτιος Αὐγουρείνος (PP 6 [1951] p. 71 no. 5), and we know of a \textit{Sextius} also in Catania (CIL X 8045, 21).}

\footnote{Published by D. Comparetti in \textit{Archivio Storico della Calabria} 3 (1915) pp. 3–6 (it is missing in D. R. Jordan’s catalogue). Comparetti dated the text in the 2nd cent. A.D., but the dative Κόραξ and the lack of cognomen suggest an earlier date.}

\footnote{SEG XXXI 837.}

He comments: “Here we seem to be concerned with another slave girl who was perhaps also named Venusta but who belonged to a Sextus.” That is certainly possible, but it is easier to think that this tablet alluded to the same person. If so, we should think that, as in SEG XXIX 932, also in this case the owner’s name was expressed in a different form. One could think that Sextus was Rufus’ praenomen, but in the period when these tablets were written, the Latin praenomina were being displaced in the every-day language by the nomina and cognomina. Thus, in Σέξτης it is more likely to read Rufus’ family-name, whose last part was partially preserved in SEG XXIX 932, that is, Sextius or, in Greek, Σέξτιος. To address a Roman only by his family-name may seem strange, but this phenomenon is well documented at this time. In \textit{Acta Ap.} 10, 22, for example, a Roman centurion is called simply Κορνήλιος. In a \textit{defixio} from Rhegium of the 1st cent. B.C. the victim is addressed as Σκρεπτίβωνις\footnote{SEG XXXI 837.}, and in a \textit{defixio} from Licata, Sicily, of the 2nd–1st cent. B.C., a group of Latins, most probably negotiatores, are mentioned only by their family-names: Νόνις, Κοσσούτις, Πλώτις, Τρεββίνις, Νίνιος and ΄Απόνιος. It is not surprising to find in Morgantina a Roman addressed in this way.

In consequence, I propose to read SEG XXIX 932 and 933 as follows:

\begin{verbatim}
Γάρ ΄Ερμᾶ θεοί καταχθόνιοι

\footnote{SEG XXXI 837.}

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As M. Guarducci has pointed out, Venusta was “una persona abbastanza odiata”. The author of these curses has used three different combinations of the name of Venusta’s owner: single *cognomen* (Ῥοῦφος), *cognomen and nomen* (Ῥοῦφος Σέξτιος), and single *nomen* (Σέξτιος). This specification of the owner’s name shows his (or her) interest in clearly identifying the victim, and the variations in naming him show a tendency also evident in the use of different verbs and tenses in the different tablets: ἀπαγαγεῖν, ποτιδέξεσθαι, and ἄπαξέκεσθαι.