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MULTILINGUAL INTERTEXTUALITY AND THE NEGOTIATION OF IDENTITY IN LATIN BIOGRAPHY

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the role of multilingual intertextuality in Latin biographical writing as a mode of creative communication within the linguistically diverse context of the Roman Empire. Traditionally approached as monolingual texts, Latin biographies are here reconsidered as strategically layered works that incorporate allusions, lexical borrowings, and narrative techniques from vernacular languages such as Greek, Punic, and Gaulish. These multilingual features engaged a polyglot readership and fostered cross-cultural resonance across imperial boundaries. Through close analysis of selected imperial biographies (e.g. Suetonius' Vita Divi Augusti, Historia Augusta's Vita Hadriani), alongside underexplored provincial vitae (e.g. the Vita Abercii, the Passio Sancti Perpetuae et Felicitatis), the study reveals a complex interplay of linguistic and cultural references that exceed Latin literary norms. This multilingual layering operated as a conscious rhetorical strategy to negotiate identity, authority, and belonging in an increasingly globalised empire. By combining insights from comparative literature, sociolinguistics, and narratology, the paper argues that Latin biographers were early agents of creative intercultural communication, employing language as a medium to construct inclusive narratives. In doing so, they both projected imperial ideals and acknowledged regional plurality. This perspective repositions Latin biography not as a purely Roman genre, but as a dynamic literary formembedded in the cultural negotiations of a multilingual empire.

Keywords: Multilingual intertextuality, Latin biography, Cultural identity

Latin biography, long recognised as a characteristically Roman literary genre, has often been interpreted through a rigidly Romanocentric lens[1]. This approach, the product of nineteenth-century and modernist historiography, has projected onto antiquity a static conception of linguistic identities, emphasising the genre's supposed adherence to a cultural and linguistic monolingualism. Such a perspective, however, has tended to obscure the intricate dynamics of contact, cross-fertilisation, and coexistence that shaped both daily life and the structures of the Roman Empire[2]. The adoption of Latin as the official language of administration and literary production did not preclude, but rather coexisted with, the persistence and, in some cases, the emergence of multilingual communicative practices, particularly in peripheral areas and within local communities of the Empire[3]. From its very beginnings, Rome was a profoundly multicultural entity, capable of absorbing and reworking influences of the most diverse origins: from the Hellenism of Magna Graecia, to the religious traditions of the East, and to Celtic and African cultures[4]. With imperial expansion, this plurality intensified still further, producing a linguistic mosaic in which Latin, Greek, Punic, Gallic, Syriac, and many other languages coexisted[5]. In

this context, Latin biography should not be reinterpreted as a homogeneous, closed, and self-referential literary form, but rather as an open and dialogical textual space, where the voice of the author (or narrator) is continuously confronted with other languages, other memories, and other traditions. This study therefore proposes a reconsideration of Latin biography as a profoundly intertextual and multilingual form, capable not only of reflecting, but also of negotiating the identity tensions and cultural complexities of the Empire. Far from constituting a mere collection of exemplary lives constructed upon standardised Roman models, it emerges as a veritable narrative laboratory, in which multiple expressions of belonging take shape, diverse forms of authority are articulated, and hybrid and stratified identities are represented. The biographical text thus becomes a site where the author may draw upon heterogeneous linguistic and cultural resources, addressing a composite and plurilingual audience made up of imperial officials, local elites, bilingual or trilingual readers, and new religious communities. The analysis of canonical imperial biographies, such as Suetonius' Vita Divi Augusti or the Vita Hadriani of the Historia Augusta, in juxtaposition with the study of lesser-known provincial texts, such as Pontius' Vita Cypriani or the Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis, reveals that the inclusion of non-Latin linguistic elements – Graecisms, Semitisms, Celtisms – was not the outcome of a mere osmotic process, but rather the result of a deliberate rhetorical strategy. Such a strategy sought to construct a narrative capable of transcending the linguistic and geographical boundaries of the Urbs, offering a representation of imperial identity as a composite, inclusive, and constantly negotiated reality. The investigation will adopt an interdisciplinary approach, integrating conceptual and methodological tools drawn from comparative literature, historical sociolinguistics, and narratology. This theoretical syncretism is necessary in order to explore the Latin biographical text in its intercultural and polyphonic dimension, abandoning the view of the genre as isolated and self-referential, and instead highlighting its dynamic nature, its rhetorical stratification, and its openness to dialogue with the other.

The Roman Empire constituted an extraordinarily variegated linguistic ecosystem. Latin, the language of administration, law, and the western elite, coexisted with Greek, which dominated the culture, philosophy, and commerce of the East. Alongside these two "official" languages, a wide range of vernacular idioms flourished: Punic in the African provinces, Gaulish in Gaul and Britain, Syriac and Aramaic in Syria and Mesopotamia, Coptic in Egypt, Germanic dialects along the northern limes, and Hebrew within the Jewish contexts of Roman Palestine[6]. This stratification was not confined to orality or to marginal phenomena; on the contrary, it permeated administrative life, official documentation, and everyday communication, as attested by numerous inscriptions, private letters, and legal acts drafted in multiple languages or accompanied by translations[7].

Within this multilingual environment, Latin biography, although written in Latin, emerges as a text permeated by cultural exchanges and cross-fertilisations. Numerous lexical borrowings, particularly from Greek, are preserved in their original form, presupposing a learned and shared reception. Certain proper names attest to a marked hybridity: in African documentation, for instance, names such as Perpetua, Felicitas, and Saturus bear witness to a selective process of Romanisation[8]. Multilingualism is also reflected in narrative models and rhetorical strategies: many Christian and non-Christian biographies adopt circular structures (birth, martyrdom,

eschatological destiny), more closely aligned with Eastern hagiographic traditions than with classical Latin models[9]. Biographical style thus encodes rhetorical choices inspired by extra-Roman narrative repertoires. Dreams, visions, symbolism, and allegorical imagery evoke iconographic universes of Hellenistic or Near Eastern origin. Such linguistic and symbolic devices function as instruments of intercultural communication, intended for a heterogeneous audience.

In the Vita Divi Augusti[10], for example, Suetonius does not confine himself to narration in pure classical Latin, but allows, in several passages, the influence of Greek culture to come through, particularly through references to Greek figures and institutions, as well as to Augustus' Hellenistic education. Consider, for instance, the passage in which it is recalled that the emperor availed himself of Greek rhetoricians such as Apollodorus of Pergamum and Theodorus of Gadara:

Ne Graecarum quidem disciplinarum leviore studio tenebatur […] prout quique monitione indigerent[11].

The decision to include these references reveals an openness towards a cultivated and at least partially bilingual readership. Even if Suetonius refrains from employing Greek technical terminology, his work nevertheless reflects a cultural context in which Greek was the language of philosophy, advanced education, and international communication. The representation of Augustus as a man of learning, educated also in Hellenic traditions, underscores the importance of bilingualism as a distinctive feature of the intellectual and political elites of the period[12].

In contrast, the *Vita Hadriani* of the *Historia Augusta*[13] articulates an explicit and manifest philhellenism, constructing the portrait of Emperor Hadrian as a symbolic figure of cultural dialogue between Rome and Greece. The emperor is described as an active participant in the Eleusinia sacra – the celebrated Eleusinian Mysteries, guardians of an ancient Greek religious and initiatory tradition – as we read in the passage:

Post haec per Asiam et insulas ad Achaiam navigavit et Eleusinia sacra exemplo Herculis Philippique suscepit, multa in Athenienses contulit et pro agonotheta resedit[14].

This description goes beyond mere historical fact: it underscores Hadrian's role as a living bridge between East and West, between Romanitas and Greek culture, recreating an idealised image of the philosopher-emperor who honours and preserves local traditions. His appointment as agonothetes – the magistrate charged with organising athletic and cultural competitions – in Athens, a role confirmed by numerous epigraphic inscriptions[15], is highly significant, for it situates Hadrian within the civic and religious fabric of Greece, securing for him a prestige and legitimacy that extend far beyond mere military or political power.

Similarly, in the *Vita Cypriani*[16], composed by Pontius of Carthage shortly after the martyrdom of Saint Cyprian (AD 258), the power of biographical narration emerges with extraordinary clarity. Built upon direct testimony and communal fidelity, it demonstrates how Latin, while formally conforming to established canons, bears within it the distinctive imprint of an African Church characterised by multilingualism and intercultural sensibility. From the very opening, the author asserts his authority as a witness*: si quibus eius interfui, si qua de antiquioribus comperi, dicam*[17], a formula whereby he declares his intention to transmit both what he personally witnessed and what he learned from those before him, thereby affirming a living and shared memory. The linguistic register is accessible, yet rendered vibrant by the use of the first person and by the tension between lived experience (interfui) and

oral tradition (comperi), generating a persuasive force rooted equally in personal experience and collective transmission.

This tonal register intensifies at the point where Pontius describes his profound affective bond with the bishop, affirming:

et me inter domesticos comites dignatio caritatis eius elegerat exulem voluntarium[18].

Here, exulem voluntarium ("voluntary exile") is not a mere narrative tòpos, but rather the expression of a profound identification: the companion who freely chooses to share the fate of the martyr as a form of radical Christian discipleship. The phrase dignatio caritatis – this "worthy election by charity" – not only confers pathos but also defines a mode of communal mobilisation founded upon affection and spiritual solidarity, articulated through a Latin that, while rigorous, is duly attuned to shared *religious codes*[19]. What renders the text so emblematic is that, even while systematically avoiding Graecisms and explicit borrowings, the narration nonetheless opens a window onto a multilingual African world, where Latin coexisted with Punic and Hebrew, serving as the mother tongue of written communication and liturgical. Even in the absence of non-Latin lexical insertions, the text becomes a vehicle for a multicultural sensibility. The prose of Pontius reflects a style characteristic of the third-century African Church – coordinated constructions, emphatic repetitions, sober syntactic choices[20] – and it is in the very structure of the text that one perceives a rhetoric shaped for a culturally mixed community, in which Latin functions as a shared fabric, capable of conveying profound theological values, experiences of martyrdom, ecclesial memory, and collective trust. Such cultural pluralism does not emerge through particular linguistic markers, but rather through the ethos of the narration: a testimony addressed to a composite audience – Punic believers, Latin speakers, bearers of Semitic memory – and articulated in a Latin capable of adapting to intercultural contexts without forfeiting its gravitas. Ultimately, Pontius' Vita Cypriani, despite its formal coherence, is permeated by a profound intercultural sensibility which, even if it does not manifest itself through Greek elements or Semitisms, is nonetheless discernible in the narrative, spiritual, and performative architecture of its Latin composition. It becomes an instrument for the construction of a shared memory, for the preservation of African ecclesial identity, and a mirror of a Christian Romanitas that is pervasive, multilingual, dialogical, and resilient.

The survey of ancient and late-antique biographies concludes with the Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis[21]. Composed in the African context of the first half of the third century, this work represents one of the earliest and most significant Christian texts of the Latin world, as well as an exemplary instance of how the Latin language could be inflected by syntactic and lexical structures characteristic of local linguistic substrates, in this case Punic and African. Although formally written in Latin, the narrative is permeated by a linguistic texture that reflects a complex cultural and linguistic amalgam, where "literary" Latin intertwines with expressive forms and constructions drawn from oral communication and from the vernacular languages spoken in North Africa. A fundamental feature conferring originality upon the text is its use of first-person narration, particularly evident in the sections known as Perpetua's "prison diary"[22], where the protagonist herself recounts, in an intensely vivid and direct Latin, her daily and spiritual experiences. The use of the past tense contributes to delineating with precision the sequence of events and to sustaining a measured narrative tone, as may be observed in the following example:

Tunc dixit mihi frater meus: «Domina soror, iam in magna dignatione es, tanta ut postules visionem et ostendatur tibi an passio sit an commeatus». Et ego quae me sciebam fabulari cum Domino, cuius beneficia tanta experta eram, fidenter repromisi ei dicens: «Crastina die tibi renuntiabo». Et postulavi, et ostensum est mihi hoc[23].

In this passage, the alternation between perfect, imperfect, and present does not produce the effect of immediacy typical of the praesens historicum; rather, it constructs a more introspective narrative, in which the protagonist reworks her spiritual experience with lucidity. Such verbal usage accentuates the testimonial character of the text and reflects a narrative mode that balances emotional involvement with analytical detachment. From a syntactic perspective, one observes the frequent use of coordinated constructions and the marked recurrence of the conjunction et, at times placed anomalously or repeated, suggesting a discursive organisation shaped by the influence of orality[24]. These syntactic features may be interpreted as possible calques from Punic, the Semitic language spoken in North Africa, and more broadly as evidence of a structural multilingualism within African Christian literary production[25]. The juxtaposition of clauses lacking explicit subordination and the paratactic progression of discourse contribute to shaping a syntax less rigid than that of classical Latin, more permeable to local influences. In this context, Latin is not perceived as an elitist or exclusive language, but as a "lingua franca" adapted to a multilingual environment, moulded to suit local communicative needs. The Passio thus emerges as a genuine linguistic and cultural laboratory, in which Latin is continually negotiated, hybridised, and refunctionalised. The narrative engages with multiple traditions – rhetorical, religious, linguistic – and constructs models of sanctity and martyrdom capable of transcending geographical, cultural, and linguistic boundaries, addressing a composite and plurilingual audience.

The analysis conducted on the four Vitae examined in the course of this study (Vita Divi Augusti, Vita Hadriani, Vita Cypriani, and Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis) has made it possible to reinterpret the genre of Latin biography in a radically new light: no longer to be regarded as the monolithic expression of a normative and centralised Romanitas, but rather as a dynamic, permeable, and profoundly intersectional textual space. Far from being a mere celebration of civic or imperial virtues, Latin biography emerges as a polyphonic cultural device, capable of giving voice to the linguistic, cultural, and ideological plurality of the Roman Empire. Through the methodological integration of comparative, sociolinguistic, and narratological tools, it has been demonstrated that Latin biographical texts – from Suetonius to the Christian hagiographies – belong to a multilingual intertextual network that transcends the geographical and cultural boundaries of Rome. The presence of Graecisms, Semitisms, Celtisms, as well as of Eastern narrative structures or non-Latin symbolisms, is not the result of casual contamination, but rather the outcome of a deliberate rhetorical strategy designed to engage a heterogeneous and stratified audience. In this sense, biographical Latin reveals itself to be a "plastic" language, capable of incorporating external elements in order to convey complex and nuanced meanings, in dialogue with an Empire that neither spoke a single language nor possessed a single identity. The biographical text, therefore, is never merely a container of edifying or celebratory content, but becomes a narrative laboratory in which alternative forms of belonging are experimented with, cultural tensions mediated, and discursive strategies elaborated that are able to cross

the symbolic boundaries between centre and periphery, between officialdom and marginality. Language itself – through its variation, its openness to borrowing, its capacity to host heterogeneous registers – emerges as the principal instrument of this negotiation. The conscious adoption of non-Latin terms, the preservation of Greek or African proper names, and the insertion of extra-Roman narrative models all show how Latin biography was conceived to resonate within multilingual environments: a gesture of openness, but also of recognition of the cultural alterities that composed the Empire. What emerges, therefore, is a vision of Romanitas that is less rigid, less self-referential, and more porous, capable of integrating and transforming "other" elements within an inclusive narrative syntax. The Latin biographer thus appears not only as a narrator or memorialist, but also as a cultural mediator, attentive to linguistic nuances, social differences, and circulating cultural codes. Latin biography does not speak about Rome: it speaks within Rome, through Rome, and, at times, beyond Rome. This awareness carries significant critical implications also for the broader study of imperial Latin literature, which must be reread in light of its composite, multivocal, and multilingual nature. Ultimately, when freed from the interpretative straitjacket of Romanocentrism, Latin biography reveals itself as a profoundly modern literary form, capable of reflecting and shaping the collective identity of a global world ante litteram, a world in which language, far from being a mere instrument of domination, becomes a terrain of encounter, representation, and transformation.

Foter Notes

1. *Cf. e.g. Baldwin 1979, 110–118; López 1985 and Hägg 2012.*
2. *Cf. Woolf 1998.*
3. *On this point, see Adams 2003.*
4. *Cf. e. g. Raven 1969; Coarelli 1982, 33-67; Barbero 2006 and Mogetta 2023, 249-277.*
5. *See, in this regard, Mullen – James 2012.*
6. *Cf. e. g. Jongeling – Kerr 2005; Spolsky 2014 and Fournet 2020.*
7. *By way of example, see the studies of Wilson 2012, 265-316 and Del Corso 2024, 317-336.*
8. *Cf. infra, 4-5.*
9. *On this point, see the studies of Perkins 1995 and Staat 2018, 209-224.*
10. *For a detailed examination of certain significant aspects of this Suetonian biographical work, see Wardle 2007, 443-463; 2012, 307-326; and González Galera 2017, 15-34.*
11. *Suet. Aug. 89, 1-2.*
12. *On the impact exerted by the Greek language upon Latin, including in the philosophical and humanistic domains, cf., e.g. Stahl 1962 and Moatti 2006, 109-140.*
13. *For further study of the Vita Hadriani, see, by way of example, Soverini 1981, 87-96; Fündling 2006 and Salvador Ventura 2008, 365-381.*
14. *Hist. Aug. Hadr. 13, 1.*
15. *Cf. e.g. Summa 2006, 77-86 and Begass 2025.*
16. *For further study of the Vita Cypriani composed by the deacon Pontius of Carthage, cf., e.g., Bobertz 1992, 112-128; Montgomery 1996, 195-215 and Ziegler 2009, 458-471.*
17. *Pont.vita Cypr. 2, 3.*
18. *Pont. vita Cypr. 12, 3.*
19. *Cf. Dijkstra 2020, 14-17 and Guerrero van der Meijden 2024, 245-271.*
20. *By way of example, the following passages may be noted: Pont. Vita Cypr. 1.1 Cyprianus religiosus antistes ac testis Dei gloriosus, etsi multa conscripsit per quae memoria digni nominis supervivat […] sui litteris digeratur and 1.6 Ita utrimque graviter urgemur: ille nos virtutibus suis onerat, vos nos auribus fatigatis.*
21. *Among the numerous studies devoted to the Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis, the more recent contributions include Cobb 2022, 1–27; Dell'Isola 2022, 446-472; and Muehlberger 2022, 313-342.*
22. *Pass. Perp. 3-10.*
23. *Pass. Perp.4, 1-2.*
24. *Cf. Adams 1994, 87-112 and 2003, 417-526; Calboli 2005, 235-266.*
25. *Ibid.*

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