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## THE IBERIAN LEAD PLAQUE IN THE VÍCTOR CATALÀ COLLECTION (EMPÚRIES, L'ESCALA). A NEW STUDY AND EDITION (1)

Posant devotament l'aurella en la màgica caragola  
buyda que'l destí dexà oblidada entre les sorres  
d'or del Golf de Roses, hem cregut sentir el ressó  
de les veus misterioses d'ultratomba.

Víctor Català, *Ressons d'Empori* (1923)

### ■ *Abstract*

In 1949, M. Gómez Moreno, the decipherer of Iberian script, published one of the most unusual pieces of the Iberian epigraphic corpus: an inscribed lead plaque that had been embedded in a stone pillar for public exhibition in a funerary context. The artefact had been found at the beginning of the 20th century in the necropolis of Les Corts, Empúries (2nd-1st century B.C.), but the piece, which was part of the Víctor Català private collection, had disappeared during the Spanish Civil War. This is the reason why, so far, the inscription has always been published on the basis of old pictures and drawings. Thanks to the recent recovery of that lead plaque, it is now possible to provide a new analysis and edition of the inscription.

*Key words:* Iberian epigraphy, Iberian language, inscriptions on lead, Empúries, Hispania, Víctor Català Collection.

### ■ *Resumen*

En el año 1949 M. Gómez Moreno, descifrador de la escritura ibérica, daba a conocer una de las piezas más singulares del *corpus* epigráfico ibérico: una placa de plomo inscrita que había sido inserida dentro de una columna de piedra para ser expuesta en un entorno funerario. El hallazgo se produjo a principios del s. XX en la necrópolis emporitana de Les Corts (ss. II-I a.C.), pero la pieza, que formaba parte de la colección Víctor Català, desapareció durante la Guerra Civil. Por este hecho la inscripción siempre había sido editada a partir de fotografías y dibujos antiguos. El presente artículo viene motivado por la reciente recuperación de este plomo, que ha permitido realizar una nueva edición y análisis de la inscripción.

*Palabras clave:* epigrafía ibérica, lengua ibérica, inscripciones sobre plomo, Empúries, Hispania, colección Víctor Català.

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(1) This work is part of the project FFI 2011-25113 and the GRC LITTERA (2014SGR63). I especially thank Benjamí Bofarull for his assistance and efforts in relocating the inscription, as well as for the pictures he kindly provided me with.

## Introduction

One of the most peculiar pieces in the Iberian epigraphic corpus is the lead plaque that belonged to the Catalan writer Caterina Albert Paradís (1869-1966), more commonly known by her pen name Víctor Català (2). This is a fully preserved plaque, though somewhat damaged on its surface, which displays a four-line inscription in the Iberian script and language. The plaque appears to have been attached to a stone pillar by four large nails, a noteworthy fact that highlights an exceptional desire for the public exhibition of a text written on lead (Fig. 1 and 5).

The object was found at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the cremation necropolis of Les Corts, in Empúries (Girona, Catalonia), which was mainly operative between the 2<sup>nd</sup> and the 1<sup>st</sup> century B.C. (3). Although Víctor Català directly linked the finding to one of the graves, in fact the precise provenance of the artefact is unknown as are the exact circumstances of its discovery. Moreover, due to the exceptional characteristics of this inscription, there is no agreement among specialists as regards its exact function, namely whether or not it must be considered as strictly funerary.

When M. Gómez Moreno, the illustrious decipherer of Iberian script (4), presented the *editio princeps* of that Iberian inscription in 1949, the plaque had already been lost in the turmoil of the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939). This is the reason why all the editions hitherto published have been carried out from drawings and old pictures taken by the owner herself (Fig. 2 and 3). Thanks to the recent recovery of the original artefact, it is now possible to present a new study of the inscription, along with a revised graphic apparatus; a new analysis of the text, both from a linguistic and a more formal and functional point of view in the light of the current knowledge about Iberian language and its epigraphic uses, will also be provided.

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(2) This inscription appears in the *Monumenta Linguarum Hispanicaum* by Jürgen Untermann under reference C.1.5.

(3) See LÓPEZ BORGÑOZ 1998, p. 298.

(4) GÓMEZ MORENO 1922 and 1949.



Fig. 1. Old picture of the pillar and lead plaque (Víctor Català, *apud* ALMAGRO 1952).

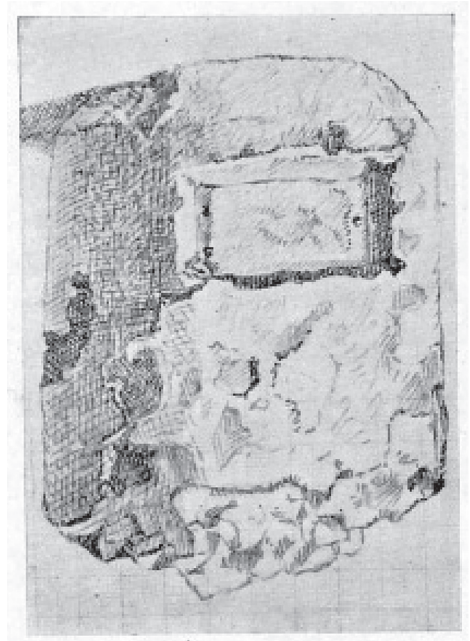


Fig. 2. Old drawing of the pillar and lead plaque (Víctor Català, *apud* ALMAGRO 1952).

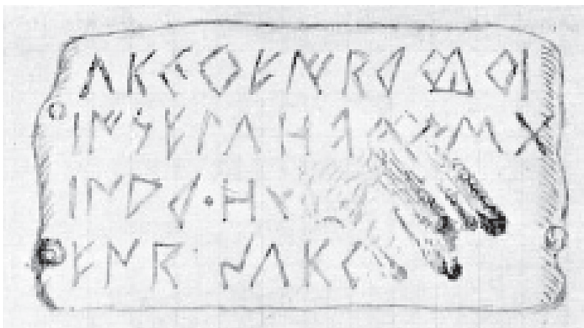


Fig. 3. Old drawing of the lead plaque and the Iberian inscription (Víctor Català, *apud* ALMAGRO 1952).

*Origin and fate of the Víctor Català Collection*

As mentioned before, this lead plaque was originally part of the Víctor Català (Caterina Albert) archaeological collection, gathered before the beginning of the official excavations in Empúries in 1908. Before that date, illegal excavators and treasure hunters had searched the site and its necropolis: the objects were unearthed and immediately sold on the Antiquities market. In this context, Caterina Albert acquired land in the surroundings of Empúries in order to carry out her own prospections and study the material, thereby gathering a rich collection of archaeological artefacts.

In the summer of 1936, shortly after the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, many of the pieces in this ensemble were confiscated by order of the Generalitat, the Catalan Government, with the aim of protecting the collective heritage from the unpredictable consequences of the conflict. The successive relocations of the objects, which caused their progressive deterioration, as well as the management of the collection's property rights, has been since then a controversial issue, which needs to be understood within the framework of the unfortunate events of the war and immediate post-war period (5). In any case, the specific circumstances of this confiscation process can be studied through the first-hand testimony left by its protagonists in personal letters and diaries, documentation which is nowadays mainly located in the Empúries Museum archives. In this regard, the diary written by Emili Gandia, who excavated Empúries from 1908 till 1936, is highly eloquent: his testimony reveals that Caterina Albert yielded, more or less voluntarily, her collection to the Empúries Museum (6). It was the Catalan Government councillor for Culture, Ventura Gassol, who asked the director of the excavations, Pere Bosch i Gimpera, to intervene in order to ensure the relocation of the objects in the Museum. Although the preparation of the collection's transfer lasted a whole month, a substantial part of it was finally lost or misplaced in the process, as was the case for our lead plaque until recently.

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(5) On this question, see, for instance, AYENSA 2007, pp. 47-59; OLIVERAS 1996, pp. 415-429; BOFARULL 1991, pp. 229-235.

(6) This documentation has also been published and discussed by OLIVERAS 1996, pp. 415-429.

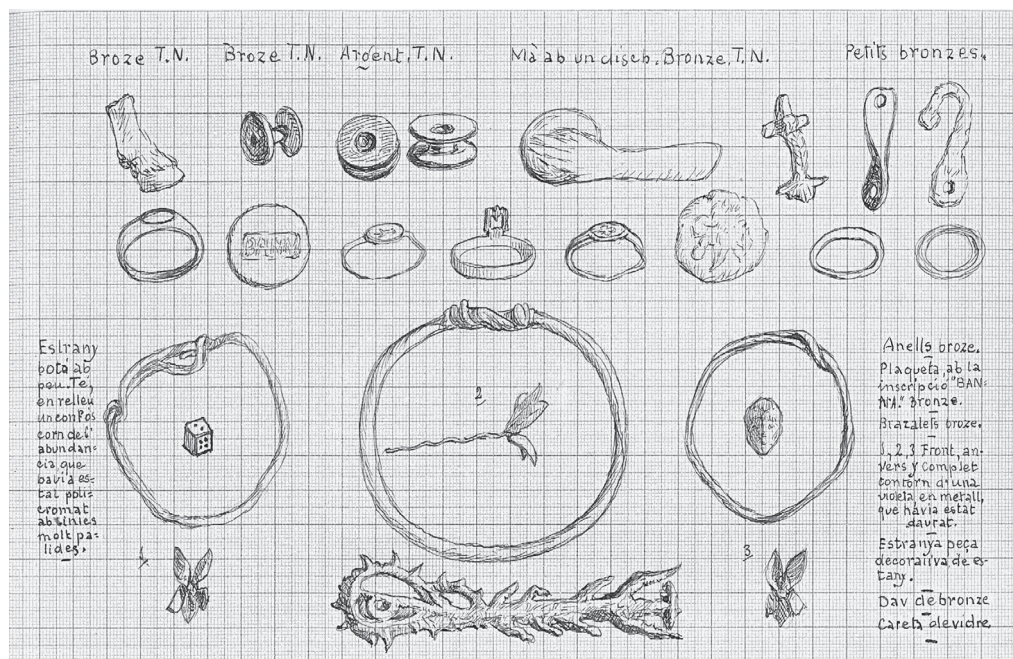


Fig. 4. Page of the notebook where Víctor Català used to draw the objects of her collection (photo by B. Bofarull).

Today, the few pieces of this collection that have finally survived are distributed between several archaeological museums in Catalonia (in Barcelona, Girona and Empúries) on the one hand, and Víctor Català's house itself, owned by the heirs of the writer, on the other, as is the case with our lead plaque. In the absence of a general catalogue of the collection, the only available overview of the objects owned by Víctor Català (7) comes from a notebook that she filled with all kind of annotations and accurate drawings (Fig. 4) (8). These notes were actually the only available data on which the previous publications of our inscription relied.

(7) In the 1960's, Ll. Pericot and J. Maluquer undertook the project of publishing the entire Víctor Català collection. The study was to appear in three volumes: the first for the bronzes and lead pieces, including the coins; the second with ceramics; and a third volume with jewels. However, the death of the writer prevented the completion of the project, so that only the numismatic part of the collection was finally published. In this regard, see MALUQUER 1968.

(8) This notebook has been commented and discussed in several publications: see BOFARULL 1991, pp. 229-235; BOFARULL 1993, pp. 521-531.

### *Description and typology of the object*

The peculiarity of our inscription comes from the fact that it combines several unusual features as regards attested ancient epigraphic habits. These characteristics, which will be analysed in detail in the following paragraphs, can be summarized as follows:

- The provenance of the artefact, its layout and the formulas found in the text clearly rule out an identification as a trade-related document or a *defixio*, which are the most common documents attested on lead.
- Moreover, its physical characteristics singles it out from the majority of the Iberian inscriptions on this material, most of which are preserved on thin sheets, often found folded. In some cases, these sheets were also punched, probably with the purpose of being used as labels or attached to something. In this case, on the other hand, the thickness of the object as well as the fact that it had been nailed to a stone pillar has led us to qualify it as a lead plaque rather than a sheet.
- Finally, this plaque was especially designed for public display, which was not the case of the other Iberian inscriptions on lead.

### *The Iberian inscriptions on lead: trade-related documents or defixiones?*

The use of lead as a writing material is especially well attested in the Iberian Peninsula, where this habit might have been encouraged by the famous local mining resources, which had been exploited since remote times. About a hundred lead documents inscribed in Iberian are known today, most of which are substantially longer than the documents attested in this language on other writing materials. However, since the Iberian language remains only partially understood, it is not possible to ascertain the precise content of these texts, for which several interpretations have been proposed.

Written lead sheets are, of course, well attested in the *katadesmoi* or *defixiones* found in other ancient epigraphic traditions such as Greek, Latin or Etruscan (9). In the light of these parallels, one

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(9) See, for instance, AUDOLLENT 1904; JORDAN 1985 and 2001; GAGER 1992; KROPP





Fig. 5a. Reverse of the lead plaque with the four nails (picture by B. Bofarull).



Fig. 5b. Current aspect of the lead plaque and the inscription (picture by B. Bofarull).

could be tempted to interpret the Iberian lead documents as curse tablets as well. However, we must acknowledge the fact that at the moment we have no Iberian lead sheet that can unquestionably fit such an interpretation (10). As a matter of fact, we would dare

2008, among others. For the Etruscan curse tablets, see recently MASSARELLI 2014, pp. 177-221.

(10) One of the few documents that might admit such an interpretation is precisely one of the other documents written on lead from Empúries (*MLH C.1.6*): it comes from the Asklepion, it does not contain the usual words identifiable in the typical commercial lead sheets (see *infra*) and,

to say that the negative and sinister symbolic charge often attributed to lead in order to explain the common use of this metal for the *defixiones* (11) does not seem to have prevailed in the Iberian world, where its frequent use as a writing material appears to have been primarily due to practical reasons: lead was abundant, easy to extract, process and inscribe, to transport, store and reuse, as well as durable and cheap (12).

Another category of texts on lead attested in the Ancient Mediterranean are trade-related documents, such as legal contracts or letters bearing on trade activities (13). As a matter of fact, most of the Iberian written documents on lead seem to fit best in this category, as can be inferred from the frequent occurrence of words related to the field of money (equally attested in coin legends), numeral expressions (both lexical and strictly numerical), greeting formulas, as well as from the presence of personal names in the documents (possibly contractors and/or witnesses).

Be that as it may, our particular text does not display either the formal characteristics of trade-related documents or those of curse tablets: its physical aspect as well as the formulas employed in the text do not fit in these epigraphic categories. Since it was originally displayed in a necropolis, one would be more inclined to identify it as funerary.

### *Punched lead documents: labels and plaques*

The physical characteristics of lead, a material, as emphasized above, easy to handle, make it possible to fix it on other objects and to employ it as a label tied or attached, for instance, to a re-

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finally, both its shape, very irregular, and the hand-writing and layout, which are very inaccurate, are features that make this exemplar different from most of the other Iberian inscriptions on lead. Nevertheless, no intratextual argument allow for a decisive interpretation of the text as a *defixio*.

(11) The symbolic importance of lead, a hard, cold, dark metal, has been often underlined to explain its common use for the *defixiones*, messages sent to the underworld. See, for instance, AUDOLLENT 1904, pp. xlvii-xlix. However, it might also be appropriate to recall the therapeutic properties and cosmetic uses attributed to lead in Antiquity (see for instance Pliny the Elder, *Nat. Hist.*, XXXIV 47sq.) as well as the frequency with which it was employed for very different uses in everyday life.

(12) For the ancient exploitation of lead in the Northern Iberian territory, see MORELL 2010.

(13) See, for instance, the Greek lead sheets from Empúries (SANMARTÍ - SANTIAGO 1987) and Pech Maho (LEJEUNE - POUILLOUX 1998), as well as the Etruscan lead sheet from Pech Maho (MASSARELLI 2014, 221-228, with previous bibliography).

ipient or a product. Even though many Iberian lead documents have been found folded, it is also quite common to find inscribed lead sheets with holes, implying that they might have been designed to be attached to another element.

A good parallel to understand the multiplicity of uses of these punched lead documents in Antiquity can be found in the nearby territory of southern Gaul, where a hundred Latin lead labels have been found. They contain all sort of information related to artisanal or trade activities, such as mentions of prices, quantities and weights, description of products, as well as specification of names that most likely correspond to the owner of the goods. In a similar way, it is also not unusual to find more specific references related to artisanal activities, such as dyer labels or indications of clothes darning (14).

In the Etruscan tradition, it is also possible to identify a totally different case of small inscribed lead plaques designed to be attached to other objects: in that case they were embedded in standardized funerary urns. These texts, attested by several exemplars from Perugia, contain the onomastic *formulae* enabling the identification of the deceased, which would have been otherwise impossible to recognize (15).

These parallels illustrate the variety of the uses of lead sheets or plaques that were designed to be attached. As we can see, these documents were principally used in the spheres of craft and trade, but other uses were also possible, as illustrated by the Perugia funerary plaques.

### *Epigraphy on lead: private or public use?*

Although, on a technical level, lead was perfectly suitable for being fixed on a larger container for public display, the base appearance of this material, which quickly loses its shiny metallic aspect when exposed to open air, as well as the fact that a text inscribed on lead could easily be altered by a third party made it quite inappropriate for official inscriptions, in comparison to bronze or stone.

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(14) See BOŽIČ - FEUGÈRE 2004, pp. 27-28.

(15) See MASSARELLI 2014, pp. 234-237.

For this reason, if there is, after all, one common denominator for all these lead inscriptions mentioned above, it is that they all seem to have been restricted to the private sphere, unlike the case that now occupies us. Unlike most of the Iberian epigraphic practices, this lead sheet was not folded but fixed to a cylindrical stone pillar which had been previously carved to receive it. A public use of inscriptions on lead is not only unknown in the Iberian world but also rare in the ancient world in a broader sense (16).

To sum up, the lead plaque from the Víctor Català collection is an epigraphic *unicum*, documenting the clear use of a lead document for public display, which has led scholars to propose different interpretations. The text being opaque in itself, none of them can be definitive: M. Gómez Moreno (17), in the first edition of the inscription, interpreted it as a cylindrical sepulchral stele; J. Untermann (18), on the other hand, preferred to exclude it from the Iberian funerary texts, given the fact that it is not possible to identify on it the characteristic elements of these inscriptions (e.g. the words **eban(en)**, **ařetake**, **seltar**); to this argument, J. Velaza (19) added the observation that this kind of monument, in the shape of column or pillar, does not necessarily have to be sepulchral, and pointed out the fact that it might also be a sign used to indicate a specific place in the necropolis, or even the base of a statue; I. Simón (20), in turn, considered that, given the provenance of the artefact, the interpretation as a funerary inscription continues to be the most plausible one.

### *Edition and lexical analysis of the text*

As we have previously pointed out, this lead sheet has already been studied in several publications on the basis of Víctor Català's drawings and old pictures (21). The stone pillar to which

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(16) See however Pliny the Elder, *Nat. Hist.* XIII 68-69, who seems to mention a use of lead for official purposes: «First of all people used to write on palm-leaves and then on the bark of certain trees, and afterwards folding sheets of lead began to be employed for official monuments [*publica monumenta*] and then also sheets of linen or tablets of wax for private documents» (translation Loeb edition).

(17) GÓMEZ MORENO 1949, p. 325.

(18) UNTERMANN 1990 = *MLH* III (C.1.5).

(19) VELAZA 2003, p. 182.

(20) SIMÓN 2013, p. 163.

(21) The main editions are GÓMEZ MORENO 1949, ALMAGRO 1952, MALUQUER 1968 and UNTERMANN 1990.

the plaque was attached (Fig. 1 and 2) has not been relocated, so we must still follow these previous editions, which are themselves based on information provided by the owner. According to these previous notices, the pillar was *ca.* 32 cm diameter by 40 cm in height, although only its upper part was preserved. The plaque, on the other hand, is roughly 6.50×17.50 cm. (22)

As regards the reading of the text, the main studies differ substantially, which is quite understandable given the deterioration of some parts of the object:

	GÓMEZ MORENO 1949	ALMAGRO 1952	MALUQUER 1968	UNTERMANN 1990
l. 1	lakefeiarduú	lakere i arduru	lakef iar duřba	lakefeiaruú
l. 2	baisegolos kuberesta	baisegolos · guberesda	baisebilos · kulesta	baisebilos · <u>belešta</u> <i>vel</i> <u>kulešta</u>
l. 3	bargor oke[	bargor · oke[	banar · or[	banar · or[- - - -] +re
l. 4	enatilar	enadilar	enatilar	enatilar

My new proposal for the text would be as follows:

	New reading
l. 1	lakefeiar · tuř <u>ba</u>
l. 2	baisebilos · <u>belešta</u>
l. 3	banar · or[ c. 4/5 ]ś
l. 4	enatilar

### *Reading and palaeographic observations*

The last signs of lines 1 and 3 are uncertain, as is the possible presence of an interpunction in the first line of the text. By contrast, the reading **belešta** instead of **kulešta** at the end of the second line is certain, as is the reading of the sixth character of line 3, which is undoubtedly a trill **ř** instead of **r**. Regarding the *vacat* in line 3, there would be clearly room for at least four or even five signs, as shown in my restitution proposal (Fig. 7).

(22) It must be noted that the dimensions usually given for the plaque until now were 6.5×11.5 cm.

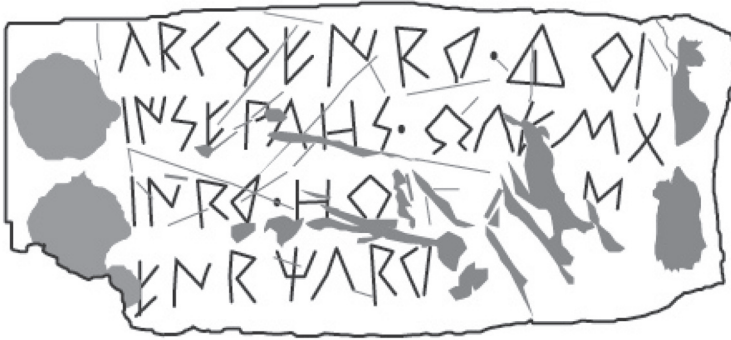


Fig. 6. Drawing of the inscription.

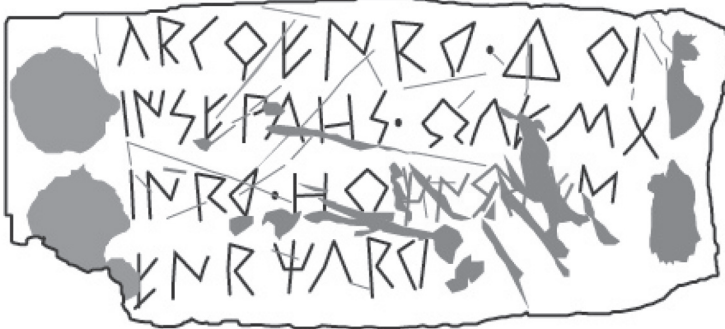


Fig. 7. Drawing of the inscription with hypothetical restitution for the lost part of the text.

As regards the palaeography, the shape of **a** (**a6**) is remarkable. This shape is attested in other inscriptions from Empúries, as well as in a good number of inscriptions from southern France. The Iberian variant used is the north-eastern non-dual system, which is fully consistent with the general dating of the necropolis (2<sup>nd</sup>-1<sup>st</sup> century BC) (23).

### *Lexical analysis*

The lack of typological parallels hampers the analysis and functional interpretation of the text, and it must be recalled at this point that, since the Iberian language is only partially deciphered,

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(23) On the chronology of the dual system, see FERRER 2005, pp. 972-973.

the typological analysis of the inscriptions remains one of the most effective resources to approach the Iberian documentation. Its structural and semantic analysis, on the other hand, remains very complex, and the following lines must therefore merely be understood as an attempt at interpretation.

As some of the previous editors had already pointed out, it seems possible to identify a series of personal names in the text, though their segmentation and morphological analysis is not always absolutely clear.

**lakériar (l. 1):** it is very plausibly a personal name. Interestingly, its first component is also attested in other inscriptions from Empúries itself: **lakérbela[ur]** (C.1.27) in one Iberian inscription on stone, as well as in a Latin sepulchral inscription bearing the text *L(ucio) Aemilio / Montano / Bacasitano / Lacerilis f(ilio) / h(ic) s(itus) e(st)* (CIL II, 4625 = IRC III, 50 = IRC V, 86). On the other hand, the interpretation of the second part of the name remains doubtful: J. Untermann has proposed **-eiar** as a variant of the Iberian anthroponymical element **iar/ian** (*MLH* III.1, §7.56), but the parallel is not at all self-evident. R. Ramos (24) has proposed an alternative segmentation as **laké-ei-ar**, which would present the advantage of isolating a suffix **-ar**, repeated in other forms of the text, thereby suggesting some kind of grammatical agreement, or parallel structure among these words. However, this segmentation would also leave a second personal name element **-ei-** without any parallels for the moment. The suffix **-ar** is well attested in combination with Iberian personal names in the property *formulae* attested on ceramic vases: this is the reason why it has traditionally been assumed that this suffix bore a value close to the genitive.

**túrba (l. 1):** it seems that this sequence is separated from the rest of the text by an interpunction and must therefore be considered as an independent word, even if we do not have exact parallels for it in the current Iberian lexicon. It must be underlined that words ending in an **-a** are rare in this language. If the isolation of a radical **túr** is acceptable, it might be adduced as a parallel to the word **túrane**, which can be isolated in several instances on two of

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(24) RODRÍGUEZ RAMOS 2014, pp. 149-150.

the lead sheets from Orlell (Castelló, València) (F.9.5 and F.9.7). Interestingly, these sheets were also found in graves, which led certain scholars to interpret them as funerary texts as well. (25) E. Orduña, on the other hand, proposes an interpretation of this radical as a verb. (26) From my point of view, an interpretation as a substantive, taking into account the possible identification of the prefix **-ar** in the preceding personal name should not be entirely ruled out either.

**baisebilos (l. 2)**: personal name composed by two anthroponymical components well attested in the Iberian repertory: **baise** (*MLH* III.1 §7.23), and **bilos** (*MLH* III.1 §7.39).

**beleštabanar (l. 2-3)**: probably also a personal name formed on the anthroponymic elements **beleš** and **ta(r)ban**, followed by the suffix **-ar**, which must be linked in all likelihood to the expression of property. The same suffix could be repeated in two of the other personal names attested in the inscription (**lakeřeiar** and **enatilar**).

**or[-c. 4/5-]ś (l. 3)**: the beginning of the sequence could be the initial part of yet another personal name formed by the well-known anthroponymical element **ortin** (*MLH* III.1 §7.95). The second element is, nevertheless, impossible to restore with certainty, due to the damage to the lead surface. If the last sign is actually an **ś**, we might think of **beleš** (cf. fig. 7 for the restitution), already documented in the previous name **beleštabanar**. In that case, the personal name would not present any suffixal mark.

**enatilar (l. 4)**: it might be another personal name built on the element **en(a)** (*MLH* III.1 §7.52); however, a second element **til** or **(a)til** does not exactly match with any anthroponymic element known up to now. The existence of the sequence **atilar**, attested in the votive rock-inscriptions of Osseja (Pyrénées-Orientales, France) (B.23.21), should also be recalled. At the end of the sequence, it might be possible, once again, to recognise the suffix **-ar**, possibly attested as well in two of the previous personal names (**lakeřeiar** and **beleštabanar**).

(25) DE HOZ 1995, p. 60.

(26) ORDUÑA 2005, pp. 157-159.



Taking all of that into consideration, the possible anthroponymical forms and the suffixed and non-suffixed words, the internal structure of the text could be schematised as follows:

NP-**ar** **tu**́**ba**  
 NP NP-**ar**  
 NP NP-**ar**

Given the accumulation of personal names, the possibility that the text contains two or even three onomastic formulas must be considered. Although the funerary character of the text is not assured, if, in the end, the inscription contained some kind of funerary formula, the most plausible interpretation would be to identify the name of the deceased, followed perhaps by the name of the dedicants.

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