

Clues to the Origins of the Latin Language: An Epigraphic and Cultural Approach

Giovanni Meledandri

ORCID: 0000-0002-5969-2051

Human Sciences Department,
Guglielmo Marconi University, Rome, (Italy)

Mark Orsag

History Department, Doane University,
Crete, Nebraska (USA)

*"...when a woman loves beautiful singing, there is no brooch that holds,
especially for those who sell their melodies to the Praetors"*

(Juv. Sat. VI, 379-80)

ABSTRACT

This study hypothesizes, from a philological point of view, the early existence of expressive and communicative skills in the Proto-Latin language of the early Italic peoples based on an engraving found on the 7th century BCE *Praeneste fibula*. This famed ancient artifact has an extensive, complex and disputed modern history, but its ancient authenticity has now been scientifically confirmed. The goldsmith, (*Manios*) who made the engraving was likely Etruscan. The inscription thus constitutes compelling evidence that both the carver and the object's patron (*Numazios*) shared a language, now considered Proto-Latin, that was unambiguously understood by contemporaries. Such a scenario, interestingly, precedes the introduction of Greek philosophical texts concerning the origins and meaning of language to the Italian peninsula by about two centuries.

Keywords: Ancient culture, Roman history, Latin language, Praeneste fibula, Ancient Greek philosophy, epigraphy, archaeology.

PREMISE

The origin of the Latin language is widely debated. The topic is so broad and complex that it is necessary to use restricted and contextualized treatments, focused on and delimited by their respective disciplines. Such limited approaches are only suitable to provide partial contributions but yet are collectively useful in providing overall perspective. This study discusses the origin of the Latin language, drawing inspiration from the text inscribed on the valuable ancient artifact, the *Praeneste fibula* (also known as the "the brooch of Palestrina" or "Manios fibula," by English-speaking authors). The antiquity of the object, 7th century BCE, places the brief epigraphic text inscribed on it at the forefront of the history of written Latin. Epigraphic textual analysis of the artifact illuminates various elements about the shared language of its creator and patron [1]. For this reason, it has been examined, trying to

reconstruct the evolution of the inscribed words (as well as potential phonemes). A congruous trace with the culture of the time was sought, which would allow for an expansion, at least hypothetically, of the knowledge of expressive skills in the culture of the pre-Latin and proto-Latin peoples who used the language of the epigraph. The image that emerges seems to anticipate classical linguistic philosophical systematization by over two centuries, revealing a style of communication with very ancient roots, already widespread among the populations of Lazio. The semantic rationale of the epigraphic text, to fulfill the purpose for which it was intended, appears to be based on epistemological assumptions that we find more formally represented, analyzed, and discussed two centuries later. These (surviving) ancient Greek selections from Heraclitean, pre-Socratic philosophy, and the works of Plato, systematically address the topic of "language" in a manner consistent with the culture in which they developed...but long after the production of the Praeneste. The fibula, centuries in advance, and in a language emerging from multiple influences (proto Latin, Italic, and pre-Indo-European) [2], already utilized, in the 7th century BCE, the linguistic, expressive, and communicative skills later theorized by Heraclitus or discussed by Socrates, Hermogenes, and Cratylus, in the homonymous Platonic dialogue.

INTRODUCTION

The earliest written documents of the Latin language are indicative of the material culture of an era about which we know very little and hypothesize much. An era in which not only language originated, but which also saw the creation of structures of meaning, through expression and communication (both written and oral), based on an alphabet resulting from numerous origins and influences. This complex evolutionary path is also only partially understood. The origins of the culture of ancient Lazio, of its indigenous and foreign peoples, created the crucible where the birth of Rome took place. There, the Latin language was formed. The origin of the Latin language, in diachronic terms, what relationships might it have had with this archaic culture? It was undoubtedly a piece in the mosaic of Italic languages, certainly it had intrinsic relationships with the surrounding and, so to speak, pre-existing alphabets and languages. Phoenician, Etruscan, Greek, the galaxy of languages and dialects currently classified as pre-Indo-European (PIE) and Indo-European languages [2,3]. This is still a controversial topic, on which much has been written and debated. How can we not consider, for example, the studies of Giovanni Semerano³ [3,4]? The resulting space for analysis and competing hypotheses remains broad. An artifact such as the Praeneste, considered the oldest example of the written Latin language, besides exciting us, can provide, in just four words, numerous pieces of relevant information. Considering this, a broader review of the object's colorful history is in order.

THE PRAENESTE FIBULA

The Discovery

The brooch, not yet referred to with the attribute "Praeneste," was presented in 1887 by the German archaeologist Wolfgang Helbig (1839 - 1915), without any indication of the place of discovery⁴. Helbig claimed to have purchased it in 1876; later, he indicated the Bernardini⁵ tomb as the place of discovery, from which the precious artifact would have been stolen⁶ from the funerary contents. The object was thus included in the inventory of finds from the Bernardini tomb until 1919, when it was temporarily withdrawn due to archaeological uncertainty about its secure provenance. Analytically, as a supplement and complement, it can be observed that other brooches, similar in type and workmanship, dated between the 8th and

7th centuries BCE, have been found in Etruria, Lazio, and Campania. The most similar object - made of gold and bearing an inscription - was discovered⁷ in Etruria at Clusium, now Chiusi [5,6].

Description

The Latin term *fibula* refers to a safety pin, a common element of ancient clothing, frequently used and, as such, often found in excavation materials. The term is adopted for technical use by archaeologists and epigraphists. The *Praeneste fibula*, made of gold and measuring 10.7 cm, is a version of the type of safety pin defined as a serpentine arch: the latter, influenced by the Eastern taste popular in Etruria in the 7th-6th centuries BCE, was enriched with symmetric bulges- an indication of the class of dragon *fibulae*. Such pins were male ornaments⁸ and, in addition to its more mundane purpose, could constitute a status symbol. The artifact presents itself, in profile, as a multi-angled element, decorated with granulation, with two transverse bars, extending into a needle, called an *ardiglione*. Its distal part is contained in an elongated loop, a sort of case, open on the side. Right on this, the inscription is situated, running from right to left, in what is considered an archaic form of Latin. The engraving work can be placed in the extensive goldsmith tradition of Etruscan craftsmanship, suggesting that already, in the 7th century BCE, there were extant workshops for a clientele speaking the Latin language. A common understanding of such a language appears to be an essential prerequisite of the artifact's commission and creation.

Controversies and Debate

The authenticity of the ornament was the subject of prolonged and intense debate. The *Praeneste fibula's* legitimacy was questioned^{9,10} for centuries- with the consensus gradually subtly shifting, over time, toward declaring the object a fake. Some of those associated with the Praeneste's discovery (such as Helbig and art dealer Francesco Martinetti) indeed had unsavory reputations in the archaeological community of the nineteenth century. Scholarly suspicion also arose due to the fragmentary nature of the initial news regarding the relic's discovery. Those who argued that the object was a forgery, however, (such as Margherita Guarducci¹¹, Thomas Hoving and E. Hamp¹²) however, did not gather unanimous consensus within the scholarly community. From an epigraphic and philological point of view, Professor A. E. Gordon from the University of California- Berkeley, after a thorough examination of each element, spoke in favor of authenticity. So did Massimo Poetta, Giulio Facchetti (in 1999) and linguist Markus Hartmann (in 2005). The debate continued until 2011 when, thanks to an investigation conducted by Daniela Ferro of the Institute for the Study of Nanostructured Materials (ISMN-CNR) and Edilberto Formigli, a professor at the 'La Sapienza' University, every doubt about the Praeneste fibula's authenticity was scientifically dispelled¹³ [7,8].

Ferro's and Formigli's analysis of the surface of the fibula, carried out using scanning electron microscopy and an electron microprobe with energy-dispersive X-ray spectrometer, established congruence between the hypothesized age of the artifact (7th century BCE) and the Etruscan goldsmith known techniques of the time [8]. Below, some parts of the mentioned statement are summarized and reproduced:

"Investigations [7,8] conducted by the Institute for the Study of Nanostructured Materials of the National Research Council and the 'La Sapienza' University dispel doubts about the precious Etruscan brooch and its inscription, which is confirmed

to be the oldest testimony in the Latin language (7th century BC). The case of the Prenestina [Praeneste] fibula, displayed in the 'Luigi Pigorini' National Ethnographic Museum in Rome, is thus finally resolved. The authenticity of the precious brooch, dated to the 7th century BCE, and its inscription, considered the oldest example of the Latin language, has been confirmed as genuine via investigations conducted by Daniela Ferro of the Institute for the Study of Nanostructured Materials of the National Research Council (ISMN-CNR) and Edilberto Formigli, a restorer with teaching positions at the 'La Sapienza' University of Rome and the Opificio delle Pietre Dure in Florence [7,8]."

The two scholars presented today, at the 'Pigorini' Museum, the results of the microanalytical investigations conducted in the scanning electron microscopy laboratory of the Department of Chemistry at 'La Sapienza' University. The fibula, found in Palestrina, ancient Praeneste, has been the subject of prolonged and intense debate regarding its authenticity and provenance since its official presentation in 1887 by the German archaeologist Wolfgang Helbig. In 1979, it was declared a forgery by the renowned scholar Margherita Guarducci, who attributed the inscription to Helbig himself [7,8].

The gold jewel, measuring 10.7 cm long, bears the Latin inscription "Manios med fhefhaked Numasioi" on the outer part of the clasp, in classical Latin 'Manius me fecit Numerio' or 'Manio made me for Numerio', which, being dated around the mid-7th century BCE, is the oldest Latin inscription that we have. "The study of an artifact required the choice of non-destructive and non-invasive analytical methods," explained Daniela Ferro of ISMN-CNR. "The use of scanning electron microscopy, coupled with energy-dispersive X-ray microprobe, allows for high-resolution observations of the surface and simultaneously enables the acquisition of data on the chemical composition of the included elements. In particular, the fibula was studied with a sample holder that allow[ed] for easy movement of the object, investigating every part without damaging it" [7,8].

While no dating methods have yet been found for gold, it is possible to trace the contextualization of the object through the technologies applied to its construction. The scientific equipment used has made it possible to ascertain methodologies and chemical composition compatible with the dating attributed to the brooch in the 7th century BC, despite the cleaning and polishing interventions carried out in the 1800s. The inscription also proved to be ancient based on the microstructural investigations of the areas affected by the grooves, confirming it as the oldest testimony in the Latin language [8].

"The brooch is a high-quality goldsmithing artifact, made using gold alloys of different compositions according to the functional use of the various components," continues the researcher. An original repair has also been identified, confirming the prolonged use of the object in ancient times. It is unlikely that a forger would reconstruct such details without knowledge of ancient goldsmithing procedures, which, among other things, could not have been detected without sophisticated technological instruments available only today [8].

Archaeological finds that inform us about the origins of the Latin language, about how and when it was organized from spoken language into letters and writing, [9] are rare. The, now

scientifically verified, jewel known as the *Praeneste fibula* (Fig. 1 below) is, therefore, one of these exceptional, and exceptionally informative, archaeological finds. It bears an inscription in reverse (Fig. 2 below), which appears readable from right to left:

"Manios med fhefhaked Numasioi"

It is a short and simple inscription¹⁴, of four words, which today could almost correspond to a signature; we interpret it, in accordance with the findings of Augusto Rostagni [1], as the more standard Latin equivalent of "Manius me fecit Numerio" ; this translates into modern English as "Manio made me for Numerio" or, as rendered by Giacomo Devoto [2], as "Manio made me for Numasio." Arnaldo Momigliano also suggests this latter interpretation, "Manio made me for Numasio"¹⁵[10].

The language in which the inscription is written is an archaic form of Latin from Latium and, as a conjecture, it is supposed that the later Romans themselves, speaking Latin, would have struggled to literally understand its meaning [9]. The Praeneste is, as noted, dated to the 7th century BCE (ca. 675 BCE more precisely.) As a result, the statement of the mysterious Manio represents the oldest testimony of the Latin language that has come down to us. The term "fhefhaked" (translated as "made/has made/", as a perfect form with characteristic syllabic doubling¹⁶[11]) was, in the past, a cause of debate and controversy, a key element of the presumption of the Praeneste's falsity. Other inscriptions, however, discovered later in the territory north of Rome, then occupied by the ancient Falisci, helped dispel any doubts: the Faliscan language, co-genetic with the original Latin, normally used this form of doubled perfect, as well as the dative ending -oi (concerning Numasio). Similarities were also discovered concerning the symbols, the writing, the arrangement, and the characters of the letters: evidence of these can be found in another exceptional find, the Capena amphora, discovered in the necropolis of Monte Laceto (near Capena), on whose belly an alphabet is inscribed [12].

Modern technologies of electron ultramicroscopy have also been applied to the engraving. The revelations regarding the known contemporary technique that was used, and which was indeed observed on the fibula, have now also helped definitively close any possible doubts about the antiquity and genuineness of the *Praeneste fibula*. In the 7th century BCE therefore, thoughts were written, expressed, and communicated clearly, understandably and without ambiguity, amongst communicators. This is a key point for understanding the origins of the Latin language.

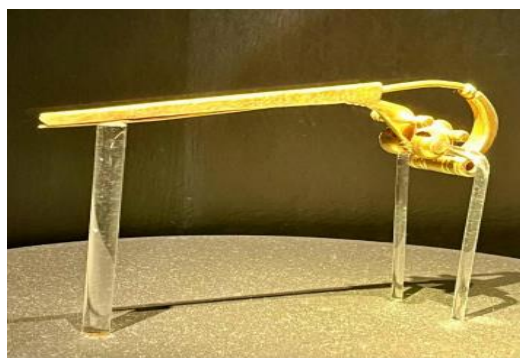


Fig 1: The *Praeneste fibula*, a golden artifact dated to the 7th century BCE and preserved in the Museum of Civilization, in Rome (f.d.a.). It bears an inscription that is considered the earliest written testimony of the Latin language.

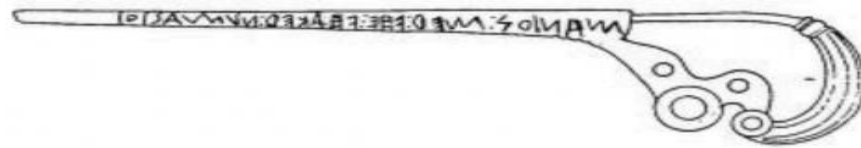


Fig 2: The fibula of Preneste, reproduced with the inscription. (From: Civilization of Primitive Lazio. 1976 [12]).

THE INSCRIPTION: TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

The inscription of the epigraph found on the Praeneste, illustrated in Fig. 3 below:

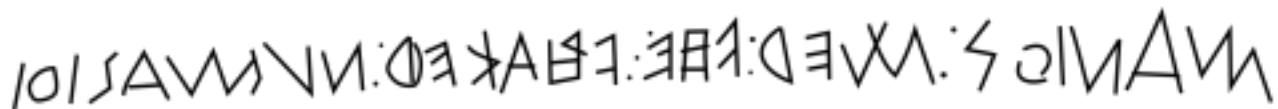


Fig 3: Transcription of the text engraved on the *Praeneste fibula*: the reading direction is [counterintuitively from a modern Western point of view] leftward; read from right to left.

(From J. M. Ciordia – Own work, CC0,

<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=82470279>).

It is initially transcribed, and on this there is broad agreement, as follows: “Manios med vfhevoked Numasioi” To “Manios me fecit Numasio”¹⁷.

Analyzing the four words from which the inscription is composed, we note:

- 1) Manios: it is a nominative in -os, a typical archaic morphology. The ending -os, Greek, is already pre-Indo-European (PIE) and traceable in Oscan, Umbrian, Vedic, and Hittite¹⁸[13].
- 2) The pronoun med is considered proto-Latin, different from the Italic *meom*, in turn an expression of the PIE form, certainly more recent. Latin influence or an Italic archaism, however this pronoun is not PIE in origin; there are, however, hypotheses put forward to explain its use¹⁹.
- 3) *vfhevoked*: note here the introduction of the spelling *vh*, as opposed to *f*, which appeared later. Such spelling, as appears on the Praeneste, also appears in the oldest Etruscan and Venetic inscriptions and is therefore to be considered more appropriate. From the inscription, we also learn immediately that the Praenestine dialect, unlike Latin and proto-Latin, used a perfect with the doubling of the root *fac*. The linguistic congruence, in this case, is with the Oscan language: for example, *fefacid* and *fefacust* [2] (also in Giacomo Devoto, “Il linguaggio d’Italia”). This is a form of Italic *perfect tense*, contemporary but not analogous to the Latin *feced*, which is found in the more recent inscription (5th century BCE) present on the Duenos vase [13].

The possibility that this may be a match with an ancient strong aorist with doubling is a subject of debate and discussion, and therefore its geographical origin is rather uncertain: it could be, in case, an Attic dialectal influence (Lorenzo Rocci, *Grammatica Greca*, 184, 2. Società Editrice Dante Alighieri, 40^a ed. 2019, PG, Italy). The perfect *vfhevoked* is certainly considered an Italicism by Giacomo Devoto [2], who also refers to the influences of texts which reject the initial Proto-Latin mixture. In terms of linguistic evolution, there would be, therefore, initial nuclei of mutual Italic, pre-Indo-European, Eastern, and Proto-Latin influences present. One possible interpretation is

that, as we are in the 8th-7th centuries BCE, linguistic pressure is already radiating from Rome and as evidenced by the Praeneste inscriptions, is decidedly Latin and not Proto-Latin, a trend that would continue to manifest in the coming centuries [2;13;14].

- 4) The dative *Numasioi* presents two notable characteristics: first, the *a* is observed, which has not changed into an internal syllable, thus giving rise to the form *Numsio*. Regarding this name, we find various *Numsii* in the Campanian area, also with orthographic variants: *Devoto* mentions a *Niumsius* (*Herennius*) in *Nola* and cites examples of the variant *Numerius* (the *r* replaced the *s* over time). This phenomenon – rhotacism – represents another archaic feature) that remained in Rome until recent times [2]. The Italic character of the name is also attested from Etruria. It is appropriate to recall here the history of the relationships between Italic languages and Latin, in so doing, we refer directly to *Devoto's* words that these relationships, “can no longer be represented as the coherent and constant branching from a common Italic trunk nor as the definitive and total unification of relatively different currents in their origins.”²⁰ [2]. The ending *-oi*, which is found in the ancient endings of the singular dative, characteristic of pre-Latin Italic languages: *-oi*, as well as *-ai*, result from the evolution of *-oy* and *-ay*. According to *Sihler* the prevailing influence is still pre-Indo-European²¹. In linguistic evolution, the *i* will subsequently fall, and the vowels *-o* and *-a* will assume a respective consequent quantity, that is, long: *-ō*, *-ā*. The literary Latin language chose, transformed, and canonized the ending *-ae*. While, simultaneously, in spoken language (as can be inferred from sources like *Plautus*) and in the vernacular, *-ā* remained widespread [13].

EXPRESSION AND COMMUNICATION: LANGUAGE IN THE FIBULA

The four words of the inscription, for the writer and the recipient, had a certain meaning. What was expressed in the text was equally and mutually communicated among those who shared it. Starting from this premise, it is possible to ask what the linguistic skills were that ensured the functioning of the communication itself [15,16,17].

There are no other Latin examples close to the 7th century BCE dating of the fibula. To trace back to ancient linguistic theories, one is forced to refer to the Greek language and culture, which, however, is more recent than the relevant ancient Latin artifact. This is what, to propose a hypothesis on the origin of archaic communicative ability in Lazio, is discussed in the next section. The analysis here is dedicated, precisely, to the debate on language in the Italian pre-Socratic and Platonic environment. The testimonies available, in Greek, show how the problem of the correspondence between signifier and signified, between name and real object, was addressed, with reference to the philosophy of the 5th – 3rd centuries BCE.

Plato broadly based his conception of language on ontology [18,19,20]; for Plato, it was evident that another reality existed, outside of the name; it was a separate, ideal reality to which things and names should refer to possess a non-surreptitious foundation. How and why did he arrive at such a view? The topic is observed and discussed in its development.

THE TEXT AND THE FUNCTION

The critical epistemological approach and the linguistic philological one contributes to historicizing and integrating the interpretation of the Prenestine epigraphic text. It fulfills both fundamental functions of language: expression and communication²².

The text is expressed in a sentence: it is not decomposable, and the Prenestine sentence is not divided by punctuation marks. If it were decomposed into words, it would cease to fulfill its function, it could no longer communicate its content: none of the words that compose it is sufficient to do so. According to the linguist and philosopher Wilhelm von Humboldt, in expressing oneself, pre-existing words are not joined together, but each chosen word is specified by the totality of the spoken language; that is, by the meaning and content one wants to communicate. Language cannot be decomposed into words, but it is necessary to identify which indispensable meaningful units the individual sentences represent²³. The concept of the decomposability of the sentence into words, an interpretation attributed, perhaps not entirely correctly, to Plato, has, in modern times, been questioned, and perhaps even surpassed. In studies on child language by Milivoje Pavlovitch²⁴[17], babbling and early childhood stuttering are not attempting to pronounce single words but entire sentences, with the aim of expressing sensations and needs. The ontogeny of language essentially recapitulates its phylogeny. In support of this concept, Josef Schick writes, "the archaic forms of writing, ideographic and hieroglyphic, reproduced entire objects or images, that is, they corresponded to sentences"²⁵. Ancient Phoenician and Greek texts were written without interruption, and only the Romans began to mark the division between words with a point. The intention to establish a reciprocal correspondence between individual sounds and graphic signs was a subsequent achievement of phonetic writing and appeared later, as a result of broader cultural advancement.

The epigraph of the *Praeneste fibula* thus embodies this concept of complex linguistic evolution as a simple reality of expression and communication. With clarity for the context in which the communication took place and content related to both the artifact's creator and recipient. This occurs through a construction containing proper names, a pronoun, and a verb. Both the writer and the reader understood and shared the meaning of the inscribed text. This took place in the 7th century BCE, in Lazio. There are no documents of the history or theory of language in Italy preceding or contemporary to the dating of the *Praeneste fibula*.

In the earliest available texts of Greek thinkers, who lived between the 6th and 5th centuries BCE, prior to the period of Socrates and Plato, traditionally called pre-Socratic, the conceptions related to language are entirely dependent, in fact indistinguishable, from ontology. Forms of thought are mythical syntheses. The word not only pertains but belongs, is consubstantial, to the object. To say is to evoke, to evoke it is necessary to say, adhering always to precise rules. Such rules could also be of exclusive domain and competence. This reality, in turn gave rise to forms of expression – song, rhymes, alliterations, metaphors - and to the figures designated, sometimes exclusively, for the use of words, often in religious and magical contexts. As for proper names... of men, gods, or other entities, the above was truer than ever and could easily include taboos and various prohibitions [19,20,21,22]. Language and the sphere of facts were one and the same, their relationship was consubstantial: speaking of reality was part of the same reality, language did not merely describe reality but was an intrinsic part of it and its functioning, even where appearances were obscure, mysterious, or incomprehensible.

Heraclitus of Ephesus (circa 550-480 BCE) was, according to a widespread custom, the first to assert the identity between being and language. Heraclitus extensively used the term *logos* (*fragment 16, from Heraclitus in Pre-Socratics, Hermann Diels e Walther Kranz*) [22]. This term has multiple meanings, even in the Greek language, and the explanations of its intrinsic polysemy are inherent in its root. In the texts of Heraclitus, the word *logos* recurred in its

multiplicity of meanings, often making its precise translation far from easy. Alternatively, *logos* can signify thought, reason, intelligence or discourse - but also only when and if it asserts the truth and departs from mere opinion! It is the law that regulates the functioning of the cosmos and human relations, it is the principle of everything. For this reason, every man as part of the universe participated in the universal *logos*. However, participation was not identical among men, as it related to the level of depth, awareness, and penetration into the depths of natural truths that could be individually reached. For men to equally partake in the mysteries of nature and enjoy equal rationality, a superficial or partial participation in *logos* was not enough: rather a deep (and sufficient) participation was the privilege of a few. Law-harmony, word-discourse, thought-reason were not a full or rightful possession of those whom Heraclitus calls "the sleepers" (fragment 14-16). Heraclitus thus emphasized, in his concept of *logos*, the intentionality of the internal and intrinsic articulation of language. Language was not merely learned; it was pre-existing and already possessed by men. This, because it coincided with the essence and structure of reality, but it was not the same for all men^{26,27}. This Heraclitean conception reaches us mainly through fragments 1 and 2 of Herakleitos²⁸ [18;19;20].

Parmenides of Elea (Elea, 515 BC/510 BCE (according to Plato's chronology), 544 BC/541 BCE (according to Apollodorus' chronology) – 450 BC) was certainly influenced by Heraclitean doctrine. He posited it as a necessary condition for language to truly say something about the existence of the thing referenced itself. Nothing could be said if it did not exist– the Parmenidean "is." Language, as an activity and manifestation of thought, belonged to the sphere of ontology. "Being"²⁹ (unchanging, ungenerated, finite, immortal, unique, homogeneous, and motionless) was the foundational term. Every word could express it as an attribute or absolute³⁰. The correspondence between word and being was necessary to the point of giving rise to the divergence between truth (*alétheia*) and opinion (*doxa*), a theme that would become a mainstay of Western philosophy from then on [21;22].

Empedocles, believed to have lived between 492 BCE and 432 BCE, was, at least in part, influenced by Parmenides and Pythagoreanism. But Empedocles' doctrine was also the result, as noted by Maria M. Sassi, of a rhapsodic education, "based on listening and memorization of traditional literature"³¹[23]. The prominent role and multiple activities of Empedocles had a wide influence and gained recognition within ancient Greek philosophical tradition. For Aristotle, Empedocles was the "father of rhetoric" (Aristotle, fr. 1, 9, 65) and a "poet" skilled in creating suggestions with words (Rhetoric, III, 5, 1407). Cicero later described him as a "author of an excellent poem" (Cicero, De Oratore 1, 217) and, in "De Amicitia, he referred to Empedocles as "the wise man of Agrigento". Lucretius looked to him as an exemplar (De rerum natura, 727 ss.). Plutarch considered him a "Sapiens" (On Exile, 17, 607c), a "wise" man who possessed a superior mind. These are the attestations of some of the great thinkers and writers of the ancient Greco-Roman Mediterranean world. Regarding the origin and evolution of language, Empedocles plays a role of conjunction between older mythical thought and the new approach, more centered on man, of Greek philosophy. Using modern terminology, Empedocles introduces a vision that leaves room for the senses and intelligence, thus contributing to the birth of empiricism, rationalism, and perhaps even relativism. He teaches – these are fragments 6 to 8 – that by minimizing the effects of innate impulses, thought can reach the understanding and narration of truth both through inner reality (open to intelligence) and externally, through the perception of the senses³²[24]. Human intelligence takes on an exclusive role, still magical and mythical, but capable of separating the sphere of investigation of epistemology from that

of ontology.

The development of the philosophical culture of the Greek poleis was now ready for the confrontation between what 'is' by nature and what exists by convention. Among the atomists, and even more so among the sophists, a new vision of language emerged, as a human capacity, the result of cognitive activity and, as such, analyzable on the epistemological level, independently of ontology. For the pre-Socratics, language had directly reflected natural reality, but no longer. Democritus and the Sophists explicitly affirmed, for the first time in the history of Western thought, the role and primacy of human cognitive and communicative capacity.

Democritus's view (circa 460 BCE – 360 BCE) may seem modern; language is portrayed as the result of both convention and arbitrariness. Language is also seen as a tool, responding to the need to communicate. For Democritus, humans use language as holders of the ability to articulate sounds to indicate objects. The correspondence between name and thing is not innate and universal; it is rather arbitrarily established, contingently, by humans. The way in which sounds are assembled to form words, as well as prosody and sentence construction, are thus foreign to ontological reality³³[25]. In this overall conception, words are mere conventional signs, arbitrary symbols; there are no correspondences or links between word and object. Much later early modern linguistic conventionalism and the theses of John Locke did not truly add much to Democritus's denial of the existence of connections between the sound and meaning of a word.

The Sophists, contemporaneously (Protagoras and Gorgias were born between 485 and 483 BCE) also denied the capacity and revelatory function of words. Words are merely the means used to produce effects and achieve goals. Language was subjected to analysis to study its production and usage techniques, to use it in the most effective and utilitarian way. The thought of the Sophists holistically stated that by using the right words, any type of influence and conditioning could be exercised. Rulers, scientists, lawyers, and philosophers unscrupulously use words, not hesitating to lie in pursuit of their goals. Words, in this sense, do not differ from medicines, if appropriately chosen, in their ability to exert positive or negative effects³⁴[22]. The often obscurantist oracles of the ancient world, for example³⁵[22], knew well how to make use of them. Words, for instance, have different uses, such as delighting, persuading, challenging or changing beliefs and opinions. The 'mind' (an example in Italian that is, likewise, a noun - *mente*- and the third person singular - "egli *mente*", (he lies) - of the verb "*mentire*", (to lie)³⁶[14]), learns and refines rhetorical techniques and has no need to base the persuasive words of a speech on reality or truth.

PLATO'S MEDIATION

In Plato's dialogues, especially in the *Cratylus*³⁷ on the correctness of names [26], which is chosen as the main reference in this discussion, (while preserving the discussions in *Gorgias*, *Theaetetus*, *Protagoras*, and *Republic*), we witness the critical recovery of many conceptual motifs of predecessors, which have been mentioned above. Plato sought a mediation, a synthesis, a compendium, a proposed solution that was, at the same time, exhaustive and satisfying. The theoretical context in which Plato proceeded with the reorganization of the philosophy of language was culturally different. Essentially, he traced the question of the correspondence between name and object to the will to redefine words and their function. The word, in Plato, is treated as an entity with its own, defined, and autonomous structure. A word

imposes limits and constraints, as it follows specific laws to which the speaker is bound to conform. The origin of language derives from its intrinsic function; by investigating the function of language, one traces back to its very origin. The exact time of composition of this key Platonic dialogue is still debated and remains uncertain. It might well have been between the years 386-384 BC, in proximity to the drafting of the *Theaetetus* and *Republic* [26].

This discussion, which revolves around the relationship between name and object, in the *Cratylus*, takes place among three interlocutors (below), who represent three different points of view: 1) Cratylus, who supports the total intrinsic nature of the name/object relationship; 2) Hermogenes, who asserts, on the contrary, an absolute extrinsic nature; and 3) Socrates, who rejects both theses of the two interlocutors, more than refuting them, shifting the topic to a completely different plane. Plato denies the correspondence between sensible forms, precisely between the sound of the term and the physicality of the object, towards which Hermogenes and Cratylus had focused their attention. According to Socrates, and this was obviously Plato's point of view as well, it is a mistake to consider the name and the physicality of a thing as belonging to a shared plane of reality. The alternative proposal, and the answer to the initial question, is framed within the Platonic doctrine of ideas: the only possible plane of correspondence is that between ideal forms or between the immutable essence of a thing and the potential being, as such, a reference object to which a name can be applied.

According to the conception upheld by *Cratylus*, somewhat to be considered traditional at the time when the dialogue (which we could refer to as naturalistic theory) was written, Ademollo writes "the 'correctness' (orthòtes) of a name is of a natural type (fysei), and consists in the fact that the name must reveal, through etymology, the nature of the thing named"³⁸[27]. In the absence of correspondence between the etymology of a name and the nature of a thing, that name cannot be considered the true name of that thing, regardless of any convention that may have existed among the speakers³⁹[26].

Three theories on language appear, simultaneously, in the dialogue.

Sophistic

Ermogenes symbolizes the Sophistic conception of language. For the Sophists, starting from Protagoras, if "man is the measure of all things", every type of name adapts according to the conditions set by use. Every name is conventional and interchangeable; it is the use that allows its affirmation and dissemination.

Naturalistic

In the conception of language represented by Cratylus, there is identity between name and named thing. The name is true because it contains within itself the same nature of the named thing. The name of the thing is born by sharing the substance of the thing. The origin of names is divine: the gods named everything.

Platonic

The plane of reality and discussion radically changes in Plato. Socrates, who represents this conception in the dialogue, explains how the reality perceived by the senses is not the essence. The latter exists outside of the names themselves. Plato's conception is ontological. Language, the very ability to name, is based on unchanging and immutable ideas that represent it, on

which names are based and without which they are not possible. The common participation with the world of ideas made possible the origin of language, through which men can express themselves and communicate. Saint Augustine of Hippo, centuries later, would reduce essence to the ability to name and place the origin of language among mental processes. According to Augustine, the acquisition of language does not occur in a hypothetical world of ideas, but in the mind itself and, consequently, is arbitrary⁴⁰.

CONCLUSIONS

The text inscribed on the fibula of Praeneste has lent itself and, certainly, will continue to lend itself to multiple considerations. Given its undeniable archaeological and historical relevance, the consequent hermeneutic analysis still imposes itself. Language itself, as has been discussed above, also went through a historical-philosophical, and evolutionary, synthesis in the ancient Greco-Roman world. In the populations that inhabited pre-Roman Lazio in the 7th century BCE, there was a use of the language, of the emerging Latin language, already awareness and mastery of semantic skills about which we find explicit discussions in texts written in Greek and in later ages. One can recognize the long, and poorly documented, period of cultural exchanges across the Mediterranean, both in the simple but telling language that appears on the *Praeneste fibula* and in the complex analytical discussions of the somewhat later Greek philosophers. Migrant populations, moving nuclei, and localized and stably located linguistic assemblies, whether referred to by the acronym PIE or considered Indo European, spread and shared knowledge. This function of language was observed, as mentioned, and explicitly treated by the Greek philosophers. These treatises focused upon origins that had been acquired and consolidated among the speakers who lived in the preceding centuries. Regarding customs, culture, lifestyle, including fashion, of the Neolithic Lazio (and Italic), we know little more than the circumstances of archaeological finds and the study of materials allow us to deduce. From Luigi Pigorini's observations, it appears that most types of brooches in use during the Iron Age are derived from pins already widespread in earlier ages⁴¹[28]. The engraving of a text on them, at least on those that had civil, political, or more likely, religious and sacred importance, can be considered an expression of a qualified ability for communication and semantic sharing.

Enlightenment era dissident Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) later questioned the very origins of language in his *Essay on the Origin of Languages*⁴²[29,30]. Rousseau explicitly rejected the opinion that considered cultural and civil origin and evolution as the primary impulsive sources of the birth of language. He preferred to attribute greater importance to the stimulation of emotions rather than social utility; just as Democritus had once argued. In this view, rational planning would not have been at the origin of the linguistic need since, to satisfy primary needs and solve practical problems, words were not needed– actions were sufficient. According to the French philosophe, words were, instead, indispensable to signify emotions and were stimulated by states of mind. This gave rise to a poetic, magical, sacred language, inspired, rather characteristically for Rousseau, by the sounds of nature. Social, economic, pragmatic language, and with it, grammatical structures, would come later. The primary need, and function, of language would have been to express states of mind, and rational transformation would then have faded but never been completely erased: this constituted the original poetic charge. In its study, one can indeed search for further clues about the origins of language.

Gianfranco Contini, referencing the great scholar Giovanni Pascoli, in a conference, later taken up in one of his texts⁴³[31], stated "Pascoli either transcends the language module known to us

from literary tradition. In any case, whether it is poetry, if I may express myself this way, translinguistic, or whether it is a cis-linguistic poetry, we are faced with a phenomenon that exceeds the norm...We first recognize the presence of onomatopoeias, 'videvitt', 'scilp', 'trr trr trr terit tirit', thus the presence of a phono symbolic language. This language has nothing to do, in itself, with grammar; it is a grammatical or pre-grammatical language, foreign to language as an institution." He pointed out how the language of Pascoli's poetry exploited purely phonetic components, pre- and post-grammatical resonances, independently or almost from the meaning of the words: the language of poetry seeks the hidden harmonics in nature to manifest and reveal the mysterious or emotional meanings of reality. It is certainly not a coincidence, considering the deep knowledge and reverence that Pascoli dedicated to the Greek and Latin languages.

Latin, the language of the Latins and of Rome, as it is understood today, represents a well-defined and atypical entity within the overall framework of the Indo-European languages of Italy. It is well known how the adjective "Indo-European" is at the center of discussions and controversies– as noted in the critical studies of the linguist Semerano mentioned above [4]. The origin of the Latin language is usually attributed to the spread of speaking peoples, whether one accepts it or not, variants of "Indo European." At least on the archaeological trace of cultural progress, there is agreement in tracing the development of civilizations and settlements in Latium, already in the 9th century BCE. Greek colonization began in the first half of the 8th century BCE, almost simultaneously with the descent of the Sabines along the Tiber valley and their growing pressure in Latium. In the eighth and seventh centuries, the population of Latium multiplied. Multiple linguistic penetrations occurred in the context of a group of eastern Italic languages and dialects, such as Oscan Umbrian and Umbrian Sabellian, and through contact with tribes such as the Volsci, the Equi, and the Hernici. A separate linguistic position, moreover, with a non-Indo-European structure, regardless of its origin, was that of Etruscan. In such a complex framework, the reality of Praeneste came quite late. The 7th century BCE, considering the centuries of culture and, necessarily, the numerous speakers of different ethnicities and languages that had preceded it renders the time, place and context as not as "new" in a linguistic sense as we might be tempted to imagine it. The text inscribed on the fibula today represents a flash of sudden light, after a long darkness, but not a darkness due to the absence of a language, but simply due to the lack of evidence.

It is notable that the Greek philosophical contemplations of the nature of language discussed above appear on the scene of history and philosophy about two centuries after the text of the *Praeneste fibula*. It can be assumed that the writing on the fibula constitutes proof of the intrinsic competence and semantic skill of those who used the language in which it was written, a skill inclusive of the linguistic functions that were the subject of philosophical dialogue but, evidently, had long been a resource of the peoples of Latium as well as, probably and more broadly Mediterranean. The Greek texts, rather than being abstract and speculative, thus recapitulated the real and existing past (and present).

As for the meaning of the inscribed text, it is not sufficient to hypothesize a dedication or a signature. It has been said that it is presumed to have been written by an Etruscan goldsmith and, on the hermeneutic level, there is a tendency to exclude the hypothesis that it is a dedication to a signature. The most recent examination and interpretation tend to attribute to the applicable verb the significant role not of "did" but of "had done" or, as Giovanni Colonna

writes in a specific study [12], which is fully shared, for semantic extension, noted in Etruscan texts⁴⁴. The proper names, Manios (the donor) and Numasios (the beneficiary of the gift), take on a sacred meaning when contextualized this way. Perhaps, alternatively, the inscription was a funerary pledge with which a mortal, Manios, made a votive gift to the deity: Numisius Martius was a protolatin deity and, moreover, "Num" is a representative sound of the unpronounceable and a generic root of divinity⁴⁵[14].

The sounds, silences, and rhythms of nature (as Rousseau believed) and the surrounding world were perhaps indeed the origin of language, becoming song, recitation, invocation and prayer, precisely because they were sounds and the voice was shaped by sound. In this way, sound, and therefore name, became an integral part of reality, becoming intuitively understandable. One could imagine an archaic world in which the languages of men were universally comprehensible. Thus providing an epistemic support to the linguistic origin myth of the Tower of Babel. The subsequent, long structuring of the Latin language very likely had its foundations in a shared origin where the name - in the case of Latin, generally, the root - corresponded, without risk of misunderstanding or ambiguity, to the object, thus ensuring the effectiveness of communication. Those who later wrote and spoke Latin contributed, in accordance with this premise, to establishing its rules and structure. A solid and certain structure, indeed irresistible, paraphrasing the quote from Juvenal - "*...there is no brooch that holds*", with which this study was introduced, joking about the term and the role of the brooch.

Footnotes

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