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GIFTS OF GYMNASIA: A TEST CASE FOR READING QUASI-TECHNICAL JARGON IN LATIN INSCRIPTIONS


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GIFTS OF GYMNASIA: A TEST CASE FOR READING QUASI-TECHNICAL JARGON IN LATIN INSCRIPTIONS

There are a number of inscriptions from the western provinces, especially North Africa, that commemorate gifts to a community by local officials of what the texts term gymnasium or gymnasia. At first glance, the interpretation of these inscriptions might appear unproblematic, since gymnasia are well-known as centers for exercise and education in the Greco-Roman world. A closer look at the inscriptions, however, reveals that the gymnasium commemorated here cannot be buildings; in any case, the term gymnasium, while routinely applied to structures in the Greek East, was never used in such a sense in inscriptions from the Latin West. Instead, the Latin inscriptions mentioning gymnasia clearly record the conferral of some sort of liberality for the benefit of the local population. Almost invariably such gifts of gymnasia mark a ceremony of dedication – of a statue or a building, for example – and they are very often granted in conjunction with one or more additional beneficia, such as public banquets or theatrical displays. Two interpretations of this usage of gymnasia have long predominated in the modern literature: either the term denotes the staging of gymnastic displays or competitions for public entertainment, or it designates distributions of oil for bathing and/or other supplies associated with exercise. To date, no satisfactory resolution has been reached in determining which of these two interpretations best captures the reality alluded to in the inscriptions; in most instances, both can be plausibly argued as applicable.

In this paper, therefore, I first review the epigraphic evidence for gifts of gymnasia. When, subsequently, the arguments in favor of each of the two modern interpretations are applied to these inscriptions, it quickly becomes clear that neither view is sufficient to explain all the occurrences of the term convincingly. In the final section, I propose a third avenue of approach to the problem of gymnasia’s meaning that carries wider implications for how quasi-technical and ill-understood terms such as this one may be read in Latin inscriptions.

The Texts

For this paper, I have collected forty-eight gymnasia inscriptions. The overwhelming majority of these (45/48) hail from the communities of North Africa, particularly Africa Proconsularis (and...
Byzacena, after the Diocletianic reforms). Outside Africa, three examples have been found in Germany and Spain.\(^5\) The earliest datable example is a Trajanic inscription from Spain (no. 34), while the latest is an African example from the reign of Probus (no. 15). Most of the other datable inscriptions stem from the Severan era, when North African cities were at the height of their prosperity, although some Antonine examples are known. The geographic distribution – with the notable absence of Italy, normally the largest contributor of Latin inscriptions – demonstrates that we are dealing with an essentially regional word-usage apparently imported into Africa and popularized there (the earliest example, it will be remembered, comes from outside Africa); the chronological spread, while partly a product of the overall pattern of epigraphic survival, nevertheless implies a limited window of application for the term gymnasium in the sense under study in this paper.

In terms of content, the inscriptions are highly formulaic. In virtually all the examples, and with some instructive exceptions, the gift of gymnasium accompanies a dedication of a statue or a building. In many examples the dedication is itself stimulated by the acquisition of some local office or priesthood, and several inscriptions make this explicit by recording that the benefactions were given \textit{ob honorem} or \textit{pro honore}, often funded from the sums habitually levied from the honoree for accepting the office (\textit{summae honorariae} or \textit{legitimae}).\(^6\) As to the gift of gymnasium itself, it can be offered on its own (nos. 1–5), or in combination with other liberalities. Such supplementary \textit{beneficia} include \textit{visceratio} (distribution of meat following a sacrifice); \textit{epulum} (public banquet); \textit{sportulae} (cash handouts); and \textit{ludi scaenici} (theatrical displays) or violent \textit{spectacula} or \textit{certamina} (usually of boxers).\(^7\) More often, these \textit{beneficia} appear in multiple combinations, so that the gymnasium forms merely one element in an often impressive package of generosity (nos. 16–48). In some cases, the combined benefactions are given to separate classes (see the cited examples below). In these instances, the gymnasium invariably goes to the \textit{populus}, while more restricted groups receive other gifts (often \textit{sportulae}); this is entirely in keeping with documented Roman practice, whereby distributions of this type were not welfare payments to the needy but status statements among socio-economic peers.\(^8\) In two of the three non-African examples, both from Spain, the gift of gymnasium is associated with an offer of \textit{ludi scaenici} and free bathing (nos. 33, 34).

Some examples serve to illustrate these types. At Sarra a Severan inscription commemorates a local official who built a temple “along with its \textit{pronaos} and an altar, and on account of its dedication he gave a public banquet and a gymnasium” (no. 9). At Gor a local magnate set up an annual foundation so that, on his birthday every year, the decurions were “to receive cash handouts and all of the citizens a public banquet and a gymnasium” (no. 11). At Villa Magna, two men reached the local aedileship in AD 239 and erected a statue of Mars; one of them, Rufinus, “on account of the dedication of the statue also provided a large sum involved (100,000 sesterces) makes a \textit{summa honoraria} improbable, unless the total masks a \textit{summa} with extra money added. On \textit{summae honorariae} or \textit{legitimae}, see R. Duncan-Jones, \textit{The Economy of the Roman Empire: Quantitative Studies}\(^2\), Cambridge 1982, 82–88 (in Africa) and 147–55 (in Italy).

\(^6\) Benefactions \textit{ob honorem/pro honore}: nos. 10, 13, 14, 20, 29, 31, 32. Benefactions \textit{ob honorem/pro honore} expressly funded from \textit{summae honorariae}/\textit{legitimae}: nos. 2, 7, 9, 16, 17, 22, 23, 28, 30, 45. The wording of no. 48 is ambiguous: the large sum involved (100,000 sesterces) makes a \textit{summa honoraria} improbable, unless the total masks a \textit{summa} with extra money added. On \textit{summae honorariae}/\textit{legitimae}, see R. Duncan-Jones, \textit{The Economy of the Roman Empire: Quantitative Studies}\(^2\), Cambridge 1982, 82–88 (in Africa) and 147–55 (in Italy).

\(^7\) \textit{Visceratio}: no. 7; \textit{epulum}: nos. 8–10; \textit{sportulae}: nos. 11–13; \textit{ludi scaenici/displays}: nos. 14, 15, 19 (second benefaction).

spectacle of boxers and a gymnasium” (no. 14). Similarly, at Thibica local aediles dedicated a statue, “and on the day of the dedication gave cash handouts to the decurions, and a public banquet and gymnasium to the citizens” (no. 17). A Severan inscription from Timgad records the erection by a veteran ob honorem flamoni of statues of Mars and, in the theater, statues of Severus, Caracalla, and Julia Domna “and on account of their dedication, he gave a public banquet to the curiae and a gymnasium to the people and a theatrical display” (no. 22). An early third-century aedile at Giufi erected a statue and at its dedication he, along with his colleague, “gave a theatrical display and a gymnasium to the people and a public banquet to the decurions” (no. 23). At Tuccabor a local official, ob honorem flamoni, completed a building and “on account of its dedication he staged boxing contests and gave cash handouts to the decurions and a banquet and gymnasium to the people”. But the official was not finished. He also added an upper-story room to the building, decorated it with mosaics, and, along with his sons, dedicated it, “and on account of this dedication, he gave a banquet to the decurions and a gymnasium to the people” (no. 28). These examples are entirely typical and reflect the range of possible combinations of benefactions and beneficiaries found in the sample.

When taken together, gifts of gymnasium in these inscriptions are clearly not in reference to the construction or restoration of buildings but rather to some form of public liberality conferred by local officials to mark the dedication of a constructional endeavor undertaken usually in response to an ascent to local office. That the gymnasium often take place in conjunction with benefactions such as public banquets or cash handouts demonstrates that we are dealing with some sort of recreation or leisure activity. The question is, what type of activity?

“Gymnasium” as gymnastic displays or competitions

For those who propose that gymnasium denotes gymnastic displays or games – and the notion has impressive support – there is convincing corroboration from other sources. Such displays are amply attested in the literary sources from the late Republic onwards. Participants in these gymnastic performances were called gymnici, and gravestones of gymnici are known from Rome and Italy.  

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9 Some standard works of reference consider gymnasium to denote displays or exercises: see, e.g., E. de Ruggiero, Dizionario epigrafico, Rome 1922, 3.596 s.v. (note that practically all the inscriptions listed in this article are miscited); OLD, s.v. (2); RE 7.2026, s.v. (J. Oehler). Other scholars have since taken up this interpretation: see, e.g., K. M. Coleman, Ptolemy Philadelphus and the Roman Amphitheater, in W. J. Slater (ed.), Roman Theater and Society, Ann Arbor 1996, 49–68, esp. 56; L. Leschi, Études d’égipaphragique, d’archéologie et d’histoire africaines, Paris 1957, 315; A. Wilson, Water Management and Usage in Roman North Africa: A Social and Technological Study, 2 vols., D.Phil. dissertation, Oxford 1997, 2.305 (no. 187).

10 See Cic. Inv. rhet. 2.2, Fam. 5.12.8 (= SB 22), Tusc. 2.62; Val. Max. 8.15 ext. 4, 9.12 ext. 9; Pliny HN 7.205, 28.50, 35.75; Sen. Dial. 4.14.3; Frontin. Str. 2.11.1; Suet. Aug. 98.5, Nero 53.1; Festus p. 217M (= 236L), s.v. “perihodos”; Hyg. Fab. 2.5, 273.5, 273.12. These literary notices lend gymnastic displays expressed Greek contexts and in some cases (e.g., Cic. Tusc. 2.62) make a point of distinguishing them from Roman practice. Other sources, however, are clear that gymnastic displays were also staged among the Romans, even if they often retained Greek associations: see, e.g., Suet. Nero 12.3–4, Dom. 4.4; HA Gall. 3.7, Carus 19.2–3; Pliny Ep. 4.22.1 (the latter mentions games given at Vienna in the will of a local man and offers a literary parallel to such epigraphic evidence as no. 11). Also relevant are the mostly late Imperial mosaics depicting athletic and gymnastic competitions. A famous example is the “Bikini Girls” mosaic at Piazza Armerina (in which the ladies are clearly competing for crowns and palm fronds) but there are others, such as the ill-published mosaic from Baton-Zamoun in Tunisia, now in the Gafsa Museum. Here athletes compete in running, discus-throwing, long-jumping, wrestling, and boxing for prize money, palm fronds, and crowns that sit prominently on a table in the center of the scene; see M. Blanchard-Lemée et al., Mosaics of Roman Africa: Floor Mosaics from Tunisia, New York 1996, 190–96.

Interestingly, almost all the gymnici are boys, some as young as two years old, although one text commemorates a grown man who was “often crowned in gymnastic competition.”

Returning to our gymnasium inscriptions, the frequent combination of gifts of gymnasia with banquetts, games, and theatrical displays offers a suitable broad context for gymnastic displays or competitions. Obviously, gymnastic and theatrical/pugilistic spectacles could have been staged in a single setting, such as a theater, circus, or forum. Like other ludii, the gymnasia are also reported as having been offered over several days (nos. 31, 33, 35?). When cash handouts and gymnasia alone are reported, the cash handouts could have been staged before or after the gymnastic performance, or even while it was in progress. In those cases recording the combination of public banquetts and gymnasia, gymnastic displays remain a plausible possibility, since supplementary entertainment was a regular feature of the elite’s dining experience and was therefore naturally transferred to public banquetts. Even in those cases where the banquet is specified as given to the elite and a gymnasium to the people (nos. 16, 22–25, 28, 36?, 48), which suggests separate events, it is not hard to envision the decurions banqueting and being entertained by gymnasts while the people looked on; in a sense, the latter could enjoy the gymnasium even while being excluded from the banquet. In one North African inscription, and in the two from Spain, the gymnasium is associated with baths (nos. 3, 33, 34). Again, this is not a major problem, since the baths offer an apt context for displays of exercise and gymnastic performances. Gymnastic displays or competitions, then, certainly seem to fit the use of the word gymnasium in these inscriptions.

Objections can be raised against this view, however. Chief among them is the observation that the literary testimonia, and some inscriptions, are consistent in describing gymnastic displays or games as ludi gymnici, certamina gymnica, agon gymnicus, or with some similar phrase. Since North African gymnasia were often put on with other ludi, it seems odd for the inscriptions to use the word gymnasium when some concise alternative such as ludi scaenici et gymnici was possible. A pertinent epigraphic example is the inscription from an unnamed site in Africa Proconsularis, which records the giving of cash handouts, a banquet, and a gymnasium, and goes on to record the staging of “a spectacle of boxers and chariots and theatrical games” (no. 30). The wording implies that the gymnasium was a distinct event from the public spectacle. Other inscriptions seem rather hard to square with the interpretation of gymnasium as gymnastic displays. At Theveste, for instance, a local veteran and magnate stipulated in his will that an arch and its accompanying statuary be erected in the town. On the interior of this arch was carved an inscription recording the bequest of a foundation of 250,000 sesterces “so that on certain days gymnasia might be given to the people in the public baths”. The facing interior wall of the arch is graced with a related text headed, “The Days of Gymnasia, From the Will of Cornelius Ergilianus”; sixty-four such days a year are listed. These days of gymnasia were more-or-less evenly distributed throughout the year, so that they occurred on average more than once a week. It is reasonable to
wonder how entertaining gymnastic displays would have been when they were staged with such frequency.

The problem of cost also appears relevant. If we postulate an interest rate of five percent, Ergilianus’ foundation at Theveste would have generated 12,500 sesterces per annum, or about 195 sesterces for each of the sixty-four gymnasial days (assuming each day was equally expensive). This seems to be an inordinately small sum to pay for gymnasts. It must be admitted, however, that we have no idea what they charged. The evidence from the sepulchral inscriptions from Italy, in fact, suggests that *gymnici* were usually very young boys, often probably slaves, so they may have come cheap. At Gor a foundation that generated 240 sesterces per annum paid for an annual display of boxers, a *gymnasium*, and a banquet (no. 25); by comparison, the 195 sesterces for gymnasts alone at Theveste looks generous. We also do not know how Ergilianus’ money was paid out: it could have been paid in a lump sum to cover a whole year’s entertainment or disbursed as prize money for competitions. Unfortunately, other North African inscriptions that record a sum given for a foundation covering the costs of *gymnasia* also include other benefactions, as with the inscription from Gor (no. 25). This makes determining the cost set aside for *gymnasia* alone all but impossible. What can be said, however, is that the sums in each case are small, not running to more than hundreds of sesterces. Aside from this observation, the numerous uncertainties surrounding the mechanics of these disbursements render analysis of cost all but useless in attempting to prove the gymnastic-display interpretation.

It seems from the foregoing that *gymnasion* as a term for gymnastic displays or competitions, while it fits the inscriptions in a general sense, is applicable in certain cases only with considerable difficulty. Perhaps, then, *gymnasion* denoted some other sort of leisure activity or entertainment. A ready alternative is at hand.

“*Gymnasion*” as distributions of oil

That *gymnasion* denoted distributions of oil and/or other supplies necessary for exercise is a proposition that also has an impressive corps of champions. As with the gymnastic-display interpretation, the proposition has merit and can draw on substantial corroboration from a variety of sources. Distributions of oil for use in bathing are voluminously attested in the Greek East, most frequently as the duty of officials called gymnasiarchs. Such oil distributions are also known from the Latin West, albeit more rarely, where they are often expressly associated with baths and bathing.

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19 Interest rates appear to have varied not only from place to place but also to have depended on the size of the foundation in question; see Duncan-Jones, *Economy* (n. 6), 132–38. Duncan-Jones in general posits interest rates of five or six percent for most foundations. For an inscription that makes an interest rate of six percent explicit, see no. 25.

20 Nos. 11, 25, 48. No. 11 is a good example of the difficulties inherent in interpreting such inscriptions. In this case, the foundation would have generated 720 sesterces per annum, at an interest rate of six percent. This sum, however, covers more than just the *gymnasion*, so estimating how much was available for the *gymnasion* alone requires too much guesswork to be a reliable guide; we do not know how many decurions there were at Gor, or how much they each received as *sportulae*, and so on.

21 Duncan-Jones, *Economy* (n. 6), 81 n. 6; L. Friedländer, *Darstellungen aus der Sittengeschichte Roms* 10, Leipzig 1921, 4.282–83; S. Lancel, *Populus Thabarbusitanus et les Gymnasia de Quintus Flavius Lappianus*, *Lybica* 6, 1958, 143–51, esp. 150–51 (this article is a discussion of my no. 8); P. Le Roux, *Cité et culture municipale en Bétique sous Trajan*, *Kiema* 12, 1987, 271–84, esp. 276 (this article is a discussion of my no. 34); *TEL* 6.2.2380.B1c (“meton. de rebus ad exercenda in gymnasiis corpora necessariis”); P. Veyne, *Le pain et le cirque*, Paris 1976, 365 n. 313; Wesch-Klein, 27–30. A recent doctoral dissertation has also plumbed for the oil-distribution reading; see J.F. Donahue, *Epula Publica*: The Roman Community at Table during the Principate, Ph.D. dissertation, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill 1996, where gymnasion is translated “gymnastic oil” throughout.

22 Literary sources bear witness to the distribution of oil at Rome: see Dio 37.51.4 (Faustus Sulla); Dio 49.43.3 (Agrippa in 33 BC); Suet. *Nero* 12.3 (Nero on the opening of his gymnasion). Inscriptions fill out the picture for the rest of Italy and the western provinces. Typical of those specifying a bathing context for the offer of *oleum* is *CIL* 5.5279 = *ILS* 6728 (Comum; pre-100): *... quot annis per Neptunalia oleum | in campo et in thermis et balineis omnibus quae sunt | Comi*
In the context of our gymnasia inscriptions, oil distributions fit nicely, for the most part. In the case, for instance, of the bequest of Ergilianus to Theveste, the sixty-four days of gymnasiun offered in the baths make better sense as oil distributions than as gymnastic displays. In two of the three non-African examples, gifts of gymnasiun are expressly coupled with provisions of free bathing (nos. 33, 34). Since it is consonant with other attested oil-and-bath combinations, this coincidence seems to reinforce the bathing associations of gymnasiun. But such oil distributions at, say, banquets also make perfect sense. Indeed in our inscriptions, epulum and gymnasiun are often closely combined in a phrase such as et epulum et gymnasiun dedit, even when they appear as part of larger packages of liberality (nos. 8–10, 17–20, 27, 29–32), suggesting that these two benefactions were closely related and perhaps staged as a separate event from any spectacles or games the benefactor might have put on in addition (as has already been suggested for no. 30; see above, p. 266). Given that bathing normally took place immediately before the evening meal, this gymnasiun-banquet combination is entirely reasonable. On this view, benefactors who offered such combinations as gymnasiun, a public banquet, sportuiae, and theatrical games can be seen to provide a day’s worth of entertainment to their communities, with oil in the baths, a public banquet, cash handouts, and spectacles. This view also nicely explains the odd combination of gymnasiun and wine attested in one inscription (no. 6), since the Roman bathing ritual was noted by the ancients for stimulating thirst.23

As with the gymnastic-display interpretation, however, not all the inscriptions seem to fit this model neatly. Seemingly odd combinations of benefactions occur, such as gymnasiun (now as oil distributions) and boxing displays or other games and spectacles; such an event is difficult to imagine in a theater or forum, unless we transfer the whole operation – ludi, boxing matches, and the rest – into the baths.24 As it is, however, the association of gymnasiun with the baths is not particularly strong among the North African examples, where only one text unequivocally states that the gymnasiun was offered in that context (no. 3); the location of most gymnasiun is not specified. It is arguable that the term gymnasiun carried an automatic association with the baths and meant perhaps something akin to “oil in the baths”; but if so, it is difficult to account for the redundancy at Theveste, where the gymnasiun are expressly set “in the baths” (in thermis). Furthermore, in the inscriptions of non-African origin that commemorate distributions of bathing oil the term used is oleum, not gymnasiun (although this might reflect little more than a regional difference in terminology).25

One of the non-African examples is particularly difficult to square with reading gymnasiun as “oil distributions”. The inscription, from Spain and of Trajanic date, records two acts of benefaction by the

populo praebetur ... For other examples expressly mentioning baths, see CIL 14.2112 = ILS 7212.II.29–31 (Lanuvium; 136); CIL 11.6360 (Pisaurum; early-mid second century); CIL 2.4514 = ILS 6957 = ILER 5838 (Barcino, Hispania Tarraconensis; 161/69); CIL 11.3811 = ILS 6583 (Veii; third century?). A variety of inscriptions do not specify baths as the setting for the oil distribution: see CIL 5.7007 = ILS 2544 (Taurini; late first century); CIL 5.4449 (Brixia; undated, but sometime during the Principate); CIL 5.7905 (Cemenelum, Alpes Maritimae; undated, but sometime during the Principate); CIL 9.4691 (Reate; undated, but sometime during the Principate); CIL 5.7920 (Cemenelum, Alpes Maritimae; undated); CIL 5.5272 (Comum; undated); CIL 12.372 (Reii, Gallia Narbonensis; undated); CIL 12.1236 (Arausio, Gallia Narbonensis; undated). Note CIL 13.2943 (second century?) which does not mention baths expressly but was found in the ruins of baths at Agedincum in Gallia Lugdunensis.

23 See, e.g., Ael. Arist. 25.311 (Jebb); Celsus 1.3.6–7; Pliny HN 14.139–40. Compare CIL 11.6360 where bread, wine, and oil in the baths are given to the people. Note, however, that an offer of wine and a spectacle is not unheard of; see CIL 8.16556 = ILS 6839 = Wesch-Klein 195 (nr. 9) (Theveste, Afr. Proc.; second or early third century); ... curii quoque et Augustalibus / aureos binos et populo vinum et ludos edidi.

24 Nos. 14, 15, 23, 25. In contrast to the combination of gymnasiun and banquet (see above, p. 268), nothing in the wording of these examples suggests a separation of the gymnasiun from the spectacles. If anything, they appear to have been closely allied, as in no. 25 where the banquet is separated from the gymnasiun and pugiles.

25 See n. 22 for oleum inscriptions. S. Lancel (“Populus Thabarbusitanus” [n. 21], 151) argues that the parallelism between the non-African formula epulum et oleum dedit and the African wording of epulum et gymnasiun dedit suggests that gymnasiun = oleum in African texts. It is a good point, but the association of gymnasiun with baths is not self-evident, as this view requires (since gymnasiun cannot mean merely “oil” but must carry a bathing or athletic connotation and not all the oleum inscriptions can be associated with baths).
same duovir (no. 34). On one occasion, the benefactor held public and private games and gave “oil and free baths” (oleo et balineo gratuito dato) to the people. Afterward, when he was staging games for the youth (ludi iuvenum) in the theater, “he offered a gymnasia and free bathing to the adult men and women” (gymnasium et balinea viris et mulieribus gratuita praestitit). If gymnasia denoted oil distributions, why the distinction between oil and free baths on the first occasion, and gymnasia and free baths on the other? An appeal may be made to rhetorical variatio, or to the possibility that gymnasia denoted an oil distribution in combination with some other unspecified service, but the expressed distinction between the terms remains troubling for the oil-distribution interpretation. In this case at least, it seems more likely that gymnasia does not denote an oil distribution.

Cost can also be used as a point of comparison between North African gymnasia texts and other attested oil-distributions. We have already seen that the amounts of money set aside for North African gymnasia are small, running in the low hundreds of sesterces (see above, p. 267). In contrast, at Comum in Italy a benefactor left a foundation of 40,000 sesterces for an annual oil distribution in all the community’s baths on the Neptunalia (23 July); at an interest rate of five or six percent, this represents an annual outlay of 2,000–2,400 sesterces.26 What is striking here is that this sum – an order of magnitude greater than our clearest North African example associated with baths, from Theveste (no. 3) – was to be spent only on oil on a single day every year. If the gymnasia at Theveste comprised oil distributions alone, never mind oil distributions in addition to other services, they must have been rather meager in comparison to this event. (Although it should be noted that the Comum bequest applied to all the baths in the town, while it is not clear how many thermae were affected by the benefaction at Theveste.) A bequest at Sassina in Italy, however, established a foundation of 4,000 sesterces for oil distributions, which is more in line with the amounts cited in the Theveste inscription. But in this case the beneficiaries were a very restricted group of collegium members.27 In drawing such comparisons, it cannot be overlooked that we are putting side-by-side inscriptions from different parts of the empire that are separated by over a century. In addition, there are too many intangibles in each case to make the comparisons truly telling (e.g., the number and social status of the beneficiaries, the quality and price of the oil, the sizes of the individual rations, and so on). Once more, cost proves an unsound basis on which to draw conclusions.

After all this discussion, it is not hard to see why the problem of the meaning of the term gymnasia has appeared insuperable.28 The interpretation of gymnasia either as gymnastic displays or as oil distributions fits most, but not all, of these inscriptions neatly and in many cases both views can be argued with equal conviction. We appear to have reached an impasse.

Another possibility

It is my contention that the problem of gymnasia’s meaning only appears insuperable due to the way in which the question has been framed. It has been generally assumed that gymnasia can denote either gymnastic displays or oil distributions (and/or other supplies for exercise) and that, for all the inscriptions, it must be either one case or the other. There is no reason, however, to expect such consistency from epigraphic language, especially when we are dealing with a quasi-technical term found in inscriptions that, for the most part, come from a specific region of the empire and from a specific period of time. Similar technical jargon can be shown to have been employed variously in Latin inscriptions that come from particular geographic or chronological contexts. A pertinent example is the

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26 For the Comum inscription, see n. 22. For the date and duration of the Neptunalia, see RE 16.2521, s.v. “Neptunus” (St. Weinstock).

27 CIL 11.6520 = ILS 6647 (Sassina; second century): ... uti / ex redita HS qua[r]tern(um) m[illium] / n[umnum] omnibus annis pridi(ie) / Idus Ian(ias), die natalis / mei, oleum singulix / vobis dividatur ...

28 See Snyder (n. 3).
term curia as used in inscriptions from Italy and from North Africa. In the latter, curia appears commonly in reference to a club of privileged citizens with restricted membership, while in the former its precise meaning is a matter of greater uncertainty. Similar uncertainty accrues to the use of the term populus in Latin inscriptions from all provinces, and even among communities within individual regions. In some places, it seems to have been an inclusive term applied to a town’s entire population, sometimes including women; in others, it appears more restrictive, as when it was synonymous with plebs and so exclusive of a town’s ruling ordo. Where precisely other people such as municipes, incolae, or coloni are to be oriented in relation to the populus often remains difficult to determine. Aside from such status-categories as these which, it might be argued, are going to be inherently difficult to pin down, even apparently straightforward terms in inscriptions can emerge, under close scrutiny, as markedly less direct than they may initially appear. This circumstance has recently been demonstrated for reconstruction inscriptions where words that seem to denote simple acts of reconstruction can, in fact, designate widely varying types of constructional activity, from initial erection to minor repair work and everything in between. Similarly, trying to determine what a seemingly straightforward word such as epulum actually designated in specific contexts has proven taxing.

The explanation for these difficulties is not far to seek. Honorific and commemorative inscriptions were intensely localized documents, erected to record the actions of local benefactors for the benefit of local populations. The people who read them would have been familiar with what populus or curia meant in their community, what sort of work refecit denoted in a given text, or what epulum meant, because they knew the circumstances that surrounded the activity being commemorated. The local point of reference for quasi-technical jargon in Latin inscriptions tends to be obscured by the modern collections that assemble texts from all over the empire or from particular regions and issue them in a single publication. Poring over these publications, it is very easy for the modern reader to assume that a particular term had consistent applications in antiquity, when this is probably not the case at all, as the uncertainty over the precise meaning of populus or epulum makes clear. If other technical or quasi-technical terms found in Roman inscriptions could mean different things to different people depending on where and when they were living, there is no reason to suppose otherwise for gymnasium. As it stands, variations in meaning for gymnasium are traceable in the record. We have already seen the broad distinction between usage in the Greek East (where it denotes buildings) and the Latin West (where it does not). Occasional passages in Latin authors suggest that the term might also be used to mean “exercise,” broadly defined. In sepulchral inscriptions from Rome, gymnasium (or a variant, gymnas-sio) can be applied to people, where it designates a slave presumably with exercise- or bath-related

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29 See Duncan-Jones, Economy (n. 6), 277–83. In essence curia means little more than “grouping of men,” derived from *co-viria. The term appears to have evolved from conditions peculiar to archaic Rome, so its transference to and usage in Italian and African towns was likely just as community-specific; see R.E.A. Palmer, *The Archaic Community of the Romans*, Cambridge 1970, 67–79. A particularly unusual example is *curia mulierum* at Lanuvium (*CIL* 14.2120 = *ILS* 6199).


31 See E. Thomas and C. Witschel, *Constructing Reconstruction: Claim and Reality of Roman Rebuilding Inscriptions* from the Latin West, *BSR* 60, 1992, 135–77. I have challenged Thomas and Witschel’s view of the relationship between the claims of the inscriptions and the physical reality they commemorate but I do not dispute the fluidity of meaning they demonstrate for such terms as reficere or restituiere; see G. G. Fagan, *The Reliability of Roman Rebuilding Inscriptions*, *BSR* 64, 1996, 81–93.

32 See Donahue, *Epula Publica* (n. 21), 14–16, where it is shown that epulum can mean more than a public banquet.

33 Quint. *Inst.* 11.3.26 (where, interestingly, use of oleum and gymnasium for the body are distinguished); Tac. *Ann.* 14.20.5.
The differences between the African and non-African appearances of *gymnasia* have been noted above. In short, the possibility that *gymnasiun* shifted in meaning across provincial boundaries and even between communities within those boundaries has to be entertained. This interpretation has the advantage of explaining the difficulty of assigning a specific, universally-applicable meaning to *gymnasia*. On the broad view, the word seems to have had no more precise a meaning than “things to do with exercise”.

The best procedure is therefore to read *gymnasium* in our inscriptions on the merits of each case rather than to expect it to carry a unitary meaning in all contexts. Even within Africa Proconsularis, there is no reason to expect that the term did not shift in meaning depending on where it appeared; in short, the meaning of *gymnasiun* was contextually, not absolutely, determined. The people who had experienced the benefaction and who were familiar with what the term meant in their community would automatically have recognized what *gymnasiun* denoted, possibly also taking cues from the precise context of its appearance in the inscription they were reading. Some community-specific patterns are observable. In the three inscriptions from Giufi, for instance, the *gymnasiun* is always given as a benefaction to the *populus*, and games and cash handouts are specified for other groups (nos. 5, 23, 24). At Sutunurca, however, the *gymnasiun* is always coupled with a meal (nos. 7, 10, 20), and the same seems true at Tuccabor (nos. 28, 43) and Mustis (nos. 31, 40, 41, 44), despite the fragmentary condition of some of the inscriptions from these places. While three of the four inscriptions from Thugga couple *gymnasiun* with an banquet given to the people (nos. 29, 32, 35), in the fourth, which is admittedly fragmentary, separate groups benefit from the *gymnasiun* and the banquet (no. 48). These examples offer no hard proof but they are suggestive, perhaps, of community-specific applications of the term.

In this way, *gymnasiun* in certain places and on certain occasions could have denoted distributions of oil and/or other supplies for exercise in the bathhouse (especially in the case of Ergilianus’ bequests at Theveste, for instance), while in other contexts (especially, perhaps, those that couple *gymnasiun* with *ludi* or *spectacula*) it may have commemorated the staging of a gymnastic display or competition. Unfortunately for us, most appearances of the term can be read either way, as in the *et epulum et gymnasiun dedit* formula. I would argue, however, that any uncertainty as to its meaning in such formulae is primarily a function of our removal from the original context of the inscriptions. At its heart, the difficulty of determining the meaning of *gymnasiun*, and of other quasi-technical terminology in Latin inscriptions, is more a problem of modern perception than it is of ancient semantics. Sometimes admitting the limitations of our capability to understand and classify our ancient evidence is the better part of prudence. The case of *gymnasiun* seems to be one of those occasions. Of the two previously touted explanations, the preponderance of evidence seems to be in favor of the reading “oil distributions,” which can be made to fit the majority of cases from North Africa, albeit uncomfortably in some instances. More important, however, is the possibility that *gymnasiun* shifted in application depending on context, which renders the problem of its meaning unresolved in many instances – but no longer insuperable.

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34 CIL 6.6460: *gymnasionis / Statili Chaereae / posit T. Statilius / Hilarus; CIL 6.11556: [L.] Amius / Niger / Pomponia / gymnasiun; CIL 6.14229: Calpurn[niae] / gymnasi[ae] / o(ssa) b(ic) [s(tita) s(ita)] CIL 6.20770: Q. Iunius Q. l. Chrestus / vixit annos V / lateria gymnasio [sic]; CIL 6.22455: [ -- Ja M. I. / [gymn]asioc; CIL 6.27587: Trebellia T. l. / gymnasioc / ex testamento. (This sense of *gymnasiun* appears to have escaped the notice of the editors of TLL and the OLD.) For a comparable designation of persons by a term more properly descriptive of their function, see *acoema*, which can mean both a rendition (Cic. Arch. 20; Pliny Ep. 6.31.13; Suet. Vesp. 19) and the performers of it (Cic. Sest. 116; Suet. Aug. 74; HA Alex. Sever. 34.2).

35 Compare, for instance, the difficulties of discerning meanings for many bath-related terms, despite the volumes of archaeological evidence for these buildings.
Appendix. Latin Inscriptions Recording Gifts of gymnasia

N.B.: Here listed are the gymnasial inscriptions referred to by number in the article. Only the relevant portions of the texts have been quoted; the full text is readily accessible in any of the collections cited in each case. The inscriptions are listed by content, and in alphabetic and then in numeric sequence by collection. Provenance, province, and date (where applicable) are provided in parentheses.

“Gymnasium” alone:

1. AE 1914.19 = Wesch-Klein 313–14 (nr. 7) (Lambaesis, Numidia; second or third century): gymnasium quodannis | III Iduum Aprilium hic praebetur.


3. CIL 8.1858 = ILAlg 1.3040 = Wesch-Klein 190–91 (nr. 3) (Theveste, Afr. Proc.; 214): [Ex test]amento C. Corneli Ergiliani ... arcum cum statuis ... fieri prae[cepit pra]eter alia HS CCL mil(ia) n(ummum) quae rei p(ublicae) ita ut | [certis diebus gy]mnasia populo publice in thermis prae|berentur legavit ... 

4. CIL 18.1859 = ILAlg 1.3041 = Wesch-Klein 214 (nr. 3) (Theveste, Afr. Proc.; 214): (carved on arch, opposite previous entry): dies gymnas(iorum) ex test(amento) Corneli Ergiliani ... (64 days are listed)


“Gymnasium” with vinum:

6. CIL 8.14365 (Uccula; Afr. Proc.; second or third century): ... nam Martensibus gymnasium vinum(q)ue dedit ...

“Gymnasium” with visceratio:

7. AE 1910.154 = ILAf r 300 = Wesch-Klein 180–81 (nr. 2) (Sutunurca, Afr. Proc.; 145–46): ... ob honorem flam(onii) perp(etui) | Quintae f(iliae) suae ex HS IIII mil(ibus nummum) legitim(is) | statuam divi Hadriani et L. Aelii Caes(aris) | adiectis a se HS (milibus) DXXV n(ummum) d(ecreto) d(ecurionum) s(ua) p(ecunia) f(ecit) et l | ob dedicationem viscerationem et l | gymnasium populo dedit.

“Gymnasium” with epulum:


9. CIL 8.12006/7 = Wesch-Klein 257–58 (nr. 1) (Sarra, Afr. Proc.; 211): ... cum patriae suae Vazitanae Sarrae triuplicata summa fl(amonii) p(erpetui) | HS III m(ilia) n(ummum) aedem Mercurio Sobrio pollicitus fuisset | ampliata liberalitate eandem aedem | cum prono|et et ara recit et ob dedicat(iomem) aepulum | sic et gymnasium ded[it] ...

10. ILAf r 304 = Wesch-Klein 181 (nr. 4) (Sutunurca, Afr. Proc.; second or third cenutry): ... ob honorem flamin[a]s | sui p(erpetui) | ... templum | cum omni cultu ... so[lo p]rivato festo et ampli[l]us in z[o]thecis duabus patri | et matri status marmorelas posu[it] item(q)ue dedica[vit | et ob dedicationem uni|versis epulum et gymnasia|sia ded]it d(ecreto) d(ecurionum).

“Gymnasium” with sportulae:

11. CIL 8.12422 = Wesch-Klein 102 (nr. 1) (Gor, Afr. Proc.; late second or third century): ... testamento suo r(ei) p(ublicae) suae Goritanae HS XII m(ilia) n(ummum) dedit ex cuius usuris die natali | suo Idibus Septembris(ibus) quodannis | decuriones sportulae acceperent | sic et l | gymnasium universis civibus ... 

12. CIL 13.5042 (Minnodonum; Germania Superior; undated but sometime during the Principate): ... item donavit vic(anis) | Minnodunen(ibus) (denarios) DCCL ex | quorum ussur(is) gymnasium in de[di]canione | item s[por]tulas | per tridu(u)m | vic(anis) dedit in aevum ...

“Gymnasium” with ludi scaenici or other displays:

14. CIL 8.895 = 12425 = ILS 5074 = Wesch-Klein 277 (nr. 1) (Villa Magna, Afr. Proc.; 239): Marti Aug(usto) ... {sc. statua}m ob honorem ae[dl]itatis i in compensationem(m) missiliorum communi pecunia fecerunt ... ob cuius statu[ae] l dedicationem idem Rufinus de su[o] et et a<m spectaculum pulgul et gymnasium l exhibuit ...


“Gymnasium” with epulum and sportulae:


17. CIL 8.769+12224 = Wesch-Klein 199 (nr. 1) (Thibica, Afr. Proc.; late second or third century): ... fl[amoni] p(er)p(etui) ... ob honorem patriae l suae multiplicatis summis honorariis ae[dl]itatis l sua liberalitate fecerunt et die dedicationis l sportulas decurionibus et epulum l et gymnasium [sic] c[vilibus dederunt ...]

18. CIL 8.11216 = Wesch-Klein 166–67 (nr. 1) (Serres?). Afr. Proc.; Caracalla?): Testamento l C. M[e]nnmi Felicis Armeniani ... arces factus ... mater et ... soror ... et die dedicationis sportulas decurionibus et epulum et gymnasium municipibus l dederunt ...

19. CIL 8.26121 = Wesch-Klein 155–56 (nr. 2) (Numluli, Afr. Proc.; 169–70): ... templum Capitoli liberalitate suae l [f]aciendum ex HS XX mil(ibus) n(umnum) patriae suae pago et civitati Numulitanae promississet et ob honorem fl[amoni] luniae Saturninae uxorise suae ex de creto utriusque ordinis HS IIII m(tia) n(umnum) in id l opus exprosset[l] multiplicata pecunia solo suo extruxit et marmoribus et statuis omniq(ue) cultu exornavit itemq(ue) dedicavit ob quam dedicationem decurionibus utriusq(ue) ordinis sportulas l item populo epulum et gymnasium dedit praeterea exigente annona frumenta quanta nume habuit populo multo minore preto quam tunc erat benignissime praestitit item ludos scsaenicos et gymnasia adsidue dedit.

“Gymnasium” with epulum and ludi scaenici or other displays:

20. AE 1909.160 = ILS 5075 = Wesch-Klein 329–30 (nr. 6) (Timgad, Numidia; 198–211): ... ob honorem flamoni inlata rei [publicae] legitama l amplius statuam Martis ad arcum Pantheum et hic in theatro statuas dd(ominorum) nn(ostrorum) et Iuliae Aug(ustae) ex HS XL mil(ibis) n(umnum) promiserat ampliata pecunia HS X mil(ibus) n(umnum) ex HS L mil(ibis) n(umnum) posuit et ob dedicationem l curiis epulum et gymnasiolum populo et ludos scsaenicos dedit.

21. AE 1941.46 = Wesch-Klein 100 (nr. 9) (Giufi, Afr. Proc.; early third century; ... incumbe ... neglegitur l [sc. statua]m aedilis ... fecerunt et ob dedicationem l ludos scsaenicos [biduo? edi]dierunt gymn[asium populo l epulum decurionibus dedit ...]

22. AE 1921.46 = Wesch-Klein 100 (nr. 9) (Giufi, Afr. Proc.; early third century): ... ob honorem aedilitatis ... iunciam de statuam ex HS VIII millibus [sic] n(umnum) summa honoraria posuit eandemque dedicavit et ob dedicationem simul cum Annio Memmi Collegerolo suo ludos scsaenicos et gymnasiolum populo et aepulas [sic] decurionibus dedit ...

23. CIL 8.858 = ILS 5073 = Wesch-Klein 100 (nr. 8) (Giufi, Afr. Proc.; early third century): ... ob honorem ae[dlitatis ... incumbe ... de statuam et dedere velut in perpetuum ab eadem re [publica] subsumma reditum [sic] id est usurae (denariorum) LX l die XVI Kal(endas) Ian(uarias) natalis eius pulgilibus et gymnasio itemq(ue) decurionibus epulo suo quoque anno in perpetuum ab eadem re (publica) inuserentur ...

“Gymnasium” with epulum, ludi scsaenicos and missilia:

24. CIL 8.14783 = ILS 5075 = Wesch-Klein 256 (nr. 1) (Valli, Afr. Proc.; late second or early third century; ... idem l Egnatius praeter gymnasium et missilia quae aediles edere solent diem sacri l Liberaliorem auxit et
omni inpensa sua eum cumb(us) universis l exibuit amplius etiam ludos sc(a)enicos edidit et ep[ul]um populo dedit ...

“Gymnasium” with epulum, sportulae, and other spectacles:
27. *CIL* 8.754 +12218 = 23107 = Wesch-Klein 274–75 (nr. 1) (Hr. Sidi Naoui, Afr. Proc.; 196): ... templum ...


30. *CIL* 8.11998 = ILS 5072 = Wesch-Klein 268 (nr. 1) (Hr. Esch-Schoor, Afr. Proc.; second or third century): ... [ob honorem] fla(moni) [ex] l summ[a] h]onoraria HS II m(ilia) n(uummum) ... et ob dedicationem l sportulas decurionib(us) eisdemque et universo populo epulum et gymnasio dedit l itemque spectaculum pugillum et aurigaram et lodo rum scena(m)icum edidit.

31. *CIL* 8.15576 = ILTun 1358 = Wesch-Klein 146 (nr. 5) (Mustis, Afr. Proc.; 164): ... templum quod ... ex HS XXX mil(ibus) n(uummum) testamento suo fieri iussit ... adiectis ob homeron flam(oni) per[etui sui] HS X mil(ibus) n(uummum) ... consommavit ... ob dedicationem triduo ludos decurionibus epulum sportulae populo epulum et gymnasio dedit.

32. *CIL* 8.26606 = ILS 9364 = Wesch-Klein 227–28 (nr. 9) (Thugga, Afr. Proc.; ca. 165): ... ob homeron flam(atus) sui per[etui patriae suae] quod l aedem ... HS XXX mil(ibus) n(uummum) testamento suo fieri iussit ... adiectis ob homeron flam(oni) per[etui sui] HS X mil(ibus) n(uummum) ... consommavit ... ob dedicationem triduo ludos decurionibus epulum sportulae populo epulum et gymnasio dedit.

33. *AE* 1953.21= ILER 1732 (Lucurgentum, Baetica; undated but sometime in the Principate): ... edito spectaculo per quadriduum ludo rum scena(m)icum et datu(g)ymnasio per eodem dies item mulieribus balineum gratuit.

34. *AE* 1989.420 (Singilia Barba, Baetica; 109): ... hic in IIvirato publicos ludos et totidem dierum privatos dedit, item populum universum in municipio l habitantem et incolas oleo et balineo l gratuito dato pervocavit, item quo die ludo rum iu(v)enum in theatro l dedit gymnasio et balineum viris et mulieribus gratuit praestitit ...

“Gymnasium” included in fragmentary or unclear combinations:


38. *CIL* 8.1587 = 27441 = Wesch-Klein 152 (nr. 15) (Mustis, Afr. Proc.; undated): ... [ -- decurionib]us sportulas populo epulum et gymnasiu[m dedit?]
42. *CIL* 8.14378 = Wesch-Klein 266–67 (nr. 1) (Hr. ben Glaya, Afr. Proc.; 169–70): ... [templum cum ornamentis?] et columnis duabus cum opere ded[i]cavit ... et ob dedicationem populo gymnasium et [ ... dedit?].


44. *CIL* 8.15578 = Wesch-Klein 152 (nr. 14) (Mustis, Afr. Proc.; second or third century): ... arcum cum parietibus coniunctis et porticus ... sua pecunia fecit et epulum ob dedic[ationem decurionibus? et --]N mil(ia) ex quorum usuris quodannis ob diem dedicationem epulum et [gymnasium? s(upra) s(critpa)? darentur].


48. *CIL* 8.26591 = Wesch-Klein 237 (nr. 16) (Thugga; Afr. Proc.; 205–53): ... [ -- ob flam(inicatum)] HS C mil(ia) n(umnum) patriae suae donaverit ex [quorum red(itu) dec(urionibus)] utriusq(ue) ordinis sportulae curiis e[pturum et universo] | populo gymnasium praestantur lud[ique scænicis? dentur] ...

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