

Claudia Severa's Birthday Invitation: A Rhetorical Analysis of the Earliest Artifact of Latin Written by a Woman's Hand

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Abstract: *In the last few decades our discipline has greatly benefited from research focusing on the recovery of women in the history of rhetoric. This same research has made major contributions, but has also exposed the limitations of our historiography, calling attention to the need to reflect on our methods of analysis and the retrieval of our sources. A striking example of this need to discover new primary sources and new methods to analyze these sources emerged in 1973 when artifacts of ancient Roman writings were unearthed by archaeologists from a garbage dump whose damp, natural environment had sealed off oxygen and thereby miraculously preserved over 850 writing tablets from a remote Roman garrison in northern England. Among these priceless artifacts is evidence of the wives of Roman soldiers writing to each other as a normal feature of everyday activities. These artifacts of epistolary rhetoric provide a new perspective on the written rhetoric of women in c. 100 A.D., revealing yet another dimension of rhetoric undertaken by women in the history of our discipline. One particular artifact, Tablet 291, is especially relevant to our purposes, for it reveals a correspondence between two women concerning an invitation to a birthday party. Of special interest is the post-script that provides convincing evidence of the earliest specimen of a Latin text written by a woman's hand. Benefiting from the inclusiveness of multi-modal research, this essay first summarizes and reviews archaeological and palaeographic research that provides a context for understanding the environment and conditions from which this artifact emerged and by which it was preserved. Subsequently, a rhetorical analysis of Tablet 291 is offered in order to lay groundwork for a more thorough and sensitive perspective of women and their uses of rhetoric in the history of our discipline.*

Keywords: *archaeology, ars dictaminis, epigraphy, epistolary rhetoric, epideictic rhetoric, ethopoiia, Latin rhetoric, Vindolanda, women's rhetoric.*

"The letter is probably the single most common genre of writing, practised by women and men, slaves and free, poor and rich, and even, mediated through scribes and lectors, the illiterate as well as the literate Despite this, it has been comparatively understudied in rhetorical scholarship" (Carol Poster, "The Rhetoric of 'Rhetoric' in Ancient Rhetorical Historiography" 13-14).

Introduction: The Challenge of Laura Cereta

One of the great arguments about intellectual equality between genders was made by the fifteenth-century Italian humanist, Laura Cereta. Exasperated over the demeaning manner in which women were stereotyped as intellectually inferior to men, Cereta composed her now famous statement, "Letter to Bibulus Sempronius, Defense of the Liberal Instruction of Women" (Bizzell and Hertzberg, 1st ed. only, 495-98). "Bibulus Sempronius" was a fictitious character created by Cereta for the purpose of standing in for all men who considered women to be intellectually inferior and therefore unworthy of advanced education. Cereta's second audience was women who would not, in her view, develop their talents and therefore indirectly, in Cereta's opinion, perpetuate the inferiority stereotype that she sought passionately to destroy. The crux of the argument is that Cereta was offended when she and a handful of other women were considered "exceptional" because their intelligence only reinforced the prevailing stereotype of female inferiority. Cereta did not realize that her letter would one day have yet another, third audience: historians of rhetoric. As historians of rhetoric we should respond to Cereta's challenge to document not only the exceptional but also the ordinary in order to reveal that the talents of women—in this case their abilities in rhetoric—were not limited to the rare and exceptional but widespread and shared across their gender.

Cereta's call for extending the boundaries of our historical perspectives on women is in harmony with prominent scholars of women's rhetorics. Charlotte Hogg, for example, shares agreement not only with the principles of Cereta but her own contemporary colleagues who call for studies in the history of women's rhetorics to be much more inclusive, expansive, to have a commitment to openness in order to move past "reductive binaries" and the inclination to study only those manifestations of women's rhetorics that are compatible with our own ideologies (Hogg 404 *et passim*). Our intent here is to focus on Cereta's charge in respect to ancient rhetoric by concentrating on a single, but important, manifestation of literacy among women in a remote Roman garrison in northern England named Vindolanda. It is our intent to demonstrate that the findings presented here will not only bring new insights

to the rhetoric of women in our history, but will also serve as an inducement for engaging in the kind of research that makes apparent the benefits of retrieving and analyzing non-traditional evidence and using non-standard research methods.

As mentioned above, earlier work has sought to contribute to Cereta's challenge by discovering evidence that the creativity of women in rhetoric was widespread and sophisticated in Antiquity (e.g., Enos and Peterman). In addition to specific studies, recent scholarship focusing on the general objective of advancing a better understanding of "the lives of ancient women" by presenting "them within their historical and cultural context" has indirectly made evident the pervasiveness and range of literacy throughout ancient history and across social groups (Fantham *et al.*, p. vii *et passim*). Moreover, recognizing the breadth of literacy among women has not been limited to the ancient Greek and Roman societies, for recent studies have also demonstrated the literate skills of women in non-Western ancient cultures (e.g., Lipson and Binkley, *Rhetoric Before and Ancient Non-Greek*). As early as the Old Kingdom period of Egypt, for example, there is evidence that royal women engaged regularly in correspondence, although the scribes were male, since women of this period "were not scribes" (Fischer 14-15, 24; Tyldesley 114-18). Although training for the prestigious vocation of "scribe" was not open to women in ancient Egypt, that constraint does not mean that Egyptian women were excluded from writing their own works. Joyce Tyldesley reveals in her book, *Daughters of Isis: Women of Ancient Egypt*, that education and literacy (including the likelihood of writing) is evident "beyond doubt" among Egyptian women (118-19). Tyldesley notes that depictions of Seshat, the goddess of writing, implies clearly the association of women and writing (119). In fact, there is even evidence that women writing was not limited to upper-class Egyptian society. For example, ostraca (potsherds used for writing messages) that were unearthed at Deir el-Medina provide evidence that women of common status used writing as an aid to memory for the functional recording of their daily household tasks (Tyldesley 119-20). In short, even the earliest non-classical sources of evidence reveal writing practices of women and make evident the resources that await further, more detailed, examination.

For the objectives of scholarship in the history of rhetoric, awareness of a range of literacy among women has made evident the need for more specific, in depth studies of primary artifacts so that the particular rhetorical skills become available for detailed study. As Joy Ritchie and Kate Ronald have argued: "The act of invention for women, then, begins in a different place from Aristotle's conception of invention" (xvii). Ritchie and Ronald's edited volume, *Available Means: An Anthology of Women's Rhetoric(s)*, is intended:

to point to the ways that women have discovered different means of persuasion, often based in contexts other than those Aristotle might have imagined: the kitchen, parlor, and nursery; the garden; the church; the body women have redefined and subverted the traditional means and ends of argument and in the process have reinvented rhetoric based in epistemologies more varied than Aristotle's (xvii).

To meet Cereta's challenge of fairly representing the abilities of women, however, we must continue to seek non-traditional evidence as well as review our standard sources so that we can discover, analyze, and more thoroughly understand the traits and talents of women in the history of rhetoric. Revealing the range and manifestations of women's rhetorics requires that we complement our traditional research procedures with non-traditional, and often innovative, research methods. Ronald captures this point so well in her excellent essay, "Feminist Perspectives on the History of Rhetoric," when she echoes Jacqueline J. Royster's view by emphasizing that "recovery work demands a different measure of evidence, a different perspective on history" (Ronald 148). Such an opportunity for evidence and perspective literally surfaced when new primary evidence of women in the history of rhetoric was excavated in 1973.

New Evidence, New Research Challenges

In 1973, in the northern hinterland area of England, new evidence vital to our understanding of women in the history of rhetoric was unearthed. Excavations in the Roman military outpost of Vindolanda and its environs of modern-day Chesterholm have yielded priceless archaeological treasures. Initially, we may be inclined to think that discovering artifacts of literacy at a military garrison, let alone evidence of writing among women, is an odd or at best, unlikely site for discovery. We tend to think of sites and sources of literacy in academic terms and located at intellectual centers where reading and writing is taken to be a feature of the highest levels of advanced study. However, a military community must also be a literate community. To be sure, a military garrison is not a Greek *polis* or a Roman *urbs*, but it is nonetheless a community, one where the demands for organization and coordination of activities are possibly even more critical than in civilian communities (Lewis 125-26). It hardly needs to be stressed that effective communication, then and now, is indispensable in military operations with evidence dating back to the earliest civilizations. In fact, the critical need for effective literacy among the military is long established, with evidence—with respect to the West only—dating back to the Spartans of classical Greece (Enos, "The Secret Composition Practices").

By the time of the Roman Empire, the ability to communicate well in military settings became so sophisticated that Romans had developed semaphore signal-stations so that, with the aid of fire signals—or highly polished metal shields and bright sunny days—the result of a battle fought hundreds of miles away could be relayed back to Rome in a matter of hours (Hershbell). Both within the life of the garrison and within the heat of battle, the advantages of literacy were indispensable and even vital in military life.

Archaeological evidence reveals that the fortification at Vindolanda had a range of centers that would require literacy for their operations. Commanding officers' residences, granaries, hospitals, workshops, and supply centers all would benefit from writing for their various tasks and indeed extant inscriptions at Vindolanda reveal texts that include accounts of food supplies, clothing needs, etc. (Bowman). In addition, and more relevant to the purpose of this study, archaeological evidence has unearthed private letters, a letter of recommendation, and even drafts of compositions (Bowman). Among these private letters is correspondence by and between women. In short, it is not unreasonable to expect a high degree of literacy at Roman military outposts—and attendant civilian settlements—since communication is vital not only in times of battle but in everyday garrison activities of peace-time functions. From this perspective, we can extend our notion of literate communities. We tend to think of cities such as Athens and Rome as centers of literacy in the ancient world but now we should extend that view to include the inhabitants of military outposts as well. To our good fortune, and through the efforts of archaeologists, we historians of rhetoric now have a new set of primary evidence that can add to our knowledge of women and literacy in the ancient world.

What does this wealth of new primary evidence add to our knowledge of women in the history of rhetoric? The necessity for effective literacy in military operations also had an impact in the social life of Roman military outposts. We know, and as will be discussed in detail later, that military wives performed a wide variety of daily functions that would also have necessitated literacy and the evidence of these writing tablets only offers further proof of the high degree of literacy that existed for functional purposes in such military encampments. "Enough has already been said to assure us that at Vindolanda," Alan K. Bowman writes, "the writing of official and private documents and letters was absolutely standard and existed over virtually the whole period of pre-Hadriatic occupation" (83). The range and mass of documentation unearthed since 1973 bears testimony to warrant Bowman's claim that "the environment at Vindolanda was a literate one" (82). There are writing artifacts at Vindolanda involving women that invite the sort of rhetorical analysis that this case offers. For our purposes, our in-depth treatment should make clear the benefits and

the need for continuing research on this aspect of women in the history of rhetoric.

Among these findings are the oldest handwritten Latin artifacts in Britain. Of particular interest to us is Tablet 291, where a woman named Claudia Severa writes an invitation to attend a birthday party in ink on a wooden tablet to another woman named Sulpicia Lepidina. Written about 100 A.D., this letter, along with two other tablets by Severa (i.e., 292 and 293), "constitutes the earliest known specimen of Latin written by the hand of a woman" (Hartnett 87). From just these three letters—and in the commentary of the online collection—we may justly infer that the familiar tone of correspondence means that letter-writing was a common activity between women in and between different camps, for "this letter gives a clear indication of the regularity of correspondence between Severa and Lepidina" ("Vindolanda Tablets Online II," Tablet 292). Other tablets in this collection provide insights to the composing habits of women in this environment. For example, Tablet 294 also provides clear evidence of correspondence between women because of the Latin use of feminine endings such as "*salua*" ("Vindolanda Tablets Online II" Tablet 294). These artifacts of women's writings in this archaeological find are very revealing, and Tablet 291 is an excellent illustration of the potential for rhetorical research procedures as well as new primary evidence. To that end, Tablet 291 is analyzed here as a detailed illustration of the potential to contribute to the growing body of evidence about women in the history of rhetoric. Providing a vivid example of a woman writer composing to a woman reader, Severa's letter to Lepidina, is not "exceptional" for, as Bowman observes: "The correspondence between Lepidina and Severa was not an isolated phenomenon in the equestrian officer class" (57). In fact, the catalogue of these hundreds of tablets reveals "the widespread writing of good Latin, with common formats, methods and patterns" not only with the officer class and their wives but across class lines (Bowman 95-96).

In one sense, the discovery of this writing by and for women is akin to what we learned from examining the graffiti at Pompeii. That is, the tragic preservation of artifacts that were frozen in time by the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius—at about the same time (i.e., 79 A.D.) that Tablet 291 was written by Severa—gives us a view of everyday life in that Roman city. The scratches on walls, the scrawls that expressed love, hate, admiration, and commercial advertisements all gave us personal insights to daily life that otherwise may never have survived the ravages of time (e. g., LaFleur, *Scribblers, Sculptores, and Scribes*). So to, albeit in a much smaller scale than Pompeii, this artifact—miraculously preserved for thousands of years—provides a view of the everyday writing practices of women that was largely unavailable to historians of rhetoric who have sought artifacts of literacy composed by women. Archaeologists have

uneearthed Tablet 291, philologists have translated Tablet 291, and palaeographers have identified the script-type. The tablets themselves have undergone virtually every type of computer-automated data and linguistic analysis including Think Aloud Protocols or TAPs (Terras 44 *et passim*). What is needed now is to analyze what this writing tells us about women in the history of our discipline and thereby enrich our understanding of this new manifestation of feminine rhetoric.

Vindolanda Writing Tablet 291: Claudia Severa Invites Sulpicia Lepidina to a Birthday Part



Figure 1 (front). Wood writing tablet with a party invitation written in ink, in two hands, from Claudia Severa to Lepidina. Description exact from BM [British Museum] record: <http://vindolanda.csad.ox.ac.uk/TVII-291> (Tab. Vindol. II 291). This file is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution Alike 3.0 Unported (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/deed.en>) license. Attribution: Fae. Used with permission.

A. Epistolary Rhetoric and Physical Properties

Tablet 291 is a Roman example of epistolary rhetoric. Letter-writing would eventually evolve into *ars dictaminis*, one of the three Medieval arts of rhetoric (Murphy 194-268). Yet, in this earlier Imperial Period we see nascent forms of *ars dictaminis* used by Severa and others. At this date (c. 100 A.D.) rhetoric was in the Silver Age of Latin literature and the conventions of letter-writing were established, formulaic and appropriated from such oratorical works as Cicero's *De inventione* and his later *Partitiones oratoriae*. As is the case with

Latin Text

(full text in upper and lower cases)

Front

1. Cl(audia). Seuerá Lepidinae [suae.
2. [sa] | [u]tem
3. iii Idus Septembr[e]s, soror ad diem
4. sollemnem natalem meum rogó
5. libenter faciás ut uenias
6. ad nos iucundiozem mihi
- ii
7. [diem] interuentú tuo facturá si
8. [.] [c.3]s *uacat*
9. Cerial[em t]uum salutá Aelius meus .[
10. et filiulus salutant *uacat*
11. *m2uacat* sperabo te soror
12. uale soror anima
13. mea ita ualeam
14. karissima et haue

Back

15. *m1* Sulpiciae Lepidinae
16. Cerialis
17. a S[e]urea

Figure 2. Latin text, with slight modifications of epigraphical markings made by authors for clarity: <http://vindolanda.csad.ox.ac.uk/TVII-291> (Tab. Vindol. II 291). Used with permission.

Tablet 291, the tablets generally show the standard format of epistolary rhetoric with formulaic introductions and conclusions, the conventional *topoi* of phrases, and even a high degree of consistency in spelling (Terras 73). This diptych (i.e., hinged or attached “plates”) was composed on two wood slats that had been milled into thin, flat pieces the approximate size of today’s postcard (Hartnett 83). The Vindolanda tablets used birch, alder, and oak wood that was local to the area (“Vindolanda Tablets”). This “letter” could be (and was) folded with the address written on the “back.” The composition was not scratched on

the wood surface—as might be suspected with other more durable surfaces such as stone—but written upon by carbon-based ink (British Museum). The ink itself is a mixture of carbon, gum arabic, and water (“Vindolanda Tablets”). The carbon properties make it likely that the ink came from local geological sources in northern England. Other examples of ink-writing in Antiquity sometimes used natural fluids extracted from such animals as the octopus. In all, from materials to use, we see writing as indigenous to the locale, and (therefore) clear evidence of functional rhetoric.

Formerly housed at the British Museum, today the tablets are preserved in a controlled, oxygen-free environment at the Vindolanda Museum. They were unexpectedly discovered in March 1973 when a pipe trench outside of the excavation areas was being widened (Terras 5). The findings amounted to an ancient dump heap. When discovered, the tablets were naturally encased in an environment that was also virtually oxygen-free and the damp anaerobic conditions helped to preserve the otherwise fragile wood and numerous other artifacts of everyday life that women experienced in Roman Britain (Hartnett 83). To date, over 850 writing tablets have been discovered from the general area of this site. These writing tablets reveal the pervasiveness of writing both in terms of functions but also in terms of composers, some of whom were women.

The unique Roman cursive script initially baffled palaeographers and philologists, but it is now grouped under the category of Old Roman Cursive (Wallace 22; Bowman 89; Terras 86). The distinctive feature of this style is that it was done in “capitals” or majuscules, a style normally associated with more formal epigraphy such as marble inscriptions of sacred texts. Here the Old Roman Cursive is done but in a less formal, rustic fashion (Wallace 22). In fact, the style of the writing makes the invitation appear as an example of the next phase of Latin script, Rustic Capitals. Cursive or “running” script is normally the consequence of writing with speed and often includes abbreviations that help to simplify the message. However, the care and deliberativeness of this message is a clue to the intent to be elegant and formal. In this sense, this “letter” is akin to formal printed wedding invitations that are sent out today to announce a celebration in an elegant style that befits the importance of the occasion. In contrast, however, the post-script is far different from the stylized invitation. The individual letters and the message of the post-script itself is far less meticulous, appearing to be irregular in spacing and scrawled after-the-fact: all of the features of the post-script point to the possibility that Severa herself jotted down a personal message before dispatching the invitation to a courier. In other tablets discovered at the site we see Severa performing the same habit and in the same hand (see Figure 5, Tablet 292; Figure 6, Tablet 293). In his book, *By Roman Hands*, Matthew Hartnett offers a transliteration

Transliteration

(partial, in conventional capitals)

CL SEVERA LEPIDINAE [SVAE
SA]L[V]TEM
III IDVS SEPTEMBR[E]S SOROR AD DIEM
SOLLEMNEM NATALEM MEVM ROGO
LIBENTER FACIAS VT VENIAS
AD NOS IVCVNDIOREM MIHI

[DIEM] INTERVENTV TVO FACTVRA . . .

Figure 3. Transliteration portion of text provided by Matthew Hartnett, in his volume, *By Roman Hands*, 2nd ed., 87 (no. 141). The “Herculaneum” font is used here by the authors to simulate conventional Latin script in a capital style. Used with permission.

of the cursive Latin pictured above in Figure 1 in a “capital” style that is clearer for readers. The above is a partial transliteration intended to clarify and complement the original inscription appearing in Figure 1 (above). This style of cursive, capital script (see Figure 1) would lead to the belief that the formal feature of the letter was dictated to a scribe by Severa (e.g., Bowman 88, 93). It is, of course, possible that this composition was dictated to a scribe, who may have also been a woman. We know that there were, in fact, female slaves in the Roman society of this period whose task it was to be scribes for upper-class women. Vespasian’s life-partner, Caenis, was once a freedwoman of Antonia who, according to Suetonius, copied manuscripts and took dictation (“*et a manu dilectam*”) to be an amanuensis for Roman women of the patrician class (*Divus Vespasianus* 3. 21; *Domitianus* 12. 3; see Enos and Peterman 7-8). These features provide a context to assist in a rhetorical analysis of this primary source.

B. A Rhetorical Analysis of Tablet 291

English Translation

(First Hand)

"Claudia Severa to her Lepidina greetings, On 11 September, sister, for the day of the celebration of my birthday, I give you a warm invitation to make sure that you come to us, to make the day more enjoyable for me by your arrival, if you are present (?). Give my greetings to your Cerialis. My Aelius and my little son send him (?) their greetings."

(Second Hand)

"I shall expect you, sister. Farewell, sister, my dearest soul, as I hope to prosper and hail."

(Back, First Hand)

To Sulpicia Lepidina, wife of Cerialis, from Severa."

Figure 4: English translation, slightly modified by authors to underscore partitions: <http://vindolanda.csad.ox.ac.uk/TVII-291> (Tab. Vindol. II 291). Used with permission.

A birthday invitation hardly appears to be a document of singular importance. Usually, a piece of writing that invites another to participate in a very common activity would seem to be of little interest to historians of rhetoric. In Roman society a birthday (*natalis dies*) was a celebratory occasion and, in that sense, an epideictic event for family, friends, and patrons. In fact, guidelines for birthday orations are found in Greek treatises of epideictic rhetoric (*OCD* 244, 629-30). On such annual occasions, banquets were accompanied by gifts and offerings with prayers and speeches; in fact, Roman poets created the *genethliacon*, a poem functioning as an *encomium* for the honored guest (*OCD* 630). From this perspective, we can say that not only is the birthday itself an occasion for epideictic rhetoric, but Severa's invitation itself is a form of epistolary rhetoric, for her message of joy is a plea to have Lepidina and her family participate in this festive occasion.

The importance of the document, why it should be considered rhetorical, and what a rhetorical analysis will tell us counters our immediate impulse to ignore this piece of everyday graffiti that was discarded in a dump heap almost two thousand years ago. First, the fact that this document survived since 100 A.D. alone merits our attention. This is not writing passed down through the centuries from scribe to scholar but rather an artifact that speaks to us directly from Antiquity. Second, this piece of writing is rhetorical because it expresses thoughts and sentiments from one woman to another, in this instance a plea or request, giving us the opportunity to view the values and customs of a culture in everyday social interaction. Third, a rhetorical analysis offers the possibility to understand the mentalities of women in social situations, and to learn more not only about the composition but also the heuristics of its construction.

This study also illustrates the benefits of multi-modal research. We are fortunate that this priceless work was discovered by archaeologists after being discarded and hidden for so long. The fact that it has already been translated by philologists into English is itself another benefit. However, there is still a need to review the Latin by historians of rhetoric because the translation offered above (Figure 4) was not done for the purpose of isolating and identifying rhetorical features of composition. Often translations of such works are done by philologists who do not have a knowledge of the heuristics of rhetoric and therefore may not realize the subtleties of meaning in words and composition patterns that otherwise appear commonplace. A rhetorical analysis can tell us not only about this particular specimen of epistolary rhetoric but, in a much larger sense, what this unique piece of evidence tells us about women in the history of rhetoric. In short, the cooperative efforts of researchers who come at the same object of study from different perspectives, and with different methodologies for analysis, offer a richer, more layered understanding than one approach might hope to yield.

There has been some discussion about the authorship of this hand-written composition. Was this composition, as was the case with the "writing" of Margery Kempe, a work that was dictated to a scribe—or, in the case of Kempe, a priest—and not the work of the Kempe herself (Glenn, "Reexamining *The Book*" and *Rhetoric Retold*; Ritchie and Ronald, 43)? There is one feature of Tablet 291 that leads to the belief that at least part of the letter was *written* by the hand of Severa. There is clearly a post-script scrawled at the end of the letter (see bottom right corner of Figure 1). What is fascinating about this piece of rhetoric is that the formal invitation is written with the care and exactness of a scribe but the "post-script" looks like a hastily written, personal after-thought that most likely would have been dashed off ("Vindolanda Tablets" n. 10, see Bowman 85). As mentioned above, the handwriting at the end of

this tablet is informal and distinct from the elegant script of the formal invitation. This parenthetical comment added at the end of the invitation leads researchers to believe that while the formal letter would have been dictated, the more intimate “personal greetings [are] in her own hand” (Clackson 510). There are examples of such a practice in other ancient cultures. Aurelia Charite, a prosperous landowner from Hermopolis (Egypt), proclaiming herself to be “literate” in her sales receipt of May 27, 348 A. D., nonetheless used a scribe to record her transaction but provided her personal signature on the last two lines of the papyrus (Rowlandson 242-43). Evidently, writing her own signature (i.e. “signing-off”) was a register of authenticity as well as providing a personal touch. Although separated by centuries and cultures, this same personal touch is apparent in the tablets of Vindolanda.

Examination of other letters at Vindolanda, both female and male, reveal that it was common for a clerk, scribes or amanuenses to write the formal message but for the “author” (as opposed to the “writer”) to add directly some sort of personal closing statement (Bowman 88). Adding a final statement in one’s own hand may have been done to verify authenticity, to add a personal touch to a more formalized statement, or just to include an after-thought. Regardless of intent or motive, the practice of (literally) having the final word in one’s own hand was a convention that reveals the literacy of this group of women. In sum, most palaeographers believe that the actual composition was, at least in part, composed by Severa herself.

Further, it should be mentioned that while the scripts do appear to be of two different hands, it is possible that the formal invitation was done in a meticulously detailed style by the author and that the post-script was jotted down in much the same way that we would pen in a remark to a computer-generated letter that makes it appear all the more personal. Severa also adds post-scripts to other tablets (Tablets 292 and 293) that appear to be in the same hand. These features of her composing habits lead to the view “that the author is Severa herself” and that with virtual certainty “these are the earliest know[n] examples of writing in Latin by a woman” (“Vindolanda Tablets Online II”). Thus, in whole or in part, the hand(s), most researchers agree, was that of a woman or women, for the female presence of direct authorship is beyond reasonable doubt and skepticism.

Although more open to debate, there is another feature of this invitation that our rhetorical analysis reveals that points toward a feminine composition. Writing by different genders tends to include phrases used by one gender and not another. Severa includes the vocative phrase “*anima mea*” (lines 12 and 13, i.e., “my soul”). This phrase is an expression used by Roman women of the period and, in fact, is characterized as a formulaic feature of “female speech” (Clackson 510). There is no doubt that the body of extant textual

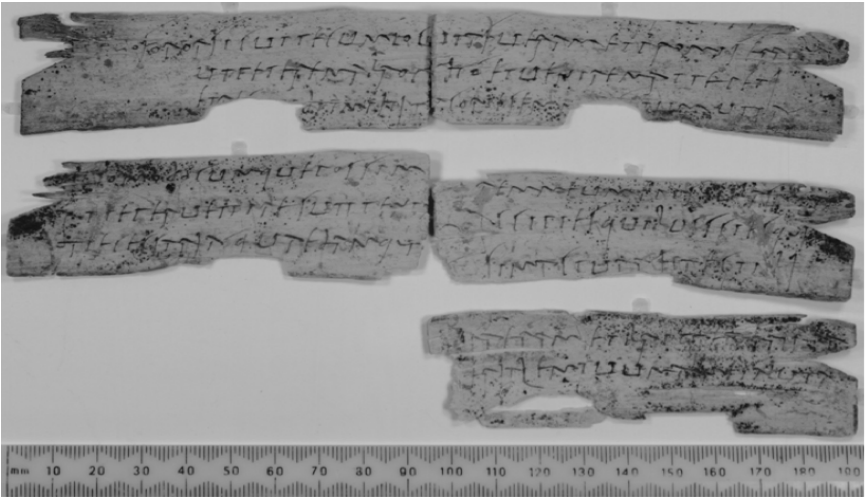


Figure 5: Tablet 292 (front). The closing portion of the tablet contains a personal post-script by Severa similar to the post-script on Tablet 291: *Vindolanda Tablets Online II* <http://vto2.csad.ox.ac.uk>. Used with permission.



Figure 6: Tablet 293 (front). A partial inscription from the right-side of a diptych, inscribed in the same handwriting post-scripts as Tablets 291 and 292, and therefore believed to be in Claudia Severa's own hand: *Vindolanda Tablets Online II* <http://vto2.csad.ox.ac.uk>. Used with permission.

evidence from female authors is limited but the expression "*anima mea*" is a formula normally associated not with male authors but rather with women. In American vernacular, for example, such terms as "fabulous" or "gorgeous" are adjectives that are used much more commonly with women than with male speakers or writers. In Tablet 292, this letter, also believed to be composed by a woman, uses the terms "*karissima*" ("dearest") and "*ma desideratissima*" ("my most desired one") provide another example of expressions normally used by female rather than male writers.

Yet another way to look at Severa's "voice" is through *ethopoia* or the capacity to insert personality and character traits into the discourse. *Ethopoia* is a concept that was consciously attended to by classical logographers such as Lysias (Enos, *Greek Rhetoric* 210 *et passim*; Kennedy 135-36). The intent of *ethopoia* is to indirectly provide an insight to the author's personality through the message. For an elder person, for example, a logographer might compose an oration that highlights the traits of maturity, wisdom, experience and reflection. For a younger person, however, a logographer might compose a piece of rhetoric that would convey enthusiasm, lofty ideals, innocence, and boundless energy. In her short message, Severa conveys many character traits through *ethopoia*. Here the warmth and familiarity of Severa's message comes through not only for Lepidina, but also for all the members of both families (Terras 7). Severa makes a point of telling Lepidina that her attendance would not only be enjoyable for Severa herself (l. 6, "*ivcvndiorem mihi*") but also how wonderful it would be "for us," meaning her family (l. 6, "*ad nos*"). This sort of personal touch, and even intimacy, is not uncommon in ancient inscriptions. In fact, there are many extant inscriptions where the spouse reveals genuine love for the partner. One such Roman epitaph, now housed in the British Museum, records how Lucius Dasumius Callistus honors his wife for 35 years of marriage, how she will be remembered "without any complaint" ("*SINE VLLA QVERELLA*") and the difficulty of living without her (Hartnett 96, 97).

The tone of Severa's letter challenges the stereotype of Roman wives. A marriage (*affectio maritalis*) was ostensibly undertaken with the religious and legal intent of a life-long union of consenting partners. Arranged marriages, however, were commonplace in Roman society during the Imperial Period, often done for pragmatic, financial, and socially beneficial reasons. Under such conditions of contractual arrangement, one would be inclined to think of such ties as emotionless pairings with (perhaps) love found elsewhere. That said, we should not ignore the fact that Tablet 291—a correspondence from one wife to another—reveals that families were apparently not unusual at Vindolanda. In principle, Roman armies sought to avoid the complexities of having to deal with wives and families by banning marriage for soldiers (Birley 36). The long-time stability of garrisons such as Vindolanda, however, makes

it clear that marriages were tolerated and perhaps even commonplace. We, of course, have no idea of the personal conditions of marriage for Severa, but her letter indicates nothing dour or sardonic. Perhaps arranged marriages—if that was indeed the case with Severa—do not necessarily mean unhappy marriages, for the buoyancy of Severa's comments only indicate happiness. Albeit this artifact is only a single piece of evidence, but we nonetheless do see a personality that challenges the inferences we make about Roman marital relationships as impersonal contractual agreements.

Although Severa's salutation and closing are conventional for the form of a letter, we can see early in the invitation that Severa expresses her personal intimacy with Sulpicia Lepidina. Severa's familiarity with Lepidina and her own family reveal a warmth of expression (e.g., l. 14 "*karissima*" or "dearest") that captures her genuine desire to see Lepidina and her family. Anyone who has studied Greek and Roman inscriptions will not be surprised with the personal, intimate tone that such writings often exhibit. We are accustomed to studying monumental inscriptions that deal with civic policy, treaties, and legal proceedings. Such civic inscriptions mask the individuals behind the message. Gravestone monuments are especially revealing where the most poignant, heart-felt messages are inscribed for all the world to see for all time. While many of those funeral messages are heart-wrenching, here in Tablet 291, we have one that is jovial and literally inviting. All such messages, however, are important because they reveal a great deal about the individuals of an ancient society. That is, even this small message gives us a snapshot of a Roman woman, one who appears outgoing, congenial and inclusive, in what we think of as an everyday function—communicating with friends and inviting them to a party.

Studying the daily life of Roman women is as important as studying their role in monumental historical moments. When we read such inscriptions, the authors seem less like statues in a museum and more like the individuals whom we wish to know about in detail. Severa's message is bright, familiar, and outgoing not only to her reader, Lepidina, but also to Lepidina's husband and family. Far from being cloistered at home, Severa appears engaging and social. In this small fragment of a message we see anything but the stereotype of a taciturn, solitary, somber Roman matron tucked away and isolated in her domicile, removed from communication and society. Again, it is important to note that this is only one instance and that there are many other sources of primary evidence that shed new insights about the voices of women that await our study and review. In the spirit of the challenge made by Laura Cereta that was presented in the beginning of this essay, we can move from the extraordinary to the ordinary in recognizing the accomplishments of women by revealing their everyday practices. In doing so, as has been argued in this study,

we can find much to appreciate in the literary practices of women that is not exceptional but nonetheless worthy of recognition and even praise.

Conclusion

Since the opening passages of Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, we have been inclined to think of rhetoric as a public, civic activity. Further, those public arenas have been dominated by males, which has led to the inclination that rhetoric is gendered in the masculine. As mentioned in the beginning of this essay, those presumptions have been challenged by the last two generations of scholars—including but not limited to Glenn, Poster, Ritchie and Ronald—who have demonstrated that rhetoric operates in many ways and those activities are not restricted by gender. In the East and in the West the voices of ancient women are waiting to be heard again. Tablet 291 is a dramatic piece of evidence supporting the challenges to the long-held assumptions about rhetoric and its manifestations. Tablet 291 is an example of epistolary rhetoric. To be sure, it is not a “public” letter in the sense of Laura Cereta’s letter to Bibulus Sempronius that was featured in the beginning of this essay. Moreover, by no stretch of the imagination is Tablet 291 akin to Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail” which was written with the intent of altering the public knowledge of a nation torn apart by civil unrest. Yet, Severa’s simple letter does make a rhetorical statement, not only to her friend as a humble invitation, but also to us as historians of rhetoric. Tablet 291 illustrates a conscious, deliberate use of discourse to offer a message, a message of request that Severa wishes to convey to her friend Lepidina. Severa follows a formula and is facile enough to personalize the conventions of the genre of letter-writing. Moreover, her even more personalized post-script reveals a familiarity with a common use of literacy that gives us pause to challenge the presumption that most women of this period were non-literate.

While Tablet 291 from Vindolanda is illuminating, it is an illustration of not only the insights we may gain, but also the primary sources awaiting study. It is important to stress again that the body of primary evidence that reveals much about women and the history of rhetoric extends far beyond the excavated military garrisons at and around Vindolanda. For the purposes of this topic, we can underscore that a wide array of epigraphical sources about—and now we can say by—women await analysis. To do such analysis, however, requires historians of rhetoric to work as partner-colleagues with archaeologists, epigraphists, historians, philologists and palaeographers. Applying long-established research methodologies from those respected disciplines, developing new methodologies appropriate to better analyzing the rhetoric of such artifacts, and the willingness to seek out new non-traditional sources for evidence in the

field and in the archives is essential if historical studies of rhetoric is to continue growing and developing. Without such a perspective, tablets such as Tablet 291 may be unearthed but their benefits to expanding our knowledge of women in the history of rhetoric will, in effect, remain buried and locked away from our discipline and the rich history that awaits discovery and explanation.

Appreciation and Dedication

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Jane E. Helppie, the wife of Richard Leo Enos for over 40 years, passed away from colon cancer on December 2, 2015. This essay is dedicated to her memory: a brilliant lawyer, a devoted mother, and a tireless advocate of women's rights.

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