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Some Remarks on the Lexicon of Erasure between Antiquity and Middle Ages

Abstract: Writing, erasing, rewriting. In the ancient and medieval world, the re-use of writing media was a constant habit; this is testified to not only by direct sources (wooden and wax tablets, opisthographic papyri, palimpsest scrolls) but also by the lexicon of literary and documentary texts. This contribution, without any ambition to be exhaustive, discusses some of these references (from Plutarch to Geoffrey Chaucer, via Cicero and the chronicles of the Abbey of Saint Gall) specifically related to ‘erasure’, aiming to identify recurring themes, similarities, and differences across the time period from Antiquity to the Middle Ages.

1 A ‘plane’ recurrence

In the eighth story of Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, ‘The Summoner’s Tale’, the events of a beggar friar in Yorkshire are relayed. Chaucer tells how the protagonist goes about with a set of ivory tablets and a sharply pointed stylus (vv. 77–78: ‘A peyre of tables al of yvory, / And a poyntel polysshed fetisly’) to note down, during the request, the names of benefactors, which are systematically erased, once the alms are obtained, to make room for new ones vv. 94–95: ‘He planed away the names everichon / That he biforn had written in his tables’).¹ The verb used to indicate the act of erasing, scraping away names, is *to plane*, literally ‘to level, make flat’. It indicates in this way the action of ‘resurfacing’ the wax that most certainly was contained in the hollow of the ivory tablets, so that they could be written on again. The choice of the verb *to plane* seems to hark back to a ‘shared’ lexicon already attested in the early medieval Latin tradition: in the *Ca-*

1 Stallybrass 2006, 556, considers these to be an ivory memorandum book to be inscribed in metalpoint, using some materials from the modern period as a comparison. However, I believe that the possibility it was a wax-covered ivory tablet should not at all be ruled out: examples of this type can be found in the inventory compiled by Lalou 1992, who moreover states: ‘à côté des tablettes de cire “classiques” – bois et cire – existent des tablettes de corne qui étaient elles aussi recouvertes de cire’ (‘alongside the “classic” wax tablets – wood and wax – there were ivory tablets, which were also covered with wax’, Lalou 1992, 234). One curious use, however, which provides further evidence of the widespread use of the practice, is some medieval ivory sundials discussed in Schewe and Davis 2019.

sus Sancti Galli, a chronicle of the Abbey of Saint Gall written on several occasions between the ninth and thirteenth centuries, the section composed by Ekkehard IV (980–1060)² recounts the events of Notker Labeo (c. 950–1022) and his encounters with the devil. In one of them, Satan is seated above him on one of the crossbeams of the ceiling, intent on writing with a stylus on a tablet ('stilo tabulam scribere'); but when Notker questions him about the contents and promptly calls God to his aid, the evil quickly erases it ('manu celerrima quod scripserat planasse').³ Here it is of interest to note the use of the verb *plano* to describe the operation of 'erasure': from the text of the *Casus*, it cannot be discerned whether the *planatio* occurred directly with the hand or in another manner, as seems more frequently attested. The term *plano* is also attested, with the same meaning, at the threshold of Late Antiquity, in Gregory of Tours's *Historia Francorum*: in Book 5, which contains a not particularly enthusiastic portrait of Merovingian king Chilpericus I (535–584), Gregory tells of the sovereign's initiative to introduce new letters into the alphabet, to be taught even to children; and that, for this purpose, the *libri antiquitus scripti* are rewritten to include these new letters, after first being flattened with pumice ('planati pomice rescriberentur').⁴ In this passage, which constitutes – to my knowledge – the earliest attestation of the verb *plano* with a meaning referring to the sphere of (re)writing, the action of erasing seems not to relate immediately to a tablet, as in Chaucer or Ekkehard, but rather indicates a writing medium that can be 'abraded' with pumice: perhaps a parchment to be reused, or a papyrus roll or sheet, whose edges need to be re-sanded? Both are plausible and well attested in the sixth century CE. For both, the action performed by the pumice stone is to 'smooth' or 'polish'. In the case of the palimpsest parchments, a recipe contained in a tenth-century codex from Tegernsee, now preserved in Munich (Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Clm 18628, fol. 105^v), describes the treatment and 'final touch' given with pumice. The recipe says

Quicumque in semel scripto pergamento, necessitate cogente, iterato scribere velit, accipiat lac imponatque pergamentum per unius noctis spatium. Quod postquam inde sustulerit, farre

2 *Casus Sancti Galli*,

3 Curiously, Wozniak 2021, 349, reads in the following narrative the throwing of the writing tablet in Notker's direction, thus taking the cue to make, in the following pages, some remarks about the strength of the materials from which the tablets are made. But the *Casus* text explicitly says 'tabula laquearii disrupti', referring to the ceiling tablets. That in the episode the devil is not writing on one of these boards is intuited by the use of the term *trabes* ('laquearii interrupti trabibus diabolum consedissee'), *Casus Sancti Galli*,

4 *Historia Francorum*, 5, 44 – Gregorio di Tours, *Storia dei Franchi*, ed. Oldoni 1981, 532–534.

aspersum, ne ubi siccare incipit, in rugas contrahatur, sub pressura castiget quoad exsicce-
tur. Quod ubi fecerit, pumice cretaque expulitum, priorem albedinis suae nitorem recipiet.

Whoever might need, for whatever reason, to write on a parchment sheet which had already been written, should take some milk and should put the parchment in it for one night's time. As soon as it is taken out, it should be strewn with flour in order that it not be wrinkled after it begins to dry, and so as to be kept under pressure until it dries out. After it is done, the parchment will regain its former quality, shining and lucid [lit. 'the original brightness of its whiteness'], by means of pumice stone [which was often not used] and chalk.⁵

In the case of the papyri, it will suffice to refer to the first poem of the Catullian collection: a 'novum libellum' ('a book just published') is given by the poet to Cornelius Nepos, 'arida modo pumice expolitum' ('just polished with a pumice').⁶ In short, the initiative of Chilpericus is a 'refurbishing' operation with illustrious precedents, in which – as can be seen from the testimonies recalled above, albeit far apart in time – the act of polishing with pumice sanctions the final smoothing. In the case of a parchment, it is of the writing surface ready to be reused; in the case of papyrus, the edges are 'just' re-polished and ready to be delivered to its dedicatee. Considering that the examined passage emphasises the operation of 'rewriting', it seems more reasonable to assume that the *libri* mentioned are parchment codices.

2 Sponging or scratching?

The operation of removing ink on papyri for their reuse must have been easier to achieve than the method for parchment, as the sources attest, using a wet sponge. Edoardo Crisci rightly notes that ancient ink, based on carbon black and vegetable glue to be diluted in water, is very easily removed precisely with water; the sponge must have been part of every scribe's kit, and used for corrections *in scribendo*.⁷ An erasure 'by cleansing' can be found in Ammianus Marcellinus (*His-*

⁵ English translation from András Németh, 'Methods of Removing the Ancient Texts', *Vatican Palimpsests: Digital Recovery of Erased Identities, Vatican Library*, <<https://spotlight.vatlib.it/palimpsests/feature/methods-of-removing-the-ancient-texts>> (accessed on 27 September 2024). The recipe is also found, with some variation, in fol. 36^v of Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Cgm 821 (fifteenth–sixteenth century). For this and other recipes mentioned here, I refer to Bartl et al. (eds) 2005, 110–111 and 653–654.

⁶ Catullus, *Carmina* 1, l. 1.

⁷ Crisci 2003, 62–64.

toriae, 15, 5),⁸ where he recounts the conspiracy hatched by the praetorium prefect against Silvanus, *magister peditum* of Emperor Constantius: the contents of some of Silvanus's autograph letters, with the exception of the signature, are obliterated and replaced with entirely dissonant arguments: 'peniculo serie litterarum abstersa, sola incolumi relicta subscriptione alter multum a vero illo dissonans superscribitur textus' ('with a sponge he [i.e. Dynamius] effaced the lines of writing, leaving only the signature intact, and wrote above it another text far different from the original'). A committee of experts, however, manages to discover the deception by discerning *apices* ('traces') of the letters of the *scriptura inferior*: 'contemplans diligentius scripta apicumque pristinorum reliquias quasdam reperiens animadvertit' ('scrutinising the script with greater care, and finding a kind of shadow, as it were, of the former letters').⁹

A recipe, handed down from a papyrus codex in the collection of the Royal Library in Stockholm referable to the fourth century CE (TM 64429), recounts a more complicated procedure, similarly used, as the text itself says, for whitening pearls: water, saltpeter, earth, and milk, mixed until a thick, sticky mixture is obtained, to which mastic juice is added before spreading it on the papyrus; once dry, the mixture can be scraped off and the papyrus will appear as if never written upon. The mixture should be smeared with a feather on individual letters or groups of letters. It is not far-fetched to speculate that this more aggressive procedure might have applied to papyri written with, rather than carbon black, metallic inks, attested as early as the third century BCE and with increasing frequency from the fourth century CE onward. In the recipe the expression used is 'αὕτη δὲ καὶ χάρτας γεγραμμένους πάλιν ψᾶ, ὥσδε δοκεῖν μηδέποτε γεγράφθαι' ('this recipe also erases written papyri to the point of appearing as if they had never been written at all').¹⁰ Sponging must have been, according to Maria Luisa Agati, the most common method of removing ink from parchment as well. And indeed, in the procedure described by Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Clm 18628, which closely resembles the standard procedure for manufacturing parchment sheets (bathing the skin in a solution of water and lime and/or milk, tending on a frame, scraping), pumice (and clay) are used not to 'scrape away' the writing but to restore luster to the sheet. Scraping, Agati insists, would have permanently obliterated the lower writing, and also abraded the ink-tainted layer of the *scriptio inferior*, which even in many *codices rescripti* can still be read, even with the

8 Ammianus Marcellinus, *History*, tr. Rolfe 1982, 8–13.

9 Crisci 2003, 62–64. Ammianus Marcellinus, *History*, tr. Rolfe 1982, 134–135, 140–141.

10 Betz 1992, no. 110.

naked eye.¹¹ *Codex rescriptus* and *charta rescripta* are the expressions most commonly used in the paleographic and codicological scholarly literature to describe palimpsests, precisely because of the problem that the term, on the practical side, brings.¹² In ancient literary sources, παλίμψηστον (and the verbal counterpart πάλιν ψάω) are not much attested; in the Latin context, *palimpsestum* occurs only twice. In a reply to his friend Trebatius, Cicero (*Familiares*, 7, 18, 2) marvels at having received from him a *chartula in palimpsestum*, a circumstance that the Arpinate attributes to either the sender's parsimony or the lack of new writing material. The lexicon used suggests that the missive was written on papyrus, subjected to 'scraping'. In Poem 22 (Catullus, *Carmina* 22, ll. 4–5), on the other hand, Catullus criticises another poet, Suffenus, for writing many – too many – verses, without resorting to *palimpsest* sheets ('in palimpsesto relata') but instead using each time valuable writerly materials that should be destined, not for texts in draft, but for final publications.

In the Greek sphere, it is Plutarch who uses παλίμψηστον twice, in a metaphorical sense. The first time (*Moralia* 49, 779c)¹³ refers to Dionysius of Syracuse, so 'steeped' in tyranny as a poorly made palimpsest, from which it is impossible to erase all previous traces or stains of writing: 'ἀλλ' εὔρε [scil. Plato] Διονύσιον ὡσπερ βιβλίον παλίμψηστον ἤδη μολυσμῶν ἀνάπλεων καὶ τὴν βαφὴν οὐκ ἀνιέντα τῆς τυραννίδος, ἐν πολλῷ χρόνῳ δευσοποιὸν οὔσαν καὶ δυσέκλυτον' ('but he found Dionysius, like a book which is erased and written over, already befouled with stains and incapable of losing the dye of his tyranny, since by length of time it had become deeply fixed and hard to wash out').¹⁴ The second instance relates to self-styled talkers who, 'by dint of repeating the same things, wear out the ears of their hearers, as if they were daubing palimpsests' ('οἱ δ' ἀποκναίουσι δήπου τὰ ὦτα ταῖς ταυτολογίαις ὡσπερ παλίμψηστα διαμολύνοντες').¹⁵ In both passages, the noun παλίμψηστον and verb μολύνω, or their derivatives, recur: in *Moralia* 49, 779c, the metaphor is clear, and the palimpsest is a writing medium (a papyrus? So the term βιβλίον would suggest) deeply stained and difficult to clean completely; however, in *Moralia* 35, 504d, the idea of 'reuse' is hardly perspicuous, and neither is that of 'stain', as the translator rightly notes in the commentary: 'Plutarch probably means that talkers wear out our ears by the repetitions of stale

¹¹ Agati 2009, 75–76.

¹² Lowe 1965.

¹³ Plutarch, *Philosophers and Men in Power*, tr. Helmbold 1939, 47.

¹⁴ Plutarch, *That a Philosopher Ought to Converse Especially with Men in Power*, tr. North Fowler 1936, 46–47.

¹⁵ *Moralia* 35, 504d – Plutarch, *Concerning Talkativeness*, tr. Helmbold 1939, 411.

news, just as palimpsests are worn out by constant erasure. But not all points of the comparison are clear'.¹⁶ Indeed, the verb used – διαμολύοντες – has to do with the concept of 'stain', not that of 'erasure'. The comparison, in short, is not straightforward, but the use of the words appears not without interest: the palimpsest is stained and is, therefore, δυσέκλυτον ('difficult to wash') – which brings us back to the operation of 'sponging' mentioned earlier. Even in their paucity, the four sources considered so far report quite different situations and reveal considerable familiarity with the idea of ink rewriting of likely papyrus media, although not always with acceptable results.

3 *Stilum ducere, stilum vertere*

The erasable medium par excellence is the wax tablet rather than papyrus, and it is with a return to tablets that I would like to close this brief survey.

Quintilian's words (*Institutio Oratoria*, 10, 3, 31: 'scribi optime ceris, in quibus facillima est ratio delendi') about the appropriateness of using wax tablets as a writing medium are very well known. Text inscribed on tablets it is very easy to erase and thus correct while writing.¹⁷ Wax is engraved using a pointed instrument, a stylus, made from various materials (wood, bone, metal), some of which – such as iron and bone – were eventually subject to restrictions because they could have been used as weapons. The stylus has a pointed tip, while the opposite side usually ends in a spatula, for scraping the wax; hence the expression *stilum vertere*, indicating the gesture of turning the writing instrument (similar to how we use pencils with erasers today) to make tiny corrections or wider erasures. These two meanings we find in Horace, *Sermones*, 1, 10, ll. 72–73: 'Saepe stilum vertas, iterum quae digna legi sint scripturus' ('Often you must turn your pencil to erase, if you hope to write something worth a second reading');¹⁸ and in Cicero, *In Verrem*, 2, 2, 101: 'Cum haec

¹⁶ Plutarch *Concerning Talkativeness*, tr. Helmbold 1939, 410.

¹⁷ Quintilian, *The Orator's Education*, tr. Russel 2001, 350–351. *Delere* is still the verb used by Fratrī Felici Fabri in his *Evagatorium in Terrae Sanctae, Arabiae et Egypti peregrinationem*: 'Ego in hoc valle rescripsi paene totum iter a Gaza usque huc; scripseram enim sedeus in asino dispositiones et habitudines regionum et viarum in tabula de cera, quam cingulo portavi et ibi totum in libello rescripsi et de cera delevi, ut consequenter alia scriberem' ('I recorded almost the entire journey from Gaza to here in writing. While sitting on the donkey, I had noted the location and nature of the landscapes and paths on a wax tablet that I carried on my belt, and then I wrote the whole thing in a booklet and erased the wax tablet so that I could write down something else'; my emphasis and translation). See Wozniak 2021, 370.

¹⁸ Horace *Satires*, tr. Fairclough 1926, 120–121.

ad istum afferrentur, pertimuit aliquando et commotus est; vertit stilum in tabulis suis, quo facto causam omnem evertit suam; nihil enim sibi reliqui fecit quod defendi aliqua ratione posset' ('When this news reached Verres, he was at last thoroughly frightened and upset; and then he applied the blunt end of his style to his records, thereby making an end of all his chances of acquittal, for he has left himself no loop-hole for any sort of defence').¹⁹

The expression, which indicates the 'retroverted' movement of the stylus, is still found more than three centuries later in a much-discussed passage of St Jerome's Vulgate, and ends up having the same meaning as the one that properly indicates the act of writing, *stilum ducere*.²⁰

In 2 Kings 21:13, the original Hebrew text reads 'I shall wipe Jerusalem as a man wipes a *dish*, wiping it and turning it upside down' (my emphasis). In the Hieronymian version, however, the text reads 'I shall wipe Jerusalem just as *tablets* are wiped smooth, and I shall turn it as I wipe, *and shall rub the stylus across its surface repeatedly*' (my emphasis; in Latin: 'et delebo Jerusalem sicut deleri solent tabulae; *et delens vertam, et ducam crebrius stylum super faciem eius*'), with the addition (here italicised) that makes perspicuous the presence of waxed tablets rather than tableware, but that also paradoxically recodes the expression *stilum ducere* to mean the process of 'erasure' of the tablet.

In this apparent short circuit we see once again, in my opinion, the familiarity, custom, and continuity in the gestures of writing and even in the movements themselves: a process in which conservatism in the use of certain media (above all, waxed wooden tablets) is paralleled by conservatism in the lexicon.

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¹⁹ Cicero, *The Verrine Orations*, tr. Greenwood 1928, 400–401.

²⁰ The passage is discussed in Mary Rouse and Richard Rouse 1990, 19.

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