

ERASURE IN LATE ANTIQUITY

EDITED BY
KAY BOERS, BECCA GROSE
REBECCA USHERWOOD, GUY WALKER

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Erasure in Late Antiquity

Edited by

Kay Boers

Becca Grose

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Guy Walker

Sylloge

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CONSPICUOUS ABSENCES IN LATE ANTIQUE GALLIC FUNERARY TEXTS, VI-VII CENTURIES CE: ERRORS, ERASURES, OR INSCRIBING UNCERTAINTY?

BECCA GROSE*

Abstract

Morgane Uberti recently noted the intentional creation of textual lacunae in the dating formulae of inscriptions from post-Roman Gaul. By analyzing the wider preservation of textual and material lacunae in epigraphic formulae from sixth- and seventh-century Gaul, this chapter argues that we need to re-assess our tendency to view these deviations as errors and consider how far conspicuous absences functioned as forms of public memory negotiation that extended beyond the political sphere to encompass wider social standing. These patterns mirror aspects of the Roman erasure processes and, through juxtaposition, shed light on the distinctive features of late Roman erasure.

I. Introduction

While the erasure of names and details on epigraphic texts has been detailed across the Roman empire, this practice appear to have died down by the sixth century CE in Gaul. Such a claim comes with the immediate and significant caveat that far fewer dedicatory or honorific inscriptions survive from Gaul vis-à-vis Visigothic Spain or Ostrogothic Italy, and

* Centre for Advanced Studies, “Migration and Mobility in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages,” Universität Tübingen, Germany/ Centre for Medieval Studies, University of York, United Kingdom.

those that do have not undergone significant study or compilation. In consequence, we possess far fewer extant texts of the type where Roman erasures are most often identified than we do for earlier periods. There may also be significant regional preservation factors, unless Gaul was a complete outlier. Given these uncertainties around preservation, it is not my position here that epigraphic erasure had definitively declined by the Merovingian era. Nonetheless, the implications of this apparent decline for the study of memory and commemoration in the Merovingian world have not received sufficient attention. Moreover, the possible end to this strategy of memory negotiation raises the intriguing question of what alternatives were available in sixth- and seventh-century Gaul, and to what extent we can consider such practices to functionally resemble earlier processes of erasure in altering communal memory of the deceased.

First, we must identify a suitable corpus. To pursue the hypothesis that erasure-like processes in Gaul may have been transformed into a form we do not immediately recognize, we might best focus on the material preservation of memory in Southern Gaul, the region for which we have better literary and epigraphic records. According to the estimates of Mark Handley, we possess somewhere under 4000 inscriptions from fourth- to seventh-century Gaul.¹ Admittedly, many of these texts are fragmentary and most are epitaphs: as we saw earlier, we possess few of the honorific and dedicatory inscriptions that have until recently dominated most modern analyses of (late-)Roman erasure. Moreover, unlike the epitaphs studied by Mali Skotheim elsewhere in this volume, we have no evidence for either the systematic or irregular erasure of epitaphs in late antique Gaul.² Nonetheless, I propose here that the

¹ Handley estimates there are c. 3500 Latin Christian inscriptions, and we can add the pagan, Jewish, Greek, and Runic texts that he excluded: Mark A. Handley, “Merovingian Epigraphy, Frankish Epigraphy, and the Epigraphy of the Merovingian World,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Merovingian World*, ed. Bonnie Effros and Isabel Moreira, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 564-565. This increases on his previous estimate of c. 4000 between Gaul and Spain: Mark A. Handley, *Death, Society and Culture: Inscriptions and Epitaphs in Gaul and Spain, AD 300-750*, (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2003), 167. The logic behind these estimations is not clearly outlined so it is hard to assess how far they account for different types of epigraphic material and its preservation and cataloging circumstances.

² For the very limited erasure of epitaphs in earlier periods, see Maureen Carroll, “*Memoria* and *Damnatio Memoriae*. Preserving and Erasing Identities in Roman Funerary

inscriptions of late antique Gaul may still provide a useful contribution to our study of erasure in Merovingian Gaul, through their use and preservation of an alternative and unexpected form of textual and material memory sanction: conspicuous absence and blank spaces.

The nature of our material evidence poses a complication, however: we lack good find contexts for most inscriptions from late antique Gaul. Moreover, few inscriptions include the names of donors, limiting textual attempts at localization. Although methods have been developed to try and link epitaphs to cemeteries on artistic or paleographic grounds, this does not help us substantially either: even if we accept Mark Handley's argument that some cemeteries can be linked to their own preferred workshops through a "house style," we do not possess enough epitaphs with absences to be able to draw systematic conclusions at that level.³

Charles Hedrick's distinction between the intentions behind an erasure and the consequences it had for potential audience reception offers a useful angle to approach the lack of original context. He justified this with the reasoning that "even where the reason for the omission of an office is innocuous, the implications of its absence may be serious."⁴ This claim has recently been developed further by Ida Östenberg, who suggested that preservation was in fact an integral part of the erasure process, as evidence for its acceptance.⁵ Both Hedrick and Östenberg suggest that the value of an erased text comes equally or more from its appearance to future audiences than what it meant to its initial creator. Hence, while we cannot look for authors and original intent, we can ask how and why gaps came to be preserved in Merovingian epitaphs and what that preservation might signify to future audiences about the appropriate way to remember the deceased.

Commemoration," in *Living through the Dead: Burial and Commemoration in the Classical World*, ed. Jane E. Rempel and John F. Drinkwater (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2011), 65-90.

³ Mark A. Handley, *Death, Society and Culture*, 27-29. This builds on: *Recueil des inscriptions chrétiennes de la Gaule antérieures à la Renaissance carolingienne, I: Première Belgique*, ed. Nancy Gauthier (Paris: CNRS, 1975), 27-36.

⁴ Charles Hedrick, *History and Silence: Purge and Rehabilitation of Memory in Late Antiquity* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000), 35.

⁵ Ida Östenberg, "Damnatio Memoriae Inscribed: The Materiality of Cultural Repression," in *The Materiality of Text – Placement, Perception, and Presence of Inscribed Texts in Classical Antiquity*, ed. Andrej Petrovic, Ivana Petrovic, and Edmund Thomas (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 324-347.

Using this approach, the aim of the remainder of this chapter is not to provide a conclusive argument for the use or function of absence in sixth- and seventh-century epitaphs, but to evaluate how far it merits further investigation as a potential form of memory negotiation through the examination of some select examples. First, I will hypothesize how some types of absence, which I will term “formulaic absence” given its reliance on knowledge of expected formulae, could function similarly to erasure, and the necessary conditions. Second, by focusing on how these types of absence are manifested materially and textually in inscriptions, I will establish the situations in which an absence or blank space that is preserved in place of expected details can or could function as a “formulaic absence.” Third, using the contemporary work of Avitus of Vienne, I will evaluate how far these “formulaic absences” could function similarly in other, non-epigraphic funerary texts. Through identifying how the characteristics of earlier texts conceived of as “erasure” are perpetuated or altered by those identified here as “formulaic absence,” the chapter will end with some thoughts on how further comparative study may develop our understanding of erasure as a process and contribute to our understanding of memory and status in the early Merovingian world.

II. Absence and Erasure in Sixth- and Seventh-Century Gallic Inscriptions

Recent studies of absences or lacunae in sixth- and seventh-century Gallic inscriptions can be characterized by their focus on either the study of material gaps or that of textual gaps. These two types of lacuna frequently coexist but there are exceptions – while material gaps frequently correspond with textual gaps, textual gaps do not always correspond with material gaps. That is, some inscriptions leave out an expected word (even one upon which the grammar of the sentence depends) without leaving a corresponding empty space.

Studies focused on material absence – blank spaces in regular English – have, until recently, dominated discussion in the field of Merovingian epigraphy. The most prominent opinion is that they are errors, likely a result of pre-made stones. This argument is made at various points by Françoise Descombes in her edition of the inscriptions of Viennensis and has been repeated more recently and forcefully by Mark Handley.

Still, there are subtle and important differences of interpretation. Descombes accepts the creation of these gaps as part of the production process, yet her argument presumes that neither artisans nor the wider population would have intended for these gaps to remain permanently; rather, something went wrong.⁶ Although Handley likewise assumes that these gaps were pre-planned, he implies that the purchaser simply had to make do with what was available and that, in some cases, this involved the purchase of a pre-designed epitaph with sections that they did not want to fill or could not afford to fill: he supports his argument with recourse to what he terms “the most important inscription in Gaul,” a sixth-century epitaph for a man named Leonidius.⁷ Thus, Handley and Descombes assume, on the basis of material evidence, that while people did purchase or obtain an inscription containing gaps, they did not do so through any desire to display or preserve the absences.

This consensus has been shaken by Morgane Uberti, in her recent study of temporal phrases in Merovingian epitaphs. Uberti analyzed inscriptions that do not contain any visible, material absences – there are no conspicuous blank spaces. Yet, she demonstrated a clear pattern among 44 inscriptions from sixth- and seventh-century Eastern Gaul, whereby in 6, the names of various Frankish kings have simply been omitted from the inscribed text.⁸ As she observes, the text is often nonsensical without these names, both syntactically but also in the tension between the precision of regnal years against the uncertainty of the king, such as “*anno [vi?]ix regno*” (the ?th year of reign).⁹ Of most significance for us, this error only affects regnal names, and does not occur in other parts of the dating formula or in epitaphs that use consular dating. Rather than an error, or a preference for a different type of phrasing, she argued that the absence of regnal names was both conspicuous and deliberate. Moreover, given that many inscriptions contain multiple dating formulae, she suggested that the absence of regnal names from these inscriptions did not remove the viewer’s

⁶ E.g., *Recueil des inscriptions chrétiennes de la Gaule antérieures à la Renaissance carolingienne XV: Viennoise du Nord*, ed. Françoise Descombes (Paris: CNRS, 1985), 703 on the inscription RICG XV.270, which we will discuss later. Hence, RICG XV.

⁷ Handley, “Merovingian Epigraphy,” 566-567, quote 566.

⁸ Morgane Uberti, “Un règne sans roi : le non-dit du temps dans quelques inscriptions de la Gaule du haut Moyen Âge” in *Words in the Middle Ages/Les Mots au Moyen Âge*, ed. Victoria Turner and Vincent Debais (Turnhout: Brepols, 2020), 181-208.

⁹ RICG. VIII.55.

awareness of the date, nor of the absent king and thus the absence of regnal names was not only deliberate but also functioned as a form of memory negotiation, albeit of a more deep-seated fundamental kind than the political resistance posited by Frank Clover in his study of Vandal kings and innovations in dating formulae that precluded the need to use their name in epigraphic dates, or Mark Handley's political reading of different Burgundian modes of timekeeping.¹⁰

Instead for Uberti, the significance of this pattern is twofold: the temporal expectations of the audience may have differed from those of modern viewers, and the absence of the names does not mean they were unknown to the audience per se but rather that their absence lent new meaning to the text. She then developed these ideas further, to consider the meaning of temporality and its (in)finiteness to medieval audiences, and the place of the kings and the dead within that landscape. For us, however, the same two issues may lend themselves to thinking about how we can develop frameworks to analyze the significance of absence in sixth- and seventh-century epitaphs more broadly, by placing absence in the dating formula in dialogue with absence in other expected parts of the epitaph. By considering these two components of her argument we may reassess our wider understanding of material gaps in these epitaphs from the boundary between Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages, and whether such material gaps are expected to be filled, or if the silence itself could be the message.

A. Epitaph for Orontius, Saintes (Aquitaine,) Sixth Century CE

Not all absences are equally suitable for making the same points, as we can see by analyzing one of the epitaphs from Morgane Uberti's study, the epitaph for a man named Orontius. We can see clearly that the final line "*anno XIIIIII regno dom(i)ni nostr*" may be syntactically incomplete but the visual schema confirms that the text itself is complete. As Uberti notes, the precision in the date challenges the imprecision in the dating system of which it forms part, suggesting that we are not dealing with an administrative problem. Like in Roman political erasures and absences,

¹⁰ Frank M. Clover, "Timekeeping and Dyarchy in Vandal Africa," *Antiquité tardive* 11 (2004): 45-64; Mark A. Handley, "Inscribing Time and Identity in the Kingdom of Burgundy," in *Ethnicity and Culture in Late Antiquity*, ed. Stephen Mitchell and Geoffrey Greatrex (London: Duckworth, 2000), 83-102.

contemporary viewers could infer the name of the absent king. As a result, the lacuna may or may not be intentional, but its contradictory nature appears to form part of the original structure and to do so without any apparent subsequent challenge.

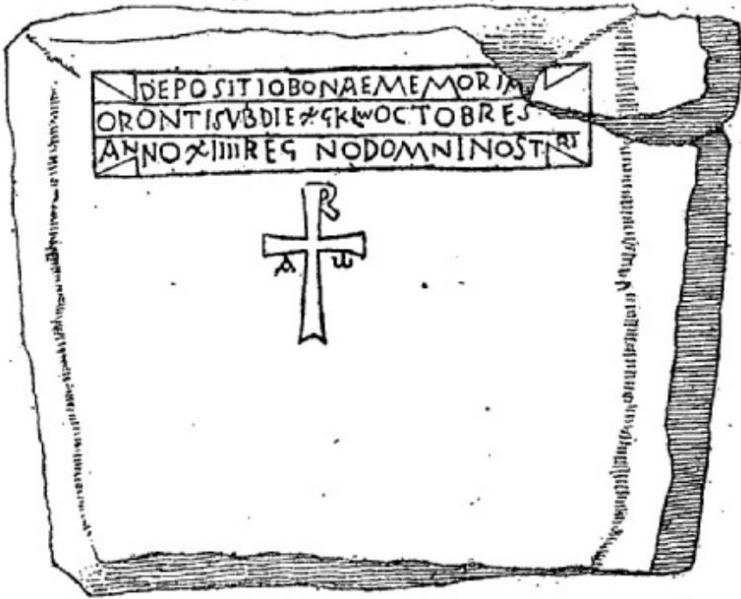


Fig. 1. Le Blant NICG 274¹¹

Transcription (1.1-3): *Depositio bonae memoria[e]/Oronti sub die x[.] k(a)l(endas) octobres[s]/ anno xiiii regno dom(i)ni nostri.*

Translation (1.1-3): The grave of the well-remembered Orontius (who died) on the ? of the kalends of October, during the fourteenth year of the reign of [sic], our lord.¹²

¹¹ *Nouveau recueil d'inscriptions chrétiennes de la Gaule antérieures au VIII^e siècle*, ed. Edmond Le Blant (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1892), 288. Hence, NICG (inscriptions) and *Nouveau recueil* (book).

¹² The second line of this transcription is heavily indebted to Uberti's reading: Uberti, "Un règne sans roi," 185.

The case that all missing details could be provided by the audience is harder to make for forms of erasure or absence that occur outside the upper echelons of the political arena, where one epitaph is often our only evidence for the deceased at all. Rather, we (and presumably later contemporaries) must often rely on the predictable type of information more than the specific information itself. Hence to investigate the question of absence as a wider tool for memory negotiation, we need to identify other, formulaic elements of the epitaph in which the absent information can be inferred by the reader and where the absence itself is generative of further denotations or connotations.

The time clauses in funerary epitaphs for lesser-known individuals provide suitable avenues to begin our enquiry. We can see a good comparative example in an erased early medieval Gallic epitaph from Angers, last altered in the tenth century – a few centuries after our period of investigation.

B. Inscription for Durant: Angers, Tenth Century CE (final use)

Transcription (l.1-2): *Hic requiescit corpus nomine Durant/[vacat][...V]IC. Obiit [vacat.] Omnes...* [text continues on subsequent lines].¹³

Translation (l.1-2): Here lies the body named Durant [erased space] [...V]IC. He died [erased space.] Everyone... [text continues on subsequent lines].

The name of the first deceased recipient of this text and his death date have been deliberately erased: the name “Durant” has been inserted in the first line, but the subsequent erased spaces in the second line, before and after *obiit*, have been left vacant, where we might expect to see the man’s age at death and date of death. Although a recent article by Vincent Debiais argues that the epitaph is not an example of *dammatio memoriae* but a pragmatic retouching so that the text could be reused for

¹³ Transcription from images provided in: Vincent Debiais, “Taire ou pointer le traître? Trahison et mémoire dans la communication épigraphique au Moyen Âge,” in *La trahison au Moyen Âge: De la monstruosité au crime politique (Ve-XVe siècle)*, ed. Myriam Soria and Maïté Billoré (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2008,) <https://books.openedition.org/pur/125517> (accessed December 2, 2022), § 10-13; Cécile Treffort, *Mémoires carolingiennes. L'épithaphe entre célébration mémorielle, genre littéraire et manifeste politique (milieu VIIIe-début XIe siècle)*, (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2007), 160.

a new deceased person, this argument does not address its preservation: viewers who saw the extant text would be aware that not only did its former recipient Durant no longer merit an inscription but also, for some reason, his replacement did not either.¹⁴

Rather than an emergency reattribution, the extant text creates a visual narrative that prioritizes decommission. The absences highlight that either no one could be found to reuse it, or no one wanted the text to be reused. Moreover, the preservation of this epitaph and its “pragmatic” erasures suggests that there was a value within these now-blank spaces, and that this value may have come not only from what is erased but also from what is retained – even if these are the only markers and the man is otherwise unknown. To understand this text and its relationship to those studied by Uberti, we need to step outside models of *damnatio memoriae*, and consider how more recent work on Roman erasure understands the relationship between erasure and absence.

III. “Formulaic Absence”

Erasure and absence have been intermittently discussed together in studies of the earlier Roman empire. In his study from 2000, Charles Hedrick explicitly distinguishes between the use of “ostentatious erasures and noticeable omissions” as twin aspects of what he terms “*damnatio memoriae*.”¹⁵ The omissions that Hedrick focuses on are not explicitly defined, but we can sketch a rough outline by considering the examples that he uses: the omission of priesthoods and similar offices in later texts that served to rehabilitate political figures.¹⁶ For Hedrick, then, “noticeable omissions” encompass the absence of known information about someone’s career, in ways that reshape their life’s narrative. The omissions he addresses are unmarked, that is, the reader needs to know the career of the deceased to know what is missing. Without that knowledge, it is unclear how far readers could identify or interpret the amendment (and indeed he suggests that the audience of such omissions

¹⁴ Debiais, “Taire ou pointer le traître,” § 10-13. The central point still stands even if the epitaph was not completed because Durant received a fresh epitaph: viewers would be aware that there was tension surrounding his commemoration. For the discussion of this epitaph within the wider evidence of epitaph re-use, see Treffort, *Mémoires*, 160-163.

¹⁵ Hedrick, *History and Silence*, xii.

¹⁶ Hedrick, *History and Silence*, 17-18; 33-39.

and equivalent erasures was correspondingly small).¹⁷ What Hedrick terms omissions are primarily distinct from erasures because of their unmarked, silent nature against the “ostentatious” nature of erasure.

Most recent study of Roman erasure references the 2006 work of Harriet Flower. Flower’s work is most known for coining the term “memory negotiation” and shifting the primary focus of conversation to the ways that the physical alteration and partial removal or damage to the names of political figures on public monuments functioned alongside a series of other methods in portraiture, performance and literature to publicly “negotiate” memory, rather than as a separate and distinct process of *damnatio memoriae*.¹⁸ Flower’s work was and continues to be significant for the ways that it reframed the function of the created silence in Roman political erasures as a prompt to speak and negotiate, rather than as a silencing technique or something distinct to the material domain. Since Flower, various scholars have adopted and expanded upon her model, to analyze how viewing erasure as a tool for negotiation might alter our understanding of (late) Roman political culture, strategies of legitimation, and the function of epigraphy within that.¹⁹ Less attention has been given to the implications of her work for thinking about the power of created absences that are not also the consequence of erasure, and how far and by what means this is a useful distinction.

In consequence, the twin legacy of Hedrick and Flower has left an uncertainty in the relationship between erasure and absence, and more broadly an uncertain framework for studying erasure. While both see non-presence as forming an integral part of the way that (late) Romans altered and navigated the physical memory of earlier figures, their choice of models limits further comparison. This can be seen through the foundational comparisons they take, where Hedrick opposes erasure to

¹⁷ Hedrick, *History and Silence*, 110-111.

¹⁸ Harriet I. Flower, *The Art of Forgetting: Disgrace and Oblivion in Roman Political Culture*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

¹⁹ E.g., Adrastus Omissi, “*Damnatio memoriae* or *creatio memoriae*? Memory Sanctions as Creative Processes in the Fourth Century AD,” *The Cambridge Classical Journal* 62 (2016): 170-199; Dario Calomino, “The Other Side of *damnatio memoriae*: Erasing Memory to Assert Loyalty and Identity in the Roman Empire,” in *Negotiating Memory from the Romans to the Twenty-First Century: Damnatio Memoriae*, ed. Øivind Fuglerud, Kjersti Larsen, and Marina Prusac-Lindhagen. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020), 23-43; Rebecca Usherwood, *Political Memory and the Constantinian Dynasty: Fashioning Disgrace*, (Cham: Palgrave MacMillan, 2022).

silence and Flower opposes erasure to redefinition but sees both as a form of obliteration.²⁰ Hence, Hedrick's model contrasts the marked absences in erasure with the unmarked silence of other rewritings, where Flower sees both erasure and redefinition as founded on an awareness of the absence or silence of what has been obliterated, just conveying different messages about how that obliteration should be treated. The role of marked *a priori* absence thus remains a complication to both models, as it is neither an unmarked silence nor necessarily an erasure (or redefinition) itself. Ironically, this complication has been overlooked due to the ways that subsequent scholars have sought to align these models. A good example of this is the work of Adrastos Omissi, who argues that the concept of *creatio memoriae* might help us understand the function of both "silences and erasures" in the creative alteration of memory: while he cites Hedrick, it is unclear if he follows Hedrick's implied definition of silence as a distinct unmarked absence or if he instead follows Flower's model, in which silences or absences can be marked through redefinition without the need for an erasure. Hence, although scholars agree that absence plays an important part in how they understand erasure to function, they do not suggest that an *a priori* marked absence alone can be used to begin these processes nor what is necessarily unique or necessary to transform a marked absence into an erasure.

Given the lack of a fixed definition or framework for late antique erasure, and even less one that integrates absence, we need a composite approach. By identifying how far the sixth- and seventh-century uses of absence identified here accord with the ways that Flower, Hedrick, Omissi, and Östenberg see erasures in action, we can identify the value of studying conspicuous absences alongside erasure. Nonetheless, this still does not explain why some absences, like those we have seen, may have had a similar potential to alter the material memorial of the deceased to something outside the expected norms, while others do not.

One way forward is to suggest that all understandings of erasure rely upon a set of accepted norms around commemoration and the formulaic nature of these norms. If erasure processes rely upon the idea that the reader or beholder will be able to understand what has been erased and what that erasure thus signifies about attitudes toward the topic erased, the extent to which other absences can function as erasure will depend upon the extent to which the reader or beholder can understand (or be

²⁰ Flower, *The Art of Forgetting*, 2.

expected to understand) what has been omitted, and what such an omission signifies about attitudes toward the absent topic.

As the distinction between reader and beholder (or viewer) indicates, inscriptions could be engaged with through multiple means and by multiple audiences.²¹ While estimates and definitions of literacy in the Merovingian world are increasingly optimistic, most agree that a significant portion of the population was illiterate and that among those deemed literate, their understanding of the text derived primarily through a pragmatic understanding of norms – what components needed to be where for a text to carry out its function.²² Thus, even if a fairly wide subset of Merovingian petty landowners was what Marco Mostert terms “semi illiterate” – that is, they understood the function of the written word and could use texts even if they could not read them – or what he terms “semi literate” that is, they could understand particular formulae or texts, their understanding may have been derived from visual as well as strictly textual cues.²³ Deviations to the visual schema, then, may not only have been more likely to catch the eye of people viewing the wider space but, when combined with textual cues, they may also have been perceptible to an extended audience.²⁴ Conspicuous absences might then be perceptible and interpretable by a far wider audience than some forms of Roman erasure, which, as we saw, arguably depended on a high level of literacy and knowledge of political titles (although this view is rapidly being challenged).²⁵ In contrast, even if inscribed texts were read aloud

²¹ For recent approaches to “viewing” rather than “reading” inscriptions, see: *Viewing Inscriptions in the Late Antique and Medieval World*, ed. Antony Eastmond (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), esp. 1-9; Sean V. Leatherbury, *Inscribing Faith in Late Antiquity: Between Reading and Seeing*, (London: Routledge, 2019).

²² For discussion and references, see: Yitzhak Hen, *Culture and Religion in Merovingian Gaul, A.D. 481-751*, (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 21-42; Alice Rio, *Legal Practice and the Written Word in the Early Middle Ages: Frankish Formulae, c.500–1000*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 9-26.

²³ Marco Mostert, “Forgery and Trust,” in *Strategies of Writing: Studies on Text and Trust in the Middle Ages: Papers from “Trust in Writing in the Middle Ages.”* (Utrecht, 28-29 November 2002,) ed. Petra Schulte, Marco Mostert, and Irene van Renswoude (Turnhout: Brepols, 2008), 40-44.

²⁴ Cf. Leatherbury, *Inscribing Faith*, 33.

²⁵ Hedrick, *History and Silence*, 110-111. For recent works that propose a wider audience, see Calomino “The Other Side of *damnatio memoriae*,” 23-43, and to a lesser extent Rebecca Usherwood, “Where Are the Names of the Iovii and Herculii? Exploring Christian Responses to Tetrarchic Material Culture,” *Journal of Late Antiquity* 15.2 (2022): 402-427, esp. 421-422.

to the illiterate, gaps were likely only perceptible to the audience if the speaker found them to be significant. Thus, the study of erasure processes offers us two key pointers to approach absences. First, while the perceptibility and the interpretation of an erasure (or absence) may often be related because both processes depend on a set of expected norms, we should not elide them – for an erasure (or absence) to function as a form of memory negotiation, it needs to be both perceptible and for its existence to convey a set of meanings. Second, to assess the potential audience, significance, and function of erasures (and thus, of absences,) we need to study the inscription holistically and consider the interaction between textual and visual deviations from the usual formulas.

For ease, we may term our object a “formulaic absence,” that is, an absence that gains meaning precisely due to a shared acceptance of a given norm or formula, and a shared understanding of what deviations signify, whether identified through reading or viewing the text. This term is indebted to Morgane Uberti’s one-off description of the regnal-dating texts we met earlier as a “perturbation formulaire,” however for a general term it seems to me more useful not to assume that all omissions or divergences from a formula are necessarily disturbances to it (a point she agrees upon elsewhere in the passage).²⁶

A “formulaic absence” then, is hypothesized here as a form of generative absence: the presence of the void is also a source of information. What sets it apart from the wider idea of “generative” absences is that the beholder is expected not only to be aware that there is an absence, but also to be aware of what sort of material should fill it. Thus, on seeing such an absence, they observe what has been omitted rather than what could potentially fill it.

IV. A Generative Reading of Epigraphic Absence

If the generative power of absence could have extended material memory negotiations beyond the upper echelons of the political sphere to the memory of lesser-known individuals, this offers a new lens to approach many textual gaps in Merovingian epitaphs that have, until now, been considered evidence for mistakes.

One of the most interesting inscriptions for this approach is a sixth-century epitaph from Arles, due to its frequent citation and use by Mark

²⁶ Uberti, “Un règne sans roi,” 183.

Handley in his arguments that epigraphic workshops and commissioners use pre-cut materials and that any absences must be reflective of mistakes in the process. A reconsideration of the gaps in this epitaph through the lens of generative absence may therefore help us to identify the potential functions of these gaps outside their context of creation, and whether it qualifies for consideration through the lens of “formulaic absence.”

C. Inscription for Leonidius: Arles, Sixth Century CE

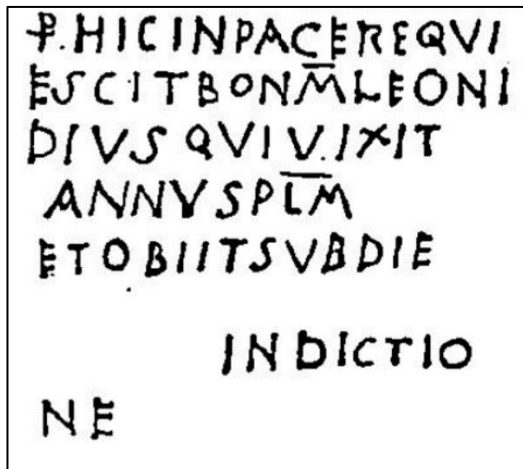


Fig. 2. Le Blant, NICG 174²⁷

Transcription (1.1-8): *Hic in pace requi/escit bon(ae) m(emoriae) Leoni/dius qui vixit/annus pl(us) m(inus) [vacat]/ et obiit sub die/ [vacat]/ [vacat] indictio/ne [vacat].*

Translation (1.1-8): Here, at peace, lies the well-remembered Leonidius, who lived for [blank space] years more or less and died on the day of [blank space] on the indiction of [blank space].

We can immediately tell through material and textual reasoning that there is information missing from this epitaph and we can also infer, through both methods, what information is missing on the fourth, fifth,

²⁷ *Nouveau recueil*, ed. Le Blant, 182.

and sixth lines: the man's age and death date. Even viewers who were not highly proficient in Latin could likely identify that information is missing, and likely reconstruct the gaps. In some ways, therefore, the conspicuous absence is more easily legible than the content of many contemporary inscriptions.

Interestingly, the missing information in this epitaph mirrors the information that was left erased in the Angers inscription: the age at death and the death date. This temporal information had increasing significance through the late antique period, as new ideas about the afterlife turned death dates from recollections of loss and obscurity into transitions that increasingly encompassed and prioritized transformation and revelation. From the third and fourth centuries, death dates appeared on both Christian and pagan epitaphs, likely to record the date for annual celebrations.²⁸ By the Merovingian period, death dates were of double significance: death on earth and birth in eternal life.²⁹ The potential implications of this absence, then, concern the fate of the individual in two distinct ways: the absence of his earthly memory and the absence of his heavenly rebirth. Which is at stake is therefore ambiguous and can best be interpreted through reference to the remainder of the epitaph: the preservation of the earthly career without a moment of heavenly rebirth tells a different narrative to that of someone whose life story contains nothing except maybe final grace. Here, the absence of all detail could suggest an entirely unclear life and fate. Not all Merovingian epitaphs contained death dates or years, and so it is not the absence per se that causes this tension, but, like Uberti's example, the tension between the half-completed formula and its expected conclusion.

As we saw, Östenberg argued that the act of preservation is the most fundamental part of the erasure process, and that the message it enshrines need not be the message found in earlier steps.³⁰ Likewise, here, it is the preservation of these absences that creates meaning. Many contemporary inscriptions were placed on reused stones, and it would have been easy to reverse the stone or cut it into smaller pieces if the

²⁸ Carlo Carletti, "La data della morte. Un modulo epigraphico tardoromano tra sacro e profano," in *Les frontières du profane dans l'antiquité tardive*, ed. Éric Rebillard, and Claire Sotinel (Rome: École française de Rome, 2010), 230-233.

²⁹ Allen E. Jones, *Death and Afterlife in the Pages of Gregory of Tours*, (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020), 27-28.

³⁰ Östenberg, "Damnatio Memoriae Inscribed," 324-347.

commission process went wrong. Admittedly, these processes may have reflected other needs, such as the distribution of shared memory or patronage, and so it is possible that a mistake would have been unappealing although a reused stone was not.³¹ However, although we cannot confirm the intent of the inscriber, we can conclude that at some point, the decision was made to preserve this text and its absences in its form here, dedicated permanently to Leonidius wherever it ended up placed.

D. Epitaph for an Unnamed Man: Briord, Sixth or Seventh Century CE

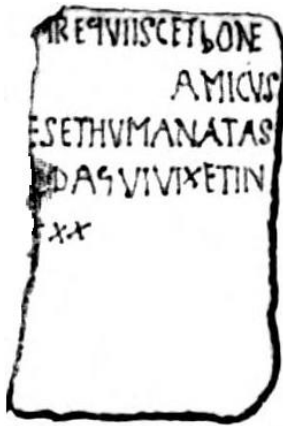


Fig. 3. Cropped version of Le Blant ICG 382, image 263³²

Transcription (1.1-5): *Hic requiescet ONE/[Memoriae?...] [vacat] amicus/ [...-S] et humanatas/ [...]DA qui vixet in/ [...X?]XX.*

Translation (1.1-5): Here lies [blank space] of good [memory?...] Friend [to everyone?] [...]S and kindness [...]DA, who lived in [peace?] for [...X?]XX years.

³¹ Ian Wood, “The Audience of Architecture in Post-Roman Gaul,” in *The Anglo-Saxon Church: Papers on History, Architecture, and Archaeology in Honour of Dr. H.M. Taylor*, ed. Lawrence A.S. Butler and Richard Morris, (London: Council for British Archaeology, 1986), 76.

³² Image: ICG II, Le Blant, 647. Cf. Edition: ICG II, ed. Le Blant, 20; RICG XV, ed. Descombes, 701-703 (as RICG XV.270).

A similar example can be found on a sixth- or seventh-century epitaph for an unnamed man from Briord, although here we see the absence of the name instead. The inclusion of the man's age indicates that this epitaph was intended for a distinct individual, who was already dead at the time of commission. The absence of his name, or part of it, therefore, draws the eye. As Descombes notes, we cannot explain why this epitaph was left "incomplete" or, as I would put it, why this absence exists.³³ Yet, the decision not to re-use the stone and to retain the blank space creates a discomfoting silence. It is heightened by the semantic disjunct in the narrative between this visual and textual absence of the man's name and memory, and the observation that he was a friend of everyone (*amicus omnibus*). The reader is left facing a quandary over the legacy of a man who was, apparently, a friend of everyone, but had no friend of his own to finish his gravestone.

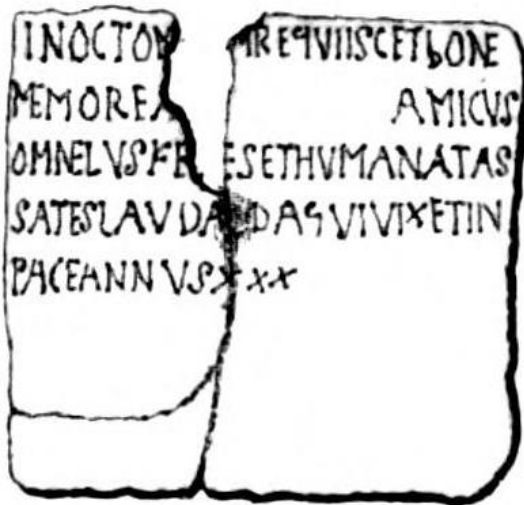


Fig. 4. Le Blant ICG 382, image 263³⁴

³³ *RICG* XV, ed. Descombes, 703.

³⁴ *ICG* II, Le Blant, 647.

The effect is only strengthened if we consider Le Blant's lithograph, where he sets this fragment in dialogue with another fragment, which does not survive. The absence of the name is only more notable when contrasted with a fuller text. Moreover, if correct, the lithograph indicates that the text was designed for one individual deceased, and so the absence cannot be explained as the offcut from, or a partially finished separation of, what was once a double epitaph.³⁵

The absence of the name offers a different reputational challenge to the absence of rebirth and the cycle of time and judgment that we saw in the absence of age and dating formulae. As Janneke Raaijmakers noted, the book of Deuteronomy explicitly links the destruction or removal of a person's name in God's book of life to their destruction and removal from salvation.³⁶ The subsequent importance of writing names, and the link between names and salvation can be seen in widespread placement of names, whether epitaphs, graffiti or *libri memoriales*, in holy and liturgical spaces across the late antique West.

There are some caveats in this parallel. Even if the epitaph were intended to be placed within a holy space, the inscribed name cannot be fully equated with a graffiti, given Carlo Tedeschi's argument that the latter derived power through the physicality of altering a holy space to make one's act a perpetual part of its form.³⁷ Moreover, it is unclear if the name was significant by itself or, instead, if its significance came from the event in which it was inscribed: Ann-Marie Yasin argues that similar graffiti from North Africa preserve prayers that briefly linked the writer and God or saint.³⁸ More useful may be the work by Elisa Pallottini on inscriptions containing the names of saints, which she argues served to

³⁵ For this argument as an explanation of similar Carolingian material, see Treffort, *Memoires*, 163.

³⁶ Janneke Raaijmakers, "The Memory of a Person's Name," in *Writing Names in Medieval Sacred Spaces: Inscriptions in the West, from Late Antiquity to the Early Middle Ages*, ed. Estelle Ingrand-Varenne, Elisa Pallottini, Janneke Raaijmakers (Brepols: Turnhout, 2023), 277. Cf. Deut. 29:20.

³⁷ Carlo Tedeschi, "*Hic fuit*: Scratching Names on Sacred Walls," in *Writing Names in Medieval Sacred Spaces: Inscriptions in the West, from Late Antiquity to the Early Middle Ages*, ed. Estelle Ingrand-Varenne, Elisa Pallottini, Janneke Raaijmakers (Brepols: Turnhout, 2023), 167-169.

³⁸ Tedeschi, "*Hic fuit*: Scratching Names on Sacred Walls," 173; Ann Marie Yasin. "Prayers on Site: The Materiality of Devotional Graffiti and the Production of Early Christian Sacred Space," in *Viewing Inscriptions in the Late Antique and Medieval World*, ed. Anthony Eastmond (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 47.

anchor the saint to the holy site.³⁹ The power that names held (and the power of their absence) is thus highly contextual.⁴⁰

Nonetheless, on a basic level, the widespread continuity of funerary epigraphy itself, of which the sole certainty is usually the name, indicates that remembering names was of particular importance to many in sixth- and seventh-century Gaul.⁴¹ It also seems likely that the names on epitaphs, whether situated on ecclesiastical property or not, also derived some of their function from the links they created between viewer and subject – permitting prayer for their souls. If these texts were intended for an ecclesiastical space, or a site where communities regularly came together to remember their ancestors, names placed here may also have had liturgical significance: as Els Rose has shown recently that likewise the recital of the names of the dead was an important part of Gallic funerary liturgy and Cécile Treffort argues that this pattern explains the prevalence of onomastic graffiti on late antique and early medieval Gallic altars.⁴² If one follows Pallottini's argument that holy names were used together to link those dead to a communal space, the *ab initio* absence of a name may even be of far more significance than an erasure: while Treffort notes some evidence that the latter could be pragmatic, because

³⁹ Elisa Pallottini, "The Epigraphic Presence on the Borghorst Cross (c.1050)," in *Sacred Scripture / Sacred Space: The Interlacing of Real Places and Conceptual Spaces in Medieval Art and Architecture*, ed. Tobias Frese, Wilfried E. Keil, and Kristina Krüger (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019), 72-73; Elisa Pallottini, "Saints' Names and Relics: The Evidence of Church Inscriptions," in *Writing Names in Medieval Sacred Spaces: Inscriptions in the West, from Late Antiquity to the Early Middle Ages*, ed. Estelle Ingrand-Varenne, Elisa Pallottini, Janneke Raaijmakers (Brepols: Turnhout, 2023), 196-222, esp. 208-209 and 219-221.

⁴⁰ For a wider discussion on the importance of context to the interpretation of early medieval epitaphs, see: Morgane Uberti, "Les épitaphes en leur "milieu". Remarques à partir du matériel épigraphique de l'Aquitaine tardo-antique et alto-médiévale," in *Funerary Landscapes of the Late Antique "ocumene" Contextualizing Epigraphic and Archeological Evidence of Mortuary Practices. Proceedings of an International Conference in Heidelberg, May 30–June 1, 2019*, ed. Stefan Ardeleanu and Jon C. Cubas Díaz (Heidelberg: Heidelberg University Publishing, 2023), 529-564.

⁴¹ Cécile Treffort, "Les 'graffitis' sur tables d'autel aux époques pré-romane et romane. Note à propos des inscriptions de l'autel de Gellone," in *Saint-Guilhem-le-Désert. La fondation de l'abbaye de Gellone. L'autel médiéval. Actes*, ed. Xavier Barral Altet and Christian Lauranson-Rosaz (Montpellier: Les Amis de Saint-Guilhem-Le-Désert, 2004), 137-146. N.B. the appendix lists all known early medieval altars containing graffiti from France.

⁴² Els Rose, "The Ritual of Names: A Practice of Intercession in Early Medieval Gaul," *Frühmittelalterliche Studien* 51 (2017): 1-18, esp. 1-4.

the name was already eternally inscribed, this is not true of an *ab inito* “formulaic” absence.⁴³

Returning to our epitaph, the force of such an exclusion from future participation in the eternal ecclesiastical community and its liturgical communion through the absence of his name jars against the explicit claim that the man was a friend of everyone in this *saeculum*. Again, then, the potential meaning of the absence here is derived not only from the deviation in the formula, but also the juxtaposition between the unachieved formula and the completed elements and the preservation of the text in this state which together raise questions over the man’s legacy.

E. Epitaph for Venantius: Vienne, Fifth or Sixth Century CE



Fig. 5. Le Blant ICG 440, image 310⁴⁴

Finally, there is a further type of material absence in certain inscriptions from Southern Gaul: the apparent absence of future, that is, of expected descendants and legacy. It would have been easy and cheaper to obtain an epitaph of the correct size for the text, and thus this epitaph was presumably designed to be filled out like other multi-familial epitaphs from the region, with the gradual accumulation of children and

⁴³ Treffort, “Les ‘graffitis’ sur tables d’autel,” 141.

⁴⁴ Le Blant, *ICG* II, 665. Cf. Edition: Le Blant, *ICG* II, 117; *RICG* XV, ed. Descombes, 299-301 (as *RICG* XV.54).

partners.⁴⁵ (The other alternative is an absent image, although the absence of a death date would fit a communal epitaph). For whatever reason, this did not come to pass. Unlike the preceding cases, to a modern viewer there is not an intrinsic wrongness about the blank space below the preceding line: the text is syntactically correct and complete. Yet, for completeness, we must acknowledge that this difference reflects a culturally attuned response to appropriate and inappropriate absences: whether a Merovingian viewer would have found this text satisfactory is less clear, and conversely our reception of this text may better reflect their reception of the unachieved fates and ambition we have seen in other epigraphic formulae. Whatever its cause, the absence here is less visually directed toward the name or attributes of the deceased, but the possibility of reading this text as a rejection of expected burial alongside his name or under the auspices of his protection for whatever reason – costs, conflicts, tragedies – offers a useful counterpoint for assessing how far our own expectations of acceptable and unacceptable texts shape our approach to formulaic absences.

From these examples, we have made a few observations about how absences in an expected commemorative formula could function in funerary texts outside the political realm to alter or subvert the memory of the deceased from the expected norm. As we have seen, while the name and date might be seen as the primary variables or components of epitaphic discourse, the ways in which these were selectively excluded offer an unappreciated range through which different elements of the expected ritual could be subverted. The absence of age and the absence of death date both concern the absence of time, but the implications of each lead them to challenge the earthly legacy and eternal rebirth of the deceased respectively, rather than the possible rejection of kingly-determined time (and the power of the secular over the infinite) posed by Uberti's texts and reading. Meanwhile, the absence of name withdraws the deceased from one avenue where they could be remembered eternally in the liturgy, even if they were a full part of the community in their lifetime (or even a friend of everyone). The absence of heirs distances the deceased from the living community, but its meaning derives primarily from the insight of readers as to whether this represents the rejection of human heirs for spiritual children, a more ambiguous absence of divinely granted children, or an outright rupture or schism

⁴⁵ E.g., RICG XV.70, RICG XV.77.

within the family. In each case then, we have seen how the absences within these unique formulas could not only have served to challenge the epitaph's function as a way to remember the dead well, but also to alter the narrative in distinct ways, based on an awareness of what is not said and why it was normally said.

The survival of these gaps or "formulaic absences" indicates that people may have taken the decision to preserve these absences and the questions they raise over the reputation of individuals and the wider nature of human reputation and its potential mutability, whether through placing the stone in a burial context, reusing it visibly in the stonework of other communal buildings, or consigning it to an unseen, ignominious fate. This effect is heightened by the selective nature of the absences: the preservation that matters is not the preservation of an entirely absent text, but rather the narrative of an unachieved life or fate that these absences threaten to generate through their incomplete formulas (those that Treffort deems most essential and constitutive of an epitaph: the name, the death date, and implicitly her third element – the ability to pray for the deceased).⁴⁶ Such an interpretation of these gaps mirrors Omissi's understanding of Roman erasure and memory negotiation as an evolving creative process, which altered material space to generate new narratives more than to forget old ones.⁴⁷

V. A Generative Reading of Absence Outside Epigraphy

It is, however, somewhat unsurprising that both visual and textual gaps in prose epitaphs from late antique Gaul are potentially conducive to creating directed yet generative absences: their content and its order is so predictable that Edmond Le Blant, Françoise Descombes, and Mark Handley suggest that they are the result of copybooks.⁴⁸ While debate about the precise implications of this feature for the study of Merovingian epitaphs continues, highly familiar patterns are also generally more common in religious and legal texts, where repetition and

⁴⁶ Treffort, *Memoires*, 164, Cf. 168-180.

⁴⁷ Omissi, "Damnatio memoriae or creatio memoriae," esp. 195-196.

⁴⁸ Edmond le Blant, *L'épigraphie chrétienne en Gaule et dans l'Afrique romaine*, (Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1890), 70-73; *RICG XV*, ed. Descombes, 414. Handley, *Death, Society and Culture*, 26.

recognition may confer authority or render the text more trustworthy.⁴⁹ Given that Latin epitaphs had a long use in the affirmation of legal heirship and manumissions that continued until the seventh century in South-Eastern Gaul, it is logical to see similar patterns. Yet, if the highly formulaic nature of epitaphs made them good vessels for rhetoric based on intentional absences, it is likewise true that other textual forms may be less suited to this method.

Absence that gains its meaning through a rejection of formulaic norms, our so-called “formulaic absence,” nonetheless holds one benefit over erasure that cannot be seen on extant epitaphs: it is easier to copy and translate. We might therefore expect to see a preference for formulaic absence over erasure in texts that were designed to be copied. The interpretation of the extant sylloges of Merovingian epitaphs found in Carolingian manuscripts remains debated, as does the corresponding extent to which epitaph copies circulated in the Merovingian world. Although Mark Handley sees evidence for at least one Merovingian proto-collection that he assumes served as a copybook, the manuscript in which it survives, and others like it, are primarily Carolingian liturgical collections.⁵⁰ In the Carolingian period, however, there is more evidence for not only the liturgical collection of manuscripts but also their transposition into what Cécile Treffort terms “formularies”: as she notes, some manuscript copies of Alcuin’s epitaph replace his name with a pronoun and replace the date of death with a blank space, to make the text into an example of a type of epitaph.⁵¹

What distinguishes the absences within these epigraphic formularies from the type of “formulaic absence” that we have studied here is the relationship between the blank space and the formula. As in legal formularies, the removal of names appears systematic and consistent: the absence is thus part of an administrative formula, not a break within it.⁵²

⁴⁹ Joanna Kopaczyk, “Formulaic Discourse Across Early Modern English Medical Genres: Investigating Shared Lexical Bundles,” in *Meaning in the History of English: Words and Texts in Context*, ed. Andreas H. Jucker, Annina Seiler, Daniela Landert, Nicole Studer-Joho, (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2013), 258.

⁵⁰ Mark A. Handley, “Epitaphs, Models, and Texts: A Carolingian Collection of Late Antique Inscriptions from Burgundy,” *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies. Supplement* (2000): 48-56; Cécile Treffort, *Memoires*, 214-225.

⁵¹ Treffort, *Memoires*, 203-209.

⁵² Alice Rio, *The Formularies of Angers and Marculf: Two Merovingian Legal Handbooks*, (Liverpool University Press: Liverpool, 2008,) 6-7. (There may nonetheless be parallels

For epitaphs, then, a “formulaic absence” could still be distinct in manuscript copy from an epigraphic formulary, were one to exist, because of the distinct relationship between absence and formula.

This then raises the question of whether the same is true of letters, another type of text that is often rendered into formularies. Unlike epitaphs, even the papyri copies of Merovingian letters that survive are copies, not originals, and thus any blank spaces or textual absences they contain will not be original. So, a study of letters will test both the wider presence of these patterns and allow us to consider its broader suitability.

If we leave aside formularies, we need to then find another compilation of letters that responds to the realities of the sixth or seventh centuries. While the Austrasian Letters might seem a better test case, the ongoing debates about the date and purpose of the compilation do not provide substantial enough context about the origins and preservations of these features.⁵³ As this example suggests, we instead need to find a compilation dated to the Merovingian period, not just a compilation containing letters that originally circulated in the Merovingian period. One collection that fits this criterion is the letter collection of Avitus of Vienne. Although debate remains about the shape of the original collection, it was attested in the Merovingian period and, more importantly, we conserve sixth-century papyrus copies of some letters and can thus confirm one contemporary form in which they circulated.⁵⁴

Within Avitus’s corpus, our best test case appears to be an early-sixth century consolatory letter written by Avitus, bishop of Vienne (d. 518) to Gundobad, king of the Burgundians (d. 517), on the death of the king’s unnamed daughter, a section of which survives on a later sixth-century papyrus.⁵⁵ As Danuta Shanzer and Ian Wood note, it is an

in the scholarly treatment of these texts, insofar as what Rio terms their treatment as “deficient” documents due to their gaps, rather than seeing the latter as indicative of a different intent. Cf. Alice Rio, *Legal Practice and the Written Word*, 33).

⁵³ Graham Barrett and George Woudhuysen, “Assembling the Austrasian Letters at Trier and Lorsch,” *Early Medieval Europe* 24.1 (2016): 12-14, 36-47.

⁵⁴ Greg. Tur. *DLH* 2.XXXIV; Ms. Paris BNF Lat. 8913-8914.

⁵⁵ Peiper. *Ep.* 5; Malaspina. *Ep.* 2. For clarity, I follow Rudolf Peiper’s numbering system for Avitus’s letters from his MGH edition. However, for quotations, I will follow the new Latin text established by Elena Malaspina unless stated otherwise: *Avit de Vienne: Lettres*, ed. Elena Malaspina and trans. Marc Reydellet (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2016); *Alcimi Eclidii Aviti Viennensis episcopi Opera quae supersunt*, ed. Rudolf Peiper (Berlin: Weidmann, 1883). This letter is translated into French: *Avit*, ed. Malaspina, 10-12; into German: Max Burckhardt, *Die Briefsammlung des Bischofs Avitus von Vienne (518)*, (Berlin:

unusual letter due to the many things that are left unspoken.⁵⁶ That Avitus used silence as a strategy is not unexpected: Jürgen Ebach has shown that the marked absence was a common narrative technique in Biblical texts, a material read extensively by Avitus and his contemporaries.⁵⁷ Yet, although this suggests that Avitus had likely encountered the use of marked absences, this is distinct from unmarked absences, where either the perception or interpretation of an absence relied on a shared appreciation of a known formula.

Turning to the letter under discussion, the custom of sending a letter in such a scenario was common – we have other examples of a senior bishop writing a consolatory letter to a king on the death of an unmarried royal woman: Shanzer and Wood identify parallels in the letter by Bishop Remigius of Reims (d. 533) to Clovis, king of the Franks, (d. 511) on the death of Clovis’s sister Albofleda (d. c. 509?) soon after her baptism.⁵⁸ Moreover, Avitus and Gundobad were already epistolary correspondents, and the royal family is addressed in Avitus’s homilies.⁵⁹ In these texts, Avitus was even known to interfere with other family problems in the royal household, sometimes publicly: he alludes to the religious inclination of the royal household in various letters, admonishes them for marital separation, and discusses the burdens of raising children with different religious leanings. Thus, what is unusual is not the existence of the letter, nor that Avitus sought to comment on royal issues, but the number of things that are left unsaid in his approach.

The first absence in the letter is that of the girl herself. She is left unnamed throughout, and her death is only introduced in the fifth sentence. There, Avitus notes that the king and others have wept but that, given Gundobad’s temporal role and responsibility, “it is not much for the father of all to lose one valuable [*pignus*].”⁶⁰ *Pignus* is used to mean child in other local sources, and there is a strong suggestion here that the

Verlag für Staatswissenschaften und Geschichte G.M.B.H., 1938), 105-108; into English: *Avitus of Vienne: Letters and Selected Prose. Translated with an Introduction and Notes*, ed. and trans. Danuta Shanzer and Ian Wood (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2002), 209-212.

⁵⁶ *Avitus*, ed. Shanzer and Wood, 208-209.

⁵⁷ Jürgen Ebach, *Beredtes Schweigen: Exegetisch-literarische Beobachtungen zu einer Kommunikationsform in biblischen Texten* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2014).

⁵⁸ *Ep. Austr.* 1. *Avitus*, ed. Shanzer and Wood, 208.

⁵⁹ E.g., Avitus. *Epp.* 6, 7; *Hom.* 24, 26. Cf. *Hom.* 31.

⁶⁰ *Parum est quod perdidit unum pignus omnium pater.*

lost, valued person is his child.⁶¹ However, the decision to pass over the girl's exact relationship to Gundobad only emphasizes the absence of her name and presence. In comparison, Remigius's letter to Clovis begins with the name of the deceased and, although Ruricius does not use his daughter-in-law's name, he refers to her as their mutual child and leaves the reader clear about the person being mourned and her relationship to the mourners.⁶² The absence of the dead girl's name, the absence of a clear allusion to daughterhood, and the decision to use the word *pater* in reference to Gundobad's role as father of his people, not of the girl, begin the consolation by diminishing her presence and that of her familial ties in contrast with Gundobad's explicit role as father of the kingdom.

The curious absence of the girl continues as the text progresses. Shanzer and Wood suggest there is a reference to her again, a few sentences later. Sadly, the sentence is corrupt, but it refers to Gundobad's brother, Godegisel, and reads:

Aut quid de fraterna sorte dicamus? Ipse quem uocitari [paruum?/ patruum?] uestrum natura...

(And what should we say of your brother's fate. He who (is? ought?) to be called...your [younger?/uncle?]. . .nature?)⁶³

Proposing a conclusive resolution for the sentence is far beyond this paper, given the lacuna and the difference between the two manuscripts: one reads *paruum* while the other reads *patruum*.⁶⁴ Shanzer and Wood prefer *patruum*, and see this as an implicit reference to the child that emphasizes the consequences of Godegisel's betrayal: he had betrayed not only his brother, Gundobad, but also his niece and wider family.⁶⁵ Yet, given that the girl is not even acknowledged as the daughter of her own father, nor is her relationship with her mother, brother or other members of the family acknowledged in the consolation, it would be

⁶¹ Ruricius *Ep.* II,3.19; *Ep.* II, 4,20. N.B. These are also consolations on the loss of a child. The dual meaning of valued possession and child may have been particularly pertinent in such situations of loss and dispossession. i.e. the word alone should not be interpreted with any negative denotations.

⁶² *Ep. Austr.* 1.1; see above.

⁶³ Whether "your" here refers to Gundobad or his daughter depends on the reading of the corrupt sentence. There are no other direct addresses to the girl, which to my mind strengthens the former interpretation, but see the discussion in text for debate.

⁶⁴ *Alcimi Eadicii Aviti Viennensis episcopi Opera quae supersunt* (MGH AA 6.2), ed. Rudolf Peiper (Berlin: Weidmann 1883), 32, cf. notes on l. 33.

⁶⁵ *Avitus*, ed. Shanzer and Wood, 211, cf. n. 5.

odder to invoke only her relationship to her traitorous uncle – especially as there is no contemporary indication that her death is related to his rebellion nor has this argument been advanced by modern scholars.

Malaspina, however, reads *paruum* and suggests that there is no reference to the girl at all in the passage, only a reminder that Gundobad was betrayed by the man he called younger brother.⁶⁶ This reading fits with the wider outline of the letter, which, as we will see, is constructed to parallel Gundobad's relationship with Godegisel, and Avitus's with the dead girl.⁶⁷ Thus, while it is tempting to follow Shanzer and Wood in seeing a reference to the girl in this passage, I think that we need to follow Malaspina and view *patruum* here as a manuscript error that is made precisely because the absence of the girl from her own consolation feels so odd.

Following the diversion around Gundobad and his brothers, the letter finally comes to address the girl and her fate. Even here, she is not named, although we receive the confirmation that the child is indeed a girl. Avitus notes that the girl is described as a virgin who was intended to be a queen but died in an immaculate state.⁶⁸ He then continues to note her further good fortune – not only did the girl die as a virgin, but she also died at home. If she could not become *domina* and rule over others then at least she was not an outsider or stateless *peregrina* abroad.⁶⁹ To conclude, the girl is unnamed, and her familial ties are left unstated, even though the addressee appears to be her own father. Instead of describing the deceased, Avitus uses the letter to assert his distance from her through the absence of the expected platitudes: the mourning father sent people to Avitus rather than vice versa; the girl's behavior and individual merits are unmentioned.

While Roman authors were aware of the possibility to talk about someone by not talking about them, and authors continued to deploy similar strategies in the early Middle Ages, this strategy relies on the accepted importance of the deceased and the inescapable void in the narrative's logic created by their absence: in its failure to achieve this,

⁶⁶ *Avit.*, ed. Malaspina, 11, cf. n. 6.

⁶⁷ Avitus, *Ep.* 5. (*Ep.* 2, §4-6, in *Avit.*, ed. Malaspina, 11).

⁶⁸ Avitus, *Ep.* 5: *Nec valentibus ista praescire potest equidem durum uideri uicinam thalamis uirginem taedio incumbente praereptam: quae tamen ambita est ut regina, defuncta est incontaminata.*

⁶⁹ Avitus, *Ep.* 5: *At nero nunc quae mens tam barbara, quae non misereatur uirginis felicitatem, quae in paterno regionisque sinu recepta mutauit sedem nec contigit peregrinationem? Ubi non diu esse potuit domina, nec breuiter extitit peregrina.*

Avitus's approach yet further underlines the insignificance of the young woman.⁷⁰ Instead, the silences here offer a different argument: that the girl and her memory were not significant. Although none of these omissions is significant enough to count as a marked absence, the cumulative weight of the gaps shapes the text and reminds the reader of what they should not recall. This draws the reader toward the main function of the text, which can be found in the three lines following the fifth sentence, where the death of a child was introduced. As we saw, Avitus first goes on to refer to Gundobad as the father of the realm, not the girl. In the next sentence, Avitus then addresses the role of fate: everything happens for a God-given reason, including this death. He then moves to discuss the death of the king's brothers, before returning to the God-given reason for these events: the stability of the realm was increased by having fewer rulers.⁷¹ Just as, ultimately, Gundobad's brothers were not of salvific importance in this life, and had to die by his hands for God's plans for Gundobad and the realm to come to fruition, the parallel implies that the girl too had to die during her marriage negotiations for the spiritual health of the realm.

This downplaying of the girl's importance builds up to and justifies the most curious passage of the consolation, in which Avitus notes that it is fortunate the girl died before her wedding, so that his own reputation was not besmirched. While Avitus deploys his customary vagueness in regards to the identity of the enemies that would set their envious teeth into him, the threat is made explicit.⁷² As Shanzer, Wood, and Malaspina have all noted, the most likely inference is that Avitus was involved in the girl's marital negotiations and that for some reason this was controversial: whether it involved handing such a hostage to the Franks, the Byzantines, or bishops getting involved in marital liturgy at all.⁷³

⁷⁰ Cf. Catharine Edwards, "Looking for the Emperor in Seneca's Letters," in *Unspoken Rome: Absence in Latin Literature and its Reception*, ed. Tom Geue and Elena Giusti, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 165-184. For an example of later uses of similar techniques, see the *Epitaphium Arsenii* by Paschasius Radbertus, where Emperor Louis the Pious is only named halfway through the text.

⁷¹ Avitus *Ep.* 5. (*Ep.* 2, §4-6, in *Avit.*, ed. Malaspina, 11).

⁷² Avitus *Ep.* 5: *quamquam reuera maiorem causam luctus sui reliquisse dixerim, si diem ultimum post recentia vota clausisset: ibi enim forte potuerat inueniri, ubi mihi post inuidiae nodum insultationis dentem fixisset aemulus luor.*

⁷³ For the Frankish angle, Cf. *Avitus*, ed. Shanzer and Wood, 20; Danuta Shanzer, "Dating the Baptism of Clovis: the Bishop of Vienne vs the Bishop of Tours," *Early Medieval Europe* 7.1 (1998): 54-55; Emmanuelle Santinelli, "Entre Burgondes et Francs: Clotilde,

Whatever his exact relationship was to the unfortunate girl and her marital negotiations, Avitus manipulates silence to create a generative space that hints at her insignificance without explicitly taking that treasonous path. Unlike erasure, however, the choice of conspicuous absence here does not concede the existence of alternative perspectives. Just as Gundobad was forced to kill his brother after the latter's rebellion to maintain the stability of his God-entrusted realm, so to Avitus (and Gundobad, his presumed commissioner), was forced to marry the girl to a foreigner and begin the events that led to her death: absence here functions to reshape memory, but it does so by eradicating contestation rather than foregrounding it.

Moreover, in the treatment of *patruum* or *paruum* we also see how later readers are faced with the decision to preserve or address this rhetoric of absence. A reading of *patruum* is more logical insofar as it would create a direct relationship between the girl and this strange civil war parallel, but the reading of *paruum* seems more likely to me both in light of the general strategy of the text and the logic of emendation – later readers are unlikely to have exacerbated the oddity of the text. The same evidence for reception is true of the girl's name: given the first copy of Avitus's letters is a sixth-century papyrus, and Gregory of Tours also had a copy, we know that the collection was read by near contemporaries and it would not have been too difficult for readers to reintroduce it.⁷⁴ It is tempting to suggest that the further we get away from the early Middle Ages, the more inclined we are to read some long-lost sense back into these silences, rather than examining the narrative and social chasm they reveal, especially in circumstances like this, where modern readers are intent on finding evidence for grief – an emotional void that bothers us.⁷⁵

princesse burgonde, reine des Francs (472/480-544/548),” in *Les Royaumes de Bourgogne jusqu'en 1032 à travers la culture et la religion : Besançon, 2-4 octobre 2014*, ed. Anne Wagner and Nicole Brocard (Turnhout: Brepols, 2018), 197-218. For a potential Byzantine angle, cf. Norbert Wagner, “Suavegotta und Caretena - Namenkundlich-genealogische Untersuchungen zu zwei Frauen in der burgundischen Königsdynastie,” *Beiträge zur Namenforschung* 41 (2006): 29-36.

⁷⁴ Greg. Tur. *DLH* 2.XXXIV; Ms. Paris BNF Lat. 8913–8914.

⁷⁵ Cf. Viola Starnone, “Gaze on the Void: Hermeneutic Responses to Dido's First Appearance,” in *Unspoken Rome: Absence in Latin Literature and its Reception*, ed. Tom Geue and Elena Giusti (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 109-110.

VI. The Significance of “Formulaic Absence”: Epitaphs and Letters Compared

As we have seen, the absence of expected information in sixth- and seventh-century funerary texts had the power to reshape the memory and legacy of the deceased, whether or not this potential was fully or intentionally realized. While in certain cases (the inscribers of the epitaphs identified by Uberti; Avitus of Vienne) there may be a strong argument for the intent of the author to construct an absence, in all cases we see how the preservation of absence – whether syntactic or material gaps in inscriptions or narrative gaps in consolatory letters – had the potential to create a generative space where readers would both be able to identify the missing type of information (or maybe even the precise information) and to wrangle with the reasons for which the deceased did not merit a regular commemoration.

The gaps in our epigraphic texts fit most criteria for what modern authors term “meaningful” absences. Werner Wolf recently argued that to notice an absence and to read significance in it, the viewer must expect the presence of something and must be convinced that its absence is not the result of random chance but has a discernible explanation. In addition, however, for that absence to be “meaningful,” his work suggests that the observer must read intent into the explanation.⁷⁶ Wolf limited his definitions of conspicuous absence to the absence of signifiers: e.g., there is nothing (a silence) where a note might have been expected in a musical performance. Yet, in what I term a “formulaic absence,” a specific signifier is missing (e.g., a name, an age,) but the missing signifier can be (partially) reconstructed by the surrounding formula. A more useful set of criteria are those used by Barry Brummett to define “strategic silence” in speeches by twentieth-century politicians. Although Brummett’s definitions are designed to analyze oral communication they can, nonetheless, be usefully applied to (formulaic) written texts. He defines “strategic silence” as a pause which:

⁷⁶ Werner Wolf, “Introduction: Meaningful Absence across Media. The Potential Significance of Missing Signifiers,” in *Meaningful Absence Across Arts and Media: The Significance of Missing Signifiers*, ed. Werner Wolf, Nassim Balestrini, and Walter Bernhart (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 1-31.

“(1) violates expectations, (2) draws public attribution of fairly predictable meanings, and (3) seems intentional and directed at an audience.”⁷⁷

Both Wolf and Brummett focus on the need for readers or audiences to identify intent in order to see meaning in absence. By this reasoning, the absences we have seen in this chapter were not all meaningful in their creation but, in their preservation, gained meaning as preserved absences.

Yet, Brummett’s final point is in fact two points: an appearance of intentionality and a clear target are, in the field of epigraphy at least, different criteria. The existence of formulaic norms suggests that there was an audience that would be aware of these absences, but our evidence is insufficient to fully understand that audience: while I have posited viewers as well as readers, the nature of these groups is still severely contingent on the spaces in which these texts were intended to be placed. Moreover, as Tom Geue and Elena Giusti recently argued, there is a need to address “lacunae as active producers of meaning rather than empty vessels waiting to be filled by speculation.”⁷⁸ Even if a significant audience could perceive an absence, not all would necessarily be equally able or permitted to fill in missing gaps.⁷⁹ Even if we cannot identify the audience of our texts, whether viewers or readers, it is significant that a “formulaic absence,” like an erasure, functions on two levels: perception and interpretation; the message is what is missing, not what detail can be generated to fill the void.

This leads to the problem we saw in assessing the presence of generative and formulaic absence in the letters of Avitus of Vienne. While there was a pattern in the selection of what was, and was not, said, there were no distinct components that could be isolated as missing from the formula. Instead, like Hedrick’s silences, the absent elements gain most of their significance through outside knowledge of the characters involved, not what is explicitly marked out in the text. While one could argue that the combined weight of these absences is generative, insofar

⁷⁷ Barry Brummett, “Towards a Theory of Silence as a Political Strategy,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 66.3 (1980): 289-303.

⁷⁸ Tom Geue and Elena Giusti, “Introduction,” in *Unspoken Rome: Absence in Latin Literature and its Reception*, ed. Tom Geue and Elena Giusti, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 3.

⁷⁹ Geue and Giusti, “Introduction,” 3.

as it prods the reader to fill in missing details, this conversely limits the ability of the text to directly call specific elements of the deceased's legacy into question, in the ways that the explicit absences in the formulas on our epitaphs do. Thus, while the marked absences in epitaphs could be transferred to another media in theory, this brief survey has shown less support so far for the idea that this model can be extended to explain the unusual use of absence in other types of Merovingian funerary discourse; further study may thus better be targeted on epitaphs and their particular use and preservation.

VII. Conclusion: "Formulaic Absence" and Erasure

This chapter asked whether "formulaic absence" could have acted as a space for memory negotiation or alteration, and investigated the situations in which the work of Morgane Uberti suggests that it may have offered a plausible form of, or successor, to erasure in late antique Gaul. The questions of whether it did, more widely, in Gaul merit exploration elsewhere and require significant fieldwork – a much wider scope than offered here. Nonetheless, we have made some useful progress to confirm the use and importance of such a study. Across the funerary texts that we have studied here, we have seen how a marked omission of or from a formula could draw attention to significant details that alter or jeopardize the good memory of the deceased.

While this type of marked omission or formulaic absence can thus be seen as a novel form of memory negotiation, it is less clear if it can be usefully understood as a form of pre-emptive erasure process. As the comparisons here have shown, several criteria that different scholars have used to distinguish and define late antique erasure do extend to these marked absences in inscriptions. However, the final part of this chapter, dealing with absence as a technique that might be carried over into letters and their manuscript copies or similar media, does not. Although the recent definitions of erasure that have been taken from scholars throughout this piece differ from Charles Hedrick's more rigid definition of what he termed "*damnatio memoriae*," my argument reaches a similar conclusion to his analysis of earlier late antique texts, in which he deemed "[s]ignificant silences and erasures" to be important but not identical.⁸⁰ To assess the use of absence in different late antique Gallic

⁸⁰ Hedrick, *History and Silence*, esp. xii and 89-130; quote 117.

funerary media, and relate it to processes of erasure further, it might be useful to distinguish between what I term “formulaic absence” – which I argue describes the epigraphic evidence here – and these “silences” – which I will argue is a better way for understanding the epistolary evidence.

The most significant yet subtle difference between the examples of “formulaic absence” here and texts traditionally conceived of as erasure, treated elsewhere in this volume, is the ways in which the epigraphic texts that we have reviewed here deal with contestation. As we saw, in our review of epitaphs and the writings of Avitus, absence can serve to control the discourse by highlighting a concern while proposing a sole solution – rejection. In her recent monograph, Elena Gertsman notes there is still an inherent tension within any display of absence, which proffers a “visual sign of silence and a prompt for speaking.”⁸¹ That is, while a blank space does not indicate two directions like an erasure, its very presence (and absence) is itself a contradiction that simultaneously tells the reader what is not to be said while prompting them to evoke it. A formulaic absence can then, like an erasure, provide a site of contestation. However, while formulaic absence suggests the tension inherent in a particular detail, it inverts the contestation: in erasures, the marked-out text is simultaneously a prompt for silence, whereas in our case it is a marked-out absence that simultaneously prompts speech.

Indeed, one might argue that the power of the “formulaic absences” reviewed here comes directly from the ways that these blank spaces shift the space of contestation: the individual has a contested legacy, but that contest lies within their life and actions not in their memorial by the community, who have responded with the uncontested blank space. Unlike erasure, this does not require the forcible alteration of what once existed, and in principle excludes it. Thus, while the use of generative absence allows these formulaic absences to offer us many useful and productive parallels with erasure, as we have explored, we have uncovered one possible important distinction and definition to test: erasure is often a contested absence marked by force, whereas by definition, these absences are not forcible and have not been contested through the later insertion of a name or date.

⁸¹ Elina Gertsman, *The Absent Image: Lacunae in Medieval Books*, (University Park PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2021), 40.

The deliberate use and preservation of absence in late antique Gallic texts we have seen here prompts deeper questions about the meanings of absences – whether through erasure or whether *ab initio* in the Merovingian world. Throughout this piece, we have noted various scholarly justifications of absence, whether as mistakes, formulas to be filled in or epitaphs to be reused. This apparent discomfort with the preservation of these absences, and the tendency to see blankness as space that needs to be owned, filled and claimed, maybe reflects more about the modern way of viewing space than it does late antique preservation and perception of generative (erased) space – as Uberti’s work also suggested.⁸² The act of reframing blank space on inscriptions fits into the wider shift toward re-evaluating the significance and subtlety of what have previously been dismissed as simple epigraphic texts, such as Estelle Ingrand-Varenne’s argument that such simplicity was itself a communicative choice, or Vincent Debiais’s work on the visual interactions between tituli and images.⁸³ A re-evaluation of absence in later late antique and early medieval epigraphic texts is thus not only justified but is also timely.

So too is the need to understand the relationship between marked erasure and absence better, as part of understanding what drove erasure as a form of memory negotiation in Late Antiquity and what drove its decline in the Merovingian world – even when stone texts remained common. Such a consideration needs to address the physicality of the process as forming an integral part of its meaning, as it is accepted to do for early medieval graffiti. Erasure offers a model in which the past can, and should, be (forcibly) corrected in light of improved knowledge or awareness to inform and expand the present. Meanwhile the use of absence – if it can be attested more widely – seemingly expresses the tensions of an unachieved or uncertain potential through incompleteness, and actively questions the possibility of a communal correction or

⁸² Cf. Alfred Hiatt, “Blank Spaces on the Earth,” *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 15.2 (2002): 223-250; Jonathan Gibson, “Significant Space in Manuscript Letters,” *The Seventeenth Century* 12.1 (1997): 1-10; Elina Gertsman, “Phantoms of Emptiness: The Space of the Imaginary in Late Medieval Art,” *Art History* 41.5 (2018): 807-811.

⁸³ Estelle Ingrand-Varenne, “La brièveté des inscriptions médiévales : d’une contrainte à une esthétique,” *Medievalia, Revista d’Estudis Medievals* 16 (2013): 213-234; Vincent Debiais, “Le nom, marque dans l’image et marqueur de l’objet,” in *Writing Names in Medieval Sacred Spaces: Inscriptions in the West, from Late Antiquity to the Early Middle Ages*, ed. Estelle Ingrand-Varenne, Elisa Pallottini, Janneke Raaijmakers (Brepols: Turnhout, 2023), 110-131.

resolution in how the past should be remembered. The use and preservation of both erasure and formulaic absence in Merovingian Gaul thus merit further attention as evidence for changing approaches to memory and commemoration at the end of the Roman world, especially in light of increased tensions around the unknowability of salvation and the meaning of commemoration in that context.

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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

The Editors

KAY BOERS is employed as Lecturer in Ancient and Medieval History at Utrecht University and is a board member of the *Utrecht University Centre for Medieval Studies (UUCMS)*. His PhD thesis focused on the rhetoricity of citizens and citizenship in seventh-century *Hispania*. His current research focuses on the *global seventh century* and investigates the political and religious debates of this period from a comparative and transregional perspective with a heavy emphasis on the relation between (inter)text and community.

BECCA GROSE is a social and cultural historian of Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages, with a particular interest in how the materiality of written texts can tell us more about the relationships and societies of the people who wrote them. She has held posts at Royal Holloway and York, and is currently a visiting fellow in the "Migration und Mobilität in Spätantike und Frühmittelalter" research group at the Universität Tübingen.

REBECCA USHERWOOD is Assistant Professor in Late Antique and Early Byzantine Studies in the Classics department of Trinity College Dublin. Her research is concerned with emperors in the third and fourth centuries CE, particularly local understandings and reactions to imperial power as conceived and communicated centrally. Her first monograph, *Political Memory and the Constantinian Dynasty: Fashioning Disgrace*, was published by Palgrave-Macmillan in 2022. She is also a series editor for Liverpool University Press' *Women in Ancient Cultures* series.

GUY WALKER is a civil servant and independent researcher. He completed his PhD, funded by the Irish Research Council, at Trinity College Dublin in 2021. His thesis explores the influence of Neoplatonism on the *Dionysiaca* of Nonnus of Panopolis; in particular, how philosophical schemas from Homeric literary criticism were retooled and “remixed” in order to generate new meanings. His research interests include the intersection of philosophy and poetry, ancient literary criticism, and late antique Greek poetry.

The Authors

KELLY HOLOB is a PhD candidate at the University of Chicago Divinity School. Her research interests include Early Christian apologetics, apocryphal literature, Greco-Roman and Egyptian religion, the magical papyri, and capital punishment in the Roman empire and its reception. In her dissertation, she investigates how ancient understandings of living and dead criminals can help us rethink early martyrdom traditions. She has an article published in *Apocrypha* on magical words in early Christian narrative.

MIRIAM A. HAY is an Early Career Research Associate at the Institute of Classical Studies, University of London. She has recently published on Christian sarcophagi in late Roman Italy, and is currently working on publishing her PhD thesis (“Classical Remains and Christian Remembrance: Reviewing Late Roman Sarcophagi”), completed at the University of Warwick in 2019 while a Wolfson scholar. She also works in research governance for the Faculty of Social and Historical Sciences at University College London.

BENJAMIN KYBETT completed his PhD, entitled “Religion and Rhetoric and the Courts of the Theodosians, c. 379-404,” at the University of Cambridge in 2022.

ANNA M. SITZ is an archaeologist who works with epigraphic material. She gained her PhD in 2017 from the University of Pennsylvania and subsequently held a postdoctoral position at the Universität Heidelberg. Her monograph, *Pagan Inscriptions, Christian Viewers: The Afterlives of Temples and Their Texts in the Late Antique Eastern Mediterranean*, was published by Oxford University Press in 2023. She is at present a researcher in the (Post)Roman Transitions project at the Universität Tübingen.

MALI SKOTHEIM is an Assistant Professor of English at Ashoka University in Sonipat, India, and a Fellow at the Harvard Center for Hellenic Studies (2023-24). She completed her PhD at Princeton University with a dissertation on the Greek dramatic festivals under the Roman Empire (2016), and has published on ancient Greek festival culture, Roman interactions with the Greek festivals, and epigraphical evidence for satyr-drama in the Hellenistic and Roman era.

RYAN DENSON is an Assistant Professor for the Ancient Greek and Roman Studies Program at Trent University in Ontario, Canada and Honorary Research Fellow at the University of Exeter. His research interests include ancient folklore, the supernatural, and Late Antiquity. Among his recent works are a chapter on the Sirens/Harpies for *The Oxford Handbook of Monsters in Classical Myth* (2024) and an article on the canine elements of ancient sea monsters for *Classical Quarterly*.

MARK HUMPHRIES is Professor of Ancient History at Swansea University. He has published widely on early Christianity and Late Antiquity, particularly on the transformation of cities (especially Rome) and the ideological implications of usurpation in the later Roman Empire. He is a general editor of the Liverpool University Press series *Translated Texts for Historians*, and area editor for Late Antiquity and Byzantium for the *Wiley Encyclopedia of Ancient History*.