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An ash-chest in an English country-garden: EDCS 65000025 revisited

EDCS (65000025) publishes a freedman's epitaph on stone from Rome, as derived from two sources – *CIL* VI.5 no. *3536 and Purser (1925) 5–6 no.8:

D(is) M(anibus) / P(ublio) A() Papylo / et con(liberto?) b(ene) m(erenti) / Mithres l(ibertus)

This contribution will offer a modern edition of this epitaph, revisiting its text, physical appearance, and its curious collection history.

The inscription was last published a century ago by Louis Purser as part of a catalogue of the collection of Latin inscriptions to be found in Shanganagh Castle, near Dublin. The catalogue included an introduction to the collection; details of each inscription's current location within the castle; its dimensions and a description, transcription, and commentary on the text; details of previous publication in *CIL* (where relevant), and brief historical notes. Purser described his endeavour as follows:

I can profess no expert knowledge at all of Latin epigraphy; but perhaps if this paper should meet the eye of any specialist in the subject it may induce him to clear up the many uncertainties and correct the many errors due to my limited knowledge; and at any rate it will show him where many of the inscriptions with which he is no doubt acquainted are actually existent at the present time. It was right, too, I thought, that such a considerable collection should be catalogued and made better known, if for no other reason, for the honour of the country. (Purser 1925: 1)

Despite his protestations, Purser's catalogue is generally proficient, and we should certainly be grateful since his investigation occurred not a moment too soon, with the collection being sold at auction and dispersed only ten years later. Nevertheless, his edition of this inscription can be improved in certain respects.

Purser's entry is as follows:

8. Ornamented sepulchral chest in the hall. The gable on the lid contains inside two birds on each side of a leaf. 10 inches broad by 11½ inches to top of gable, 9 in. to foot, 9 in.

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D · M · / P · A · PAPYLO / ET CON · B · M · / MITHRES L and on the lower rim ET · HERMES · LIB

Part of this is recorded as a forgery among the “*tabulae marmoreae cum titulis recens incisae quae exstant in villa Aldobrandinia in Quirinali.*” C.I.L. vi (5) 3536* thus – d.m. | pa. papylo | fi. con. b. m. | mithres.

In the above it is *et* (1. 3) quite plain. The Corpus does not add *Et. Hermes, lib.* 2 I can offer no suggestion as to what this line was supposed to stand for. 3 *et coniugi* [or is it *con(liberto)?*] *b(ene) m(erenti)*

The ash chest is currently on display in the gardens of Sissinghurst Castle (Kent, owned by the National Trust), where it was studied by the author in August 2022 and August 2024 (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1: A freedman's ash chest, Sissinghurst Castle garden. Photograph: A.E. Cooley (August 2024).

Consequently, the description of the ash chest can be updated. Purser's transcription of the text was accurate, improving upon *CIL*, but he was confused by its abbreviations.

The first line, *d(is) m(anibus)*, is straightforward. Line 2 caused Purser some difficulty – he lamented that he could ‘offer no suggestion as to what this line was supposed to stand for’. It is clear, however, that what we have here are abbreviated *praenomen* and *gentilicium*, separated by interpuncts, followed by *cognomen*. The best parallels for this suggest that we should expand this as *P(ublio) A(elio) Papylo*, as paralleled in Rome by *CIL VI 14347 / EDCS-15600251*:

D(is) M(anibus) / Caninae Eparchiae mammulae dulcissimae bene me/renti fecit P(ublius) A(elius) Germanus alumnus sibi et suis liber/tis libertabusq(ue) posterisq(ue) eorum / Publius Aelius Stefanus / fecit sibi et suis libertis / libertabusque posterisque eor(um).

The *cognomen* Papylus is not known elsewhere in Latin epigraphy, but plenty of parallels can be found in Greek inscriptions in the form Παπύλος, whilst an individual of that name is recorded by Eusebius (*HE* 4.15.48) as having been martyred at Pergamum.

Line 3 is more problematic, even though the lettering is clear: should we expand this as *coniugi* and translate this as ‘To Publius Aelius Papylus, also well-deserving husband’, or as ‘To Publius Aelius Papylus and to his well-deserving wife’? Neither of

these options feels very comfortable. The *et* suggests most readily that another individual is being referred to, rather than *et* being used as ‘also’, but we might more normally expect the possessive adjective to appear in such a formula: *et coniugi suo*. Although epitaphs usually do name the deceased, it is not impossible that a wife has remained unnamed here. We might compare an example from Anagni (AE 1996 no.121 / EDCS-03900001): *d(is) m(anibus) / Gelasino Euty/chus Cae(saris) n(ostri) / ser<v=B>us fecit / filio pientis/simo qui vixit / annis XV / posterisque {a}eorum / fecit sibi et coniugi*. Another option is to expand *con* as *con(liberto)* (an abbreviation paralleled in *CIL* XIV 2735 and *CIL* V 964), ‘To Publius Aelius Papyrus, also co-freedman’, but again the ET feels oddly placed if this is correct.

The final line within the main ornamental frame is *Mithres l* – an unusual name, but *Mithres l(ibertus)* is entirely possible as dedicator of the ash-chest. The name Mithres occurs at Rome (as outlined by Solin 1996: 301 and 2003, vol.1: 405) as a *cognomen* for M. Ulpius Mithres, an imperial freedman (AE 1948 no.57 / EDCS-15200067) and for [Aurel]ius Mithres, also an imperial freedman (*CIL* VI 571 / EDCS-17300717). Further, at Rome we find M(arcus) Valerius / Mithres (*CIL* VI 5344 / EDCS-18800480); and in the dative: *P(ublio) Aelio Mithr/eti* (*CIL* VI 10740 / EDCS-17200466). It also appears as a female name in the genitive case: *Corneliae Chry/santhe Mithres* (*CIL* VI 16365 / EDCS-12001261). This raises the possibility that our text could also be expanded as *Mithres l(iberta)*, which might resolve the problem of the spouse not being mentioned. Finally, the line not mentioned in *CIL* appears as an addition beyond the frame, with the words *et Hermes lib(ertus)*.

To sum up: we certainly have two individuals of freed status – Mithres and Hermes – setting up this ash chest for Publius Aelius Papyrus. It is not impossible that Mithres is Papyrus’ wife and that she is the initial commemorator dedicating the ash chest, joined at a later date by a freedman Hermes (not impossibly their son), or we might view the ash chest as dedicated by two freedmen.

1 New edition of EDCS 65000025

White marble ash chest with lid. In the centre of the pediment is a five-petalled flower flanked by a bird on each side. The top surface of the lid bears pulvini on either side. Four lines of text are laid out within a moulded decorated frame, whilst a fifth line is added in smaller letters below the frame. The lettering of this final line is quite distinct from the other lines, suggesting that it may have been added by a different hand, later than the rest of the epitaph. Simple interpuncts occur between most words. The sides are roughly finished. Faint guiding-lines are visible.

Dimensions of the ash chest: h. 22.5 cm; w. 27 cm; d. 23.8 cm. Dimensions of the lid: h. 7.8 cm; w. 28 cm; d. 24 cm. Letter heights: line 1: 2.2 cm; line 2: 2.5 cm; line 3: 2.3 cm; line 4: 2.2 cm; line 5: 1.2 cm.

Text and apparatus

d(is) ° m(anibus) ° / P(ublio) ° A(elio) ° Papylo / et ° con(iugi) ° b(ene) ° m(erenti) ° / Mithres ° l(ibertus) ° | et ° Hermes ° lib(ertus)

To the spirits of the dead. To Publius Aelius Papyrus and to (his) well-deserving wife. Mithres, freedman and Hermes, freedman (set this up).

1.2: EDCS – A0; *CIL* – PA; APAULO (Kierkuć-Bieliński)

1.3: *CIL* – FI; Purser: ET ('quite plain'); Purser: CON(iugi) or CON(liberto)

1.4 L(iberta)?

1.5: *CIL* – missing

2 A modern fabrication?

This new interpretation of the ash chest itself is only one small part of this discussion, however, since the publication in *CIL* to which Purser drew attention raises further questions about the status of the ash chest. Furthermore, the most recent mention of this inscription offers an incomplete and inaccurate account of the artefact: 'There is a very small collection of miscellaneous antiquities at Sissinghurst. The only other large antiquity sited in the garden is a Roman cinerarium, with a lid in the shape of a pedimented roof, inscribed: D.M.APAULO ET CON BM MITHRES ET HERMES [NT 803161]. The provenance of this cinerarium is not known but it is not associated with the Delian antiquities at Sissinghurst' (Kierkuć-Bieliński 2023: 392 n.11).

As Purser pointed out, the editors of *CIL* VI part 5 categorised this inscription as a modern fabrication, including it among their sub-section *CIL* VI *3519–3548, a collection of marble tablets with modern inscriptions in the grounds of the villa Aldobrandini on the Quirinal at Rome. It is unclear at what date the inscription entered that collection. In 1601 the villa was given by Pope Clement VII to his nephew, Pietro Aldobrandini, who housed there collections of his antiquities and other artworks. From 1811 to 1814 the villa Aldobrandini was appropriated by the French authorities, being taken over by Napoleon's general, Sextius Alexandre François de Miollis. He enriched the sculpture collection, but had to flee Rome in 1814, after which the villa reverted to the ownership of the Aldobrandini family in 1839. The villa was finally cut through by the building of the Via Nazionale in the latter part of the nineteenth century (Benocci 1989: 34; Benocci 2005: 23–26). The antiquities on display in the villa Aldobrandini were inventoried on several occasions and in none of the inventories (made in 1626, 1638, 1646, 1662, 1682, 1710: Benocci 1992: Appendix) nor in a descriptive catalogue of the Villa Miolli (Visconti and Visconti 1814) does anything resembling our ash chest appear.

The editors of *CIL* may have believed the inscription to be a modern fabrication because it was found in a collection alongside twenty-eight other such fabrications. In addition, the text as recorded in *CIL* makes no sense, offering FI in place of ET at the

start of line 3 (even though ET is entirely legible), and also omitting the final line of the inscription. *CIL* also describes the inscription as being on a marble plaque rather than upon an ash chest. The other inscriptions in this series which are still known and can be found in the Antiquarium Comunale on the Caelian, are indeed modern copies upon marble plaques (*Suppl. It. Imagines. Roma (CIL VI) 2 568–70 nos 3345–51 = CIL VI 3527*, 3522*, 3532–34*, 3537–38**). These discrepancies suggest one possible solution – that the Aldobrandini inscription may have been a separate modern fabrication inscribed upon a marble plaque, its text based upon that of the ash chest which, by contrast, may be an original artefact. That we may be dealing with a duplication is also suggested by the fact that the editors of *CIL*, working on the volume published in 1885, imply that they have seen the inscription themselves in the villa Aldobrandini (*tabulae marmoreae cum titulis recens incisis quae extant in villa Aldobrandinia in Quirinali . . . Descripserunt n.3522*, 3529*, 3541* de Rossi, n.3519*, 3525*, 3529*, 3534*, 3537*, 3543* Bormann, reliquas praeter n.3530* ego*), even though the ash chest was purchased in Rome and brought to Dublin in around the 1820s by Sir George Cockburn (1763–1847).

Cockburn, typically for someone of his age and class, had embarked on a Grand Tour of Europe in 1782–83, before undertaking an army career which included extended time in Sicily, amid the Napoleonic upheavals, from where he brought home a few antiquities as mementoes (Stephens and Fraser 2016). After having retired to Shanganagh Castle near Dublin, he then returned to Rome in the 1820s where he set about buying a sizeable collection of Latin inscriptions, which he installed in an area of the castle which he dubbed the ‘Little Vatican’ (Astbury 1996).

His son-in-law, Commodore William Gawen Rowan Hamilton, was on duty in the Aegean from 1820, where he gained the soubriquet ‘Liberator of Greece’ for assisting the Greeks against the Turks. He brought back for his father-in-law four round altars from the region – probably from Delos or its environs – decorated with bucrania and garlands, and a Corinthian capital. These could not be found a place within the castle’s existing display of antiquities, so the four altars were piled one upon another to form a tall column. Cockburn placed these upon a new saltire base of granite, in honour of The Representation of the People Act of 1832, also known as the Reform Act. This piece of electoral reform extended the franchise to small landowners, tenant farmers, shopkeepers, and householders if they paid a rent of at least £10 per annum. It may well be that he considered that these monuments which were redolent of ancient Greece and its democracy were particularly appropriate to mark what he saw to be a defining turning-point in British democracy. At the same time, 1832 also saw the independent kingdom of Greece established, so these historical turning-points came together in alignment. He added the following commemorative inscription to the base: ‘This Column Erected in July 1832 by Gen. Sir G. Cockburn G.C.H. to Commemorate The Reform Bills passed this year is formed of ancient Greek Marbles (The Granite Base Excepted) Sent to him from the Levant By his Son in Law Captain W.G. Hamilton R.N. C.B.’. The Reform Bill, though, was never properly implemented, and Cockburn was so disillusioned that he

added a second inscription to the base in July 1838: 'Alas to this date a Hum Bug' (Kierkuć-Bieliński 2023).

Just over a hundred years later, in 1936, Shanganagh Castle and its contents were sold at auction (Battersby & Co: *Shanganagh Castle Shankill, Co. Dublin: Catalogue of the furnishings & appointments to be sold at auction commencing Monday 10th August 1936*). Most of the inscriptions were bought by University College Dublin (Astbury 1996: 13), but the ash chest was put up for auction on 13 August 1936 (Catalogue, p48 no. 1018: 'carved stone sepulchral chest and cover', with transcription of its inscription) and was apparently bought by the diplomat turned writer-politician Sir Harold Nicolson (Otte 2009), who happened to be the great-great-grandson of George Cockburn, and had spent much of his childhood on the country estates of his mother's relations in Ireland, including at Shanganagh Castle (Astbury 1996: n.7). Nicolson had decided to travel across to Dublin to attend the auction. He wrote, 'When my grandmother died in 1919 my uncle Gawen, in a moment of impatience, suddenly sold Shanganagh with all its contents. In 1936 it again came into the market, and being anxious to rescue some at least of the memories of my childhood, I crossed to Dublin and attended the sale. I bought the column as it stood and had the altars and the top tier of the base transported to my home at Sissinghurst. Three of the altars and the Corinthian capital were disposed, with some ungainliness, along a garden path. The fourth, with the base and the inscription, was erected in the orchard' (Nicolson 1943: 200–201). So three of the round altars became individual features of the Delos Garden, whilst the bottom-most one, with the humbug inscription, ended up in the orchard. As Nicolson (1943: 201–202) explained, 'As a liberal and a democrat I share Sir George Cockburn's appreciation of the Reform Bills of 1832. I rejoice that they and Greece should jointly if incongruously be commemorated between the wild roses and the apple tree'. Although the origin of the 'Shanganagh column' is well documented in this way, the fact that the ash chest was apparently also one of the items bought at the time has hitherto been unrealised.

It too was destined to be incorporated into the garden design of Sissinghurst Castle. This property is the former home of the writer Vita Sackville-West and her husband, Harold Nicolson, taken over by the National Trust in 1967 and now one of the Trust's most popular properties. Sackville-West and Nicolson bought the property in 1930, partly as an attempt to console Vita on not being eligible as a daughter to inherit her childhood home at Knole, Sevenoaks. They then spent the next three decades developing the gardens that have become among the most famous gardens in England, designated Grade I on Historic England's register of historic parks and gardens.¹ The design and planting of the gardens were a joint project, with Harold working out the structural design from atop the castle tower and Vita creating a contrast to his formal design by carrying out an abundance of informal planting, cramming in the greatest

1 SISSINGHURST CASTLE, Cranbrook & Sissinghurst - 1000181 | Historic England = <https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1000181>.

number of plants possible – most notably in the White Garden, one of the garden's most distinctive features (Hochstrasser 2017). As Nicolson described the project in a letter to Vita of 8 June 1837, he was aiming for 'a perfect proportion between the classic & the romantic, between the element of expectation & the element of surprise. Thus the main axes are terminated in a way to satisfy expectation, yet they are in themselves so tricky that they also cause surprise. But the point of the garden will not be apparent until the hedges have grown up' (Nicolson 1966: 302). Nicolson's design combined formal gardens with an orchard cum meadow. The layout consists of ten interlinking 'garden rooms'. They were designed with the aim of disguising the irregular shapes created by the various buildings dotted around the property. The rooms are divided by formal paths, the views articulated by ancient and modern sculptures (Howcroft 2015: 51–52). Nicolson's basic plan was to create three long axial vistas, to create a sense of distance within a fairly confined space and then to create within this framework a sequence of hidden gardens (Nicolson 1966: 425). Statuary is set at focal points, a mix of copies inspired by ancient statues and modern sculpture – the Yew Walk consists of hedges which create a corridor. This long axial pathway is articulated at one end by an urn and at the other by the Shanganagh ash chest (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2: The ash chest as part of the garden design at Sissinghurst Castle. Photograph: A.E. Cooley (August 2024).

To sum up. The ash chest on display in the garden at Sissinghurst Castle was bought by Harold Nicolson in 1936 from the sale at auction of the contents of Shanganagh Castle in Dublin, which had contained a collection of antiquities bought in Rome by George Cockburn in the first half of the nineteenth century. Although a very similar inscription is included as a modern fabrication in *CIL* VI.5, it may be the case that the fabrication in the Villa Aldobrandini was in fact a marble plaque imitating the text of this ash chest which, by contrast, appears to be an ancient artefact. Autopsy at dusk with the aid of a raking light now allows the text of this ash chest to be both reinterpreted and rehabilitated.

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