

7 **stica* – a modern dress gloss

The story of the dress gloss **stica* is very short, but it may serve as a cautionary tale for those putting too much trust in scholars of any time period (the author of this book included). Modern research claims that it referred to some unknown male garment. The reason for its inclusion in this book on women's dress is that it illustrates the steps of how a dress gloss is born and how its meaning grows over time.

The word is taken from the so-called 'Vindolanda Tablets.' These are quite famous in research on Roman history. For this reason, some brief remarks will suffice here. In the year 1973, excavations started at the site of the former Roman auxiliary camp of Vindolanda, just south of Hadrian's Wall. The excavations continued for the following twenty years and brought to light a variety of objects, including extensive remains of birchwood tablets. These contained parts of the camp's correspondence, providing an interesting view into everyday life at this outpost of the Roman Empire in the years 90–120 CE. As would be expected at the fringes of the empire, the writing tablets do not contain poetry but various lists and accounts relevant to the running of a logistical operation. In tablet 181, the obscure garment called **stica* figures (at least according to some researchers).¹

The tablets are generally in bad shape, and the text of the passage in question is a bit mutilated. It gives us a list of people who have either already paid or have yet to pay various sums of money to a merchant (who seems to have written the document). Among the things this man had provided his clients was firewood (3, *lignis emtis* [!]) and some obscure **stica* (4, *sticam*). The word **stica* is not attested in ancient Latin literature, so the editors Bowman/Thomas (n. 1) tried to guess what it was. They connected it with the Greek word στῆλη, which is found in the Edict of Diocletian (301 CE). They then postulated that **stica* designated some kind of tunic.² A new dress gloss was born that was subsequently fostered by other scholars. In 2013, for example, Wild lists the **stica* as a real dress term without a question mark, indicating how confident he was of this meaning.³

But was the basic assumption of Bowman/Thomas correct? There are several reasons for serious doubt. The Vindolanda Tablets do mention numerous textiles and items of clothing, but all the terms are either used elsewhere or are easily associated with familiar dress terms. In contrast, the **stica* is a Latin hapax. It is unique. It is hence better to look for a solution that does not require postulating a new term with an unknown meaning.

¹ A. K. Bowman/J. D. Thomas, *The Vindolanda Writing-Tablets II*, London 1994, 129–131.

² Bowman/Thomas (n. 1) 130.

³ J. P. Wild, *Vindolanda. Zu den Textilien und der sozialen Hierarchie in einem Kastell*, in: M. Tellenbach et al. (eds.), *Die Macht der Toga*, Hildesheim 2013, 240.

And this is possible. Let us return to the military camp of Vindolanda for this and look at what the Roman soldiers needed. As the various letters and lists show, many items necessary to sustain daily life were traded at the camp. We find firewood⁴ and often read about cereals, such as barley (*hordeum*)⁵ and wheat (*frumentum*).⁶ Wheat is also listed in tablet 180, which was written by the same person as tablet 181. Another word for cereals (and wheat) is *spica*. The word is used twice in tablet 343, once in the plural and once in the collective singular.⁷ Tablet 343 is closely connected with the tablet that contains the sequence STICA. Both tablets were found in the same place in the excavation. The word *spica* found in tablet 343 probably specifically designated grain that had not yet been threshed.⁸

Based on other parts of the book, readers will already know where all this will lead. As to orthography, the gloss **stica* (with a T) is strikingly close to *spica* (with a P). It is a reasonable guess that tablet 181 contained the word *spica* and not the word **stica*. A merchant selling grain to an outpost in conjunction with firewood is not unusual or surprising. Moreover, we also know that the same merchant traded in some form of grain based on what is said in tablets 180 and 343. And indeed, the suspicion that some corruption occurred is confirmed when we look at the photographs of the archaeological findings. The photograph of tablet 181 shows that the second letter of the sequence may just as likely be the letter P as the letter T.⁹ Both letters are generally similar in shape in the handwriting of the tablets. The uneven surface of the wood and the haste with which the list was written in the course of routine business may have further blurred the style of writing.

It turns out that the reading SPICA is just as likely as the sequence STICA. The benefit of the first reading is that it does not create additional ambiguity. The sequence is found elsewhere in the same archaeological findings, and it has an identifiable meaning. A merchant selling the most basic of supplies (firewood and grain—heat and food) makes more sense than a merchant selling firewood and clothing. All of this suggests that the gloss **stica* is a simple misreading by Bowman/Thomas and that it should be quickly removed from the record of dress terms.

The story of the false gloss is, however, a very interesting case for showing us how obscure supposed dress terms may have been engendered in Antiquity. We should be not more confident in the explanations given by ancient grammarians than those given by modern scholarship just because these men lived in Antiquity or at least Late Antiquity. They were themselves often dealing with centuries-old texts. For example, Nonius wrote five to six centuries later than some of his sources. The ancient gram-

⁴ Tab. 215 ii.5.

⁵ Tab. 185.19; 190c passim; 213 ii.2.

⁶ Tab. 180.1,37; 185.27; 191.9. In tab. 182, which is written by the same person, we find ham and bacon.

⁷ Tab. 343.7, 27.

⁸ Bowman/Thomas (n. 1) 325.

⁹ Bowman/Thomas (n. 1) plate X.

marians' ability to understand or decipher the texts before them was often hampered by several unavoidable factors: the deterioration of papyrus and ink, the errors inherent in creating handwritten copies, and the general evolution of language. When they then proposed new words and new meanings, it need not have been based on solid textual or historical evidence. There is reason to believe that some grammarians willfully invented some glosses and the supposed meaning. However, we have no way of conclusively proving the origin of ancient misreadings or faulty explanations. In contrast, it is possible to point to the exact methodological error committed by Bowman and Thomas. We can also point to the exact material object on which their error was based. This decisive evidence allows for intervening in the ongoing dissemination of the supposed gloss **stica* in research. The lesson is this: If accomplished researchers like Bowman and Thomas can fall prey to the temptation of creating a new gloss, it is very likely that the less careful grammarians were similarly responsible for the origins of at least some of the glosses examined in this part of the book. In any case, we should avoid trusting them blindly.

