HORAE IN ROMAN FUNERARY INSCRIPTIONS: ON LIFESPANS MEASURED IN HOURS

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Epitaphs that Record Hours

Roman epitaphs often record the age of the deceased in terms of years and even months or days. Yet this precision can continue down to units of hours, or *horae*. While scholars have noted the existence of such inscriptions, no comprehensive analysis of them has ever been attempted.

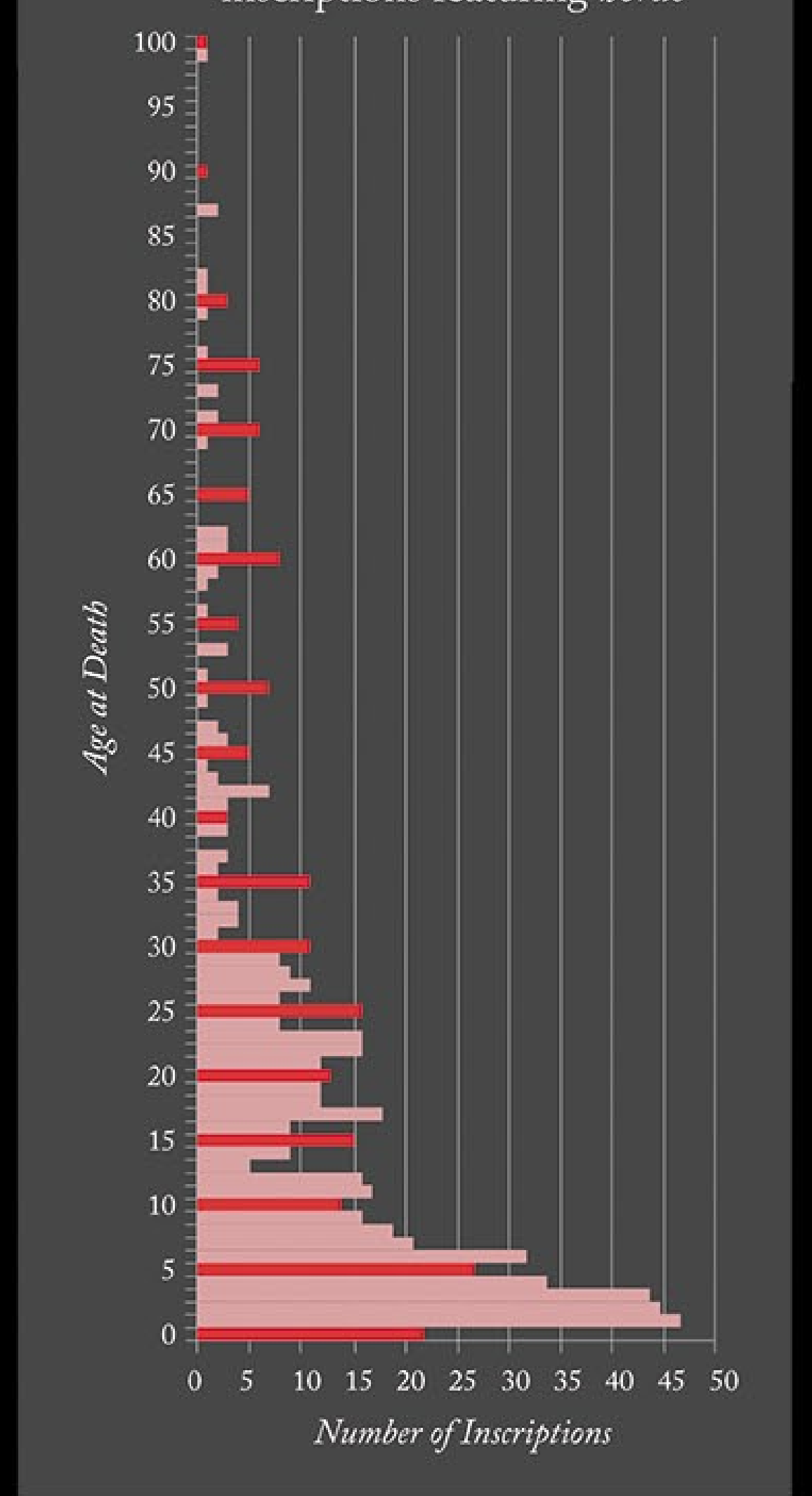
This poster shows the preliminary findings of such an endeavor, with attention given to patterns and anomalies in the figures recorded, the temporal and geographic distributions of the inscriptions, and the function such references serve.

Epitaphs with references to *horae* outnumber non-funerary inscriptions that record *horae* in the epigraphic record by a ratio of about 9:1. All told, hours are recorded in 904 Latin epitaphs, though there are examples in the Greek epigraphic record as well.

These references can take three forms:
(1) Literary or poetic usages – 56 examples;
(2) Figures in durations of life – 746 examples;
(3) Points in time – 74 examples.

Despite the fact that durations are ten times as common as points in time, I contend that these are simply two different means of noting the time of death.

Chart 1 - Age distribution of inscriptions featuring *horae*



Age Rounding

While one would expect hours to be used in the commemoration of brief lives, the distribution shows that people of all ages were commemorated with precise ages.

From age 25 onwards there is strong evidence of age rounding in the sample (see Chart 1 above), with multiples of five becoming far more prominent from that point. From age 65 onwards multiples of five feature almost exclusively.

At times these rounded figures can be flagged in the epitaphs by qualifiers such as *plus minus* before the ages.

Romans, although aware of their birthdays, were often unaware of their ages owing to the cumbersome systems of reckoning years, such as the use of consular years. The knowledge of birthdays argues for accurate figures of months and days – even after rounded figures of years.

While recording figures of hours in the lifespan of an infant can magnify the sense of loss and the injustice of so short a life, such information can also celebrate a long and full life:

> …]IV [fe]|licissim[o] | **q(ui) vix(it) ann(os) | LXXXXVIIII | m(enses) XI d(ies) XXVIII | h(oras) XI** …
>
> … *for a most fortunate man,* ***who lived ninety-nine years, eleven months, twenty-eight days, and eleven hours.*** …
>
> (CIL IX 907 – Luceria, Regio II: Apulia et Calabria)

Writing out a lifespan in this manner, though surely inaccurate, helps to communicate longevity in a way that a solitary Roman numeral *C* cannot.

Geographic Distribution

The 904 inscriptions come from 193 sites in 32 regions of the Roman Empire.

There is a strong bias towards the Western half of the Empire. This is easily accounted for by the use of Greek in the Eastern provinces. (There are inscriptions recording ὥραι with a pattern of distribution encompassing Rome and the Eastern provinces.)

Each dot on Maps 1 and 2 (right) represents one inscription. There are 898 inscriptions represented. (Six inscriptions, however, are of unknown provenance.)

The pattern of distribution suggests a practice centered on Rome with influence into Italy and North Africa.

Yet the rates of inscription survival in different provinces and the number of inscriptions set up lend some regions undue prominence and diminish the significance of others.

The shading of each province in Map 1 (near right) or region in Map 2 (far right) indicates the prevalence of inscriptions recording *horae* as a percentage of all inscriptions from that area.

On this basis, Rome's prominence is diminished relative to the vast number of surviving inscriptions from the city.

Horae were recorded with equal frequency in Rome and North Africa. The Tyrrhenian side of Italy also displays widespread acceptance of the practice, whereas the Adriatic side displays less. The low numbers in Europe and Asia suggest that the custom was brought by those coming from Italy, such as soldiers, and was not widely adopted by the locals.

The Figures of Hours

Of the 714 undamaged or confidently reconstructed figures of hours, the vast majority (98%) have values in the range of 1-12 (see Chart 2 below).

The distribution among these numbers is fairly even and hovers around 60 instances (±15%), with two exceptions:
(1) It drops off at either end of the spectrum;
(2) The numbers three and six are overrepresented.

Multiples of three are not convenient figures for rounding when using Roman numerals; hence this is not evidence of rounding, but rather an indication of digit preference.

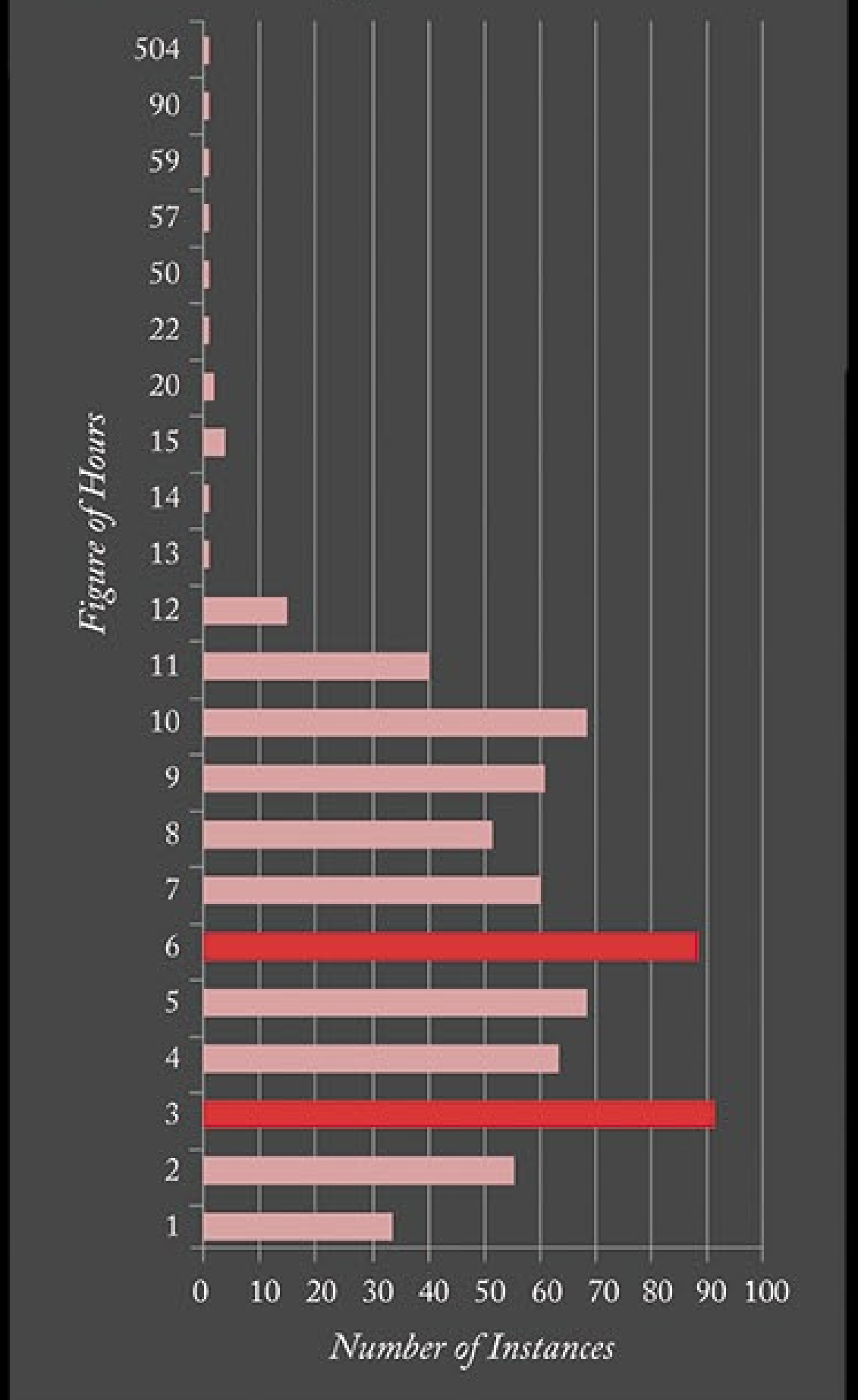
Digit preference occurs when a society assigns positive connotations to certain numbers. Here, as a large portion of the sample is Christian, the canonical hours (the traditional prayers of the Catholic Church) provide a clue as to why these digits were preferred. Four of these (*Prime, Terce, Sext, None*) are named for the solar hours to which they correspond. Each of these prayers relates in some way to the death and resurrection of Christ. In particular, *Terce, Sext,* and *None* deal with various stages of Christ's death.

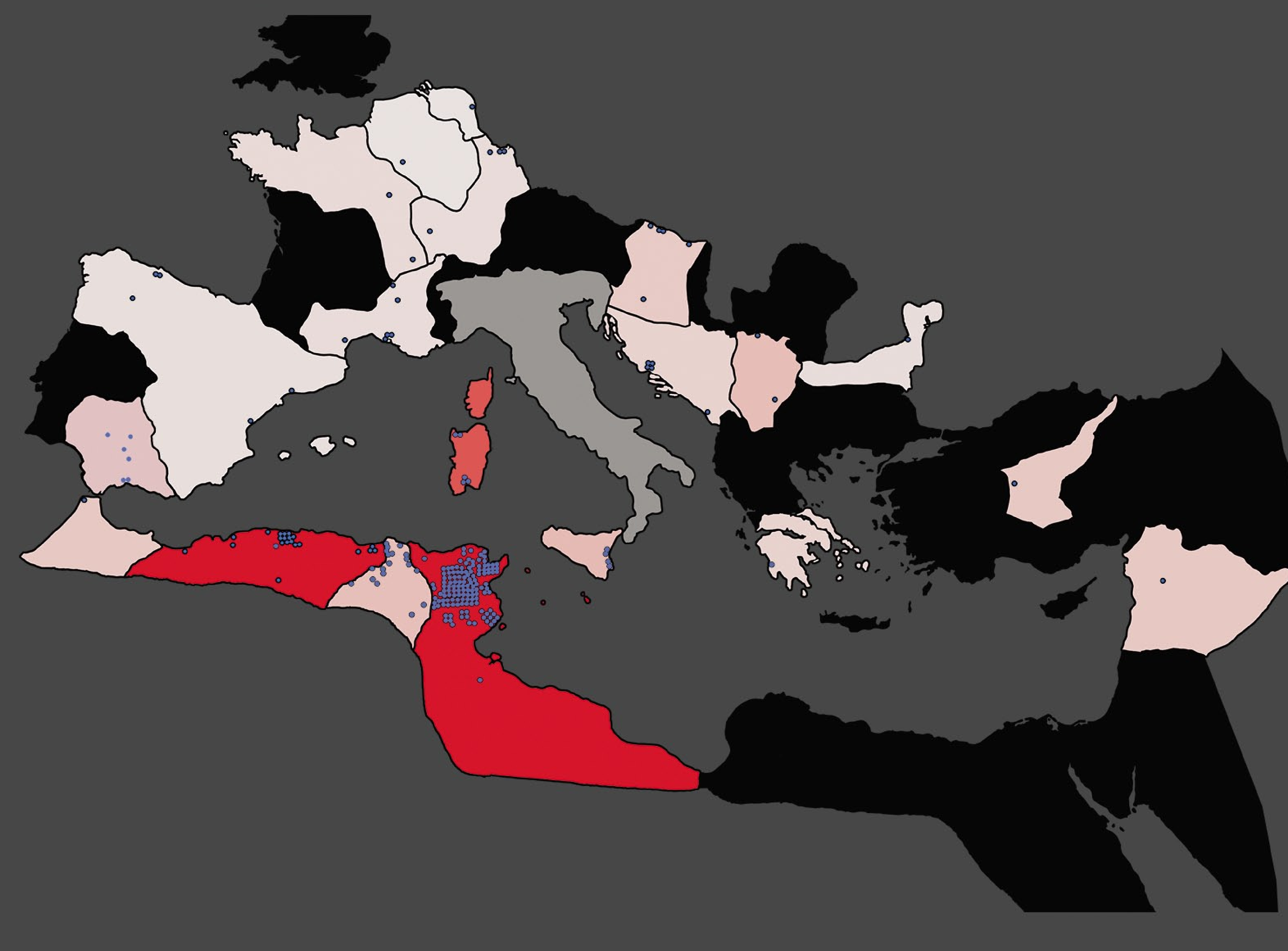
The values from 13-24 are evidence of the counting of hours based on a nychthemeral cycle, rather than separate diurnal and nocturnal countings.

The values in excess of 24 are in some cases best interpreted as errors made in the process of carving or transcriptions. However, in other cases, they serve to communicate affection by the commemorator for the deceased by stressing each moment of life:

> Iuliu{i}s Ia|nuarius | **v(ixit) h(oras) XC** | h(ic) s(itus) e(st)
>
> *Julius Ianuarius* ***lived ninety hours****. Here he lies.*
>
> (ILAlg-02-02, 5361 - Thibilis, Numidia)

Chart 2 - The figures of *horae* recorded





Map 1 - Epitaphs recording *horae* in the Roman Empire (excluding Italy)

Map 2 - Epitaphs recording *horae* in Italy

Accuracy vs. Precision

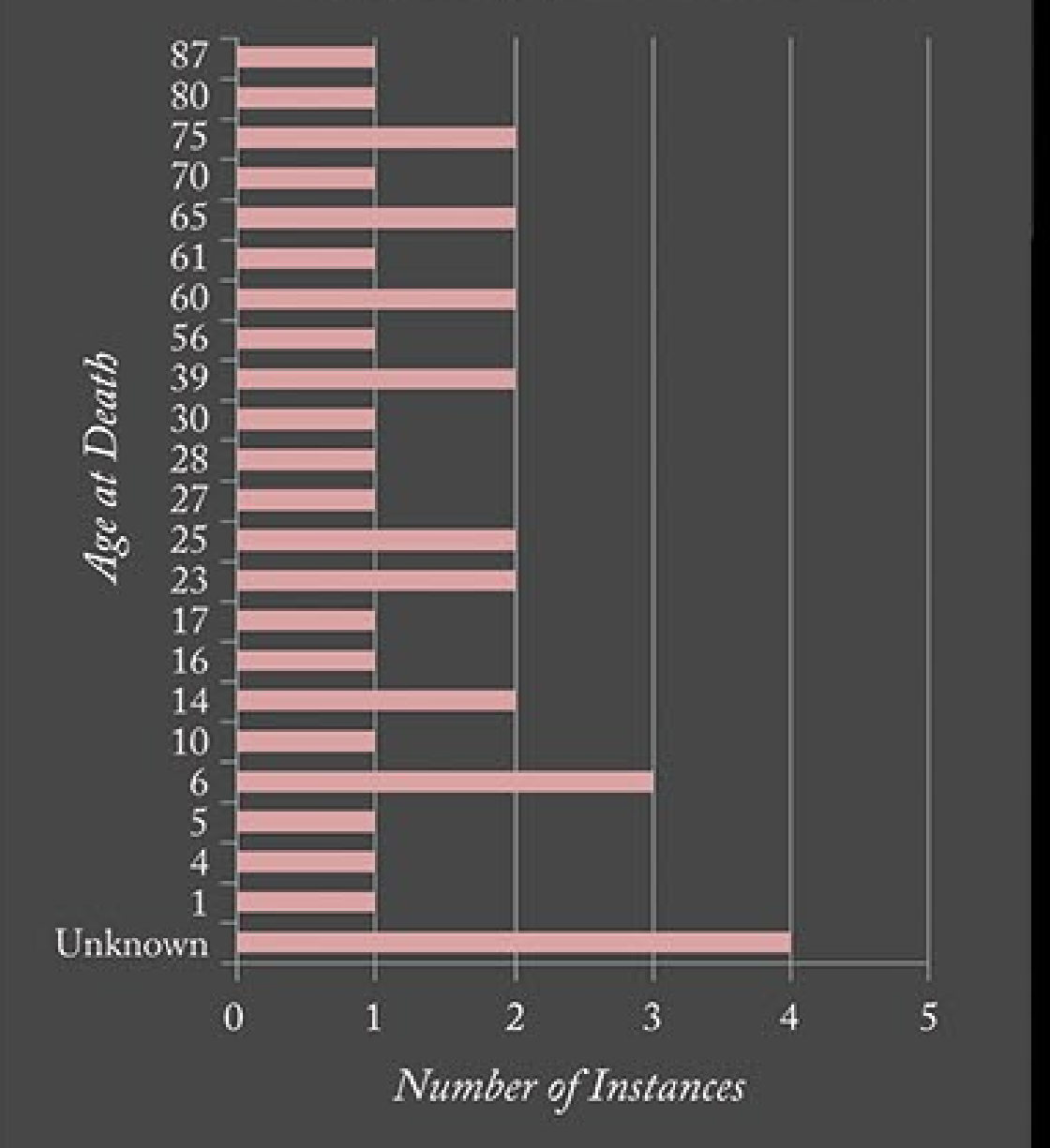
Thirty-five inscriptions in the sample record figures of years and hours alone – no months, no days (see Chart 3 below).

While this seems indicative of people expiring on their dates of birth, such a phenomenon should occur in 1 out of every 365 cases (discounting intercalations). Yet here the frequency is 17 times this expected rate.

Interestingly, about half of these cases are from tombs of adults and a large number belong to seniors whose ages quite clearly have been rounded. Surely, these figures are not to be taken as accurate measures of lifespans.

At conflict here are the precision of the figures and the accuracy of the ages, for paradoxically, the former does not serve to enhance the latter.

Chart 3 - Ages of those whose epitaphs record only years and hours



Units Smaller Than Hours

At times it appears that hours did not offer the precision that commemorators sought. Half-hours are recorded in twenty-four instances and smaller units do occur, *e.g.*:

> D(is) M(anibus) | C(aio) Avilio | Profuturo | filio | dulcissimo | qui vixit | annis VI | men(sibus) VIIII | (h)oris VII **unc(ia) I**
>
> *To the spirits of the departed: [This monument is dedicated] to Gaius Avilius Profuturus, a most charming son, who lived six years, nine months, seven hours, and* ***one uncia****.*
>
> (CIL XI 7325 – Volsinii, Regio VII: Etruria)

An *uncia* is the 12th part of a measure; in the case of an hour it is equal to five minutes.

> Bene merenti in pace | Silvanae quae hic dormit | vixit ann(os) XXI men(es) III | hor(as) IV **scrupulos VI** …
>
> *To well-deserving Silvana – [may she lie] in peace – who rests here. She lived twenty-one years, three months, four hours, and* ***six scrupuli.*** …
>
> (CIL XI 1513 – Pisae, Regio VII: Etruria)

Scrupulos comes from *scrupulum*, which is a variant of *scripulum*, the 24th part of an *uncia*, or the 288th part of a base unit. An hour divided into *scripulii* yields measures of 12½ seconds. Thus, the lifespan inscribed on this epitaph can be read as 21 years, 3 months, 4 hours, 75 seconds.

It would be absurd to suppose that lifespans could be measured so precisely and it would have been exceedingly difficult – if not impossible – to measure such fine units of time. More probably, these figures would have been added for reasons of affection.

The Function of References to *Horae*

The added precision from figures of hours does not always correspond to increased accuracy in durations. Despite this, many Romans saw fit to commit this information to stone.

There is evidence of formulaic phrasing regarding the hour of death, *e.g.*:

> Ossa sita sunt Clement(is) | Hilarionis fili(i) nato | Athenaine vixit annos | III menses VII quei | spiritum exsolvit | **hora qua natus est**
>
> *The bones that lie here are those of Clemens, son of Hilarion. Born at Athens, he, who released his breath* ***at the same hour at which he was born****, lived three years, seven months.*
>
> (CIL VI 6423 – Roma)

There was significance attached to recording the hour of death and it was noteworthy when this corresponded with the hour of birth.

While such formulaic language shows that there were auspicious reasons for recording hours, this does not imply that the numbers recorded were chosen for auspicious reasons in all cases.

The question that remains is whether these figures contributed to accurate durations from the time of birth to the time of death. Three pieces of data are needed to test this.

Only one of these 904 inscriptions contains undamaged dates and times of birth as well as a duration of life:

> D(is) M(anibus) | Blastione **vix(it) an(nis) VI | mensib(us) VIIII dieb(us) XIIII hora I** | **natus** V K(alendas) Septembres | **hora diei VI** die Lunae | **defunctus** III Idus Iunias | **hor(a) prim(a) diei** die Saturni …
>
> *To the spirits of the departed: Blastione* ***lived six years, nine months, fourteen days, one hour****.* ***Born*** *on the fifth day before the Kalends of September, a Tuesday,* ***at the sixth hour of the day****, he* ***died*** *on the third day before the Ides of June, a Saturday, at* ***the first hour of the day****. …*
>
> (CIL VI 13602 – Roma)

Aside from an error in the calculation of months (which should read *mensibus X*) this duration measures from the date of birth recorded to the date of death recorded. However, adding in the figure of hours from the duration (*hora I*) to the figure in the time of birth (*hora diei VI*) does not yield the desired result (*hora prima diei*). Thus, hours do not measure from the moment of birth to the moment of death.

This next inscription will show what they do measure:

> D(is) M(anibus) | Fla(vius) Augustalis cent(urio) | leg(ionis) Pri(mae) It[alica]es milita|vit annis V me(n)s(ibus) VI die(bus) | XII **(h)oras IIII** vixit annis | XLI me(n)s(ibus) VII die(bus) XV **(h)oras | IIII** (h)abuit co<n=M>iugem C|astorinam annis | VIII me(n)s(ibus) III die(bus) VI **(h)oras | IIII** …
>
> *To the spirits of the departed: Flavius Augustalis, centurion of the legion Prima Italica, served five years, six months, twelve days,* ***four hours****; lived forty-one years, seven months, fifteen days,* ***four hours****; had as his companion, Castorina, for eight years, three months, six days,* ***four hours****; …*
>
> (CIL V 914 – Aquileia, Regio X: Venetia et Histria)

Note that Flavius' durations of military service, his life, and his marriage all end in the figure of four hours. This is because all three of these would have ended simultaneously when he died.

It is unlikely that each of these began at the same time of day. Thus, each record of hours serves to record the last fractional day in the duration.

Conclusions

Although funerary inscriptions recording *horae* have received little attention in the past, the prevalence of such inscriptions in the archaeological record, their presence throughout the Empire, and the span of time over which they were set up all argue for their importance. For the most part, the figures of hours should be taken as accurate records of the time at which the deceased passed and, as such, the record of the final portion of a day that they were alive.

Temporal Distribution

Epitaphs are notoriously difficult to date accurately on the basis of palaeography, formulaic language, abbreviations, numeral forms, etc.

Fortunately, 2% of the sample is datable based on imperial titulature or consular, regnal, imperial, or provincial years. These inscriptions help give a sense of the longevity of the practice of recording hours.

The earliest securely datable examples come from the beginnings of the Principate. The practice continues through the Dominate, past the fall of the Western Roman Empire and into the early Byzantine Period.

43 CE

C(aio) Herennio C(ai) f(ilio) | Ter(etina) Melai | aedili IIvir(o) | L(ucio) Nonio Asprenate co(n)s(ule) | III Non(as) Sept(embres) h(oras) X natus est | A(ulo) Gabinio Secundo co(n)s(ule) | III Non(as) Sept(embres) h(oras) X moritu[r] | Melanta filio

To Gaius Herennius, son of Gaius, of the Teretinan voting-tribe, from Mela, aedile and duumvir, born at the tenth hour on the third day before the Nones of September when Lucius Nonius Asprenas held the consulship, he died at the tenth hour on the third day before the Nones of September when Aulus Gabinius Secundus was consul. Melanta [dedicated this monument] to her son.

(CIL X 4881 – Venafrum, Regio IV: Samnium)

163 CE

T(ito) Aelio Myroni | fec(it) Aureliae | Saturninae b(ene) m(erenti) | vix(it) ann(os) XXX m(enses) VI | horas VIIII in | VIII Idus Novembres | M(arco) Pontio Laeliano | A(ulo) Iunio Pastore co(n)s(ulibus)

Titus Aelius Myron made [this monument] for [himself and] Aurelia Saturnina, a well deserving woman, who lived 30 years, 6 months, 9 hours. She died on the eighth day before the Ides of November in the year of the consuls Marcus Pontius Laelianus and Aulus Iunius Pastor.

(CIL VI 10743 – Roma)

320 CE

Bona memoria Emm|artis et filiae eius vi{c}|xit annis XVIII menses | duo dies V (h)oras septe(m) | et moritur di{a}e K(a)l(endas) | Mai{i}as p(rovinciae) CCLXXVIIII

In good memory of Emmars and his daughter who lived 18 years, 2 months, 5 days, 7 hours and died on the Kalends of May in the 279th year of the province [of Mauretania Caesariensis].

(CIL VIII 21479 – Sufasar, Mauretania Caesariensis)

345 CE

Aurelia Sabina ancilla | C(h)resti vix{s}it pl(us) mi(nus) | annis XXIII me(nsibus) V di(ebus) XIII | (h)or(is) VIIII fe(lix) in pace requ(i)et | Amantio et Albino con|s<u=O>libus

Aurelia Sabina, servant of Christ, lived approximately 23 years, 5 months, 13 days, 9 hours. A fortunate woman. May she lie in peace. Amantius and Albinus were consuls.

(ILCV 1470 – Tingis, Mauretania Tingitana)

392 CE

Pos(t) consulatum d(omini) n(ostri) Arcadi | Aug(usti) e[t] Flavi Rufini vv(irorum) cc(larissimorum) con|ss(ulum) depositus Brizinus Mai|or procurator defun(c)t(us) | die Lunis IX K(a)l(endas) Iunias (h)or|a diei secunda vixit plus | minus annos XLVII

After the consulship of our master Arcadius Augustus and Flavius Rufinus – most illustrious men as consuls – Brizinus Maior the manager, was buried. Having died on Monday, the ninth day before the Kalends of June at the second hour of the day, he lived 47 years, or thereabouts.

(CIL IX 6192 – Canusium, Regio II: Apulia et Calabria)

509 CE

Hic requ[iescit] | fili{li}us [noster] | Ge[minus] | [f]idelis [vi]|[xit i]n pace an[nos V] | menses V dies [XXV] | [nat]us est ann(o) VII do(mi)n(i) n(ostri) re[gis Tra]|[sa]mundi IIII Non(as) Febr(u)ari[as] | et recessit ann(o) XII VII Ka[lend(as)] | Augustas (h)ora VIII sabbatorum di[e]

Here rests our son faithful Geminus. He lived – may he be in peace – 5 years, 5 months, 25 days. He was born in the 7th year of our master the king Trasamundus on the 4th day before the Nones of February and he departed [from life] in the 12th year on the 7th day before the Kalends of August, the Sabbath day, at the 8th hour.

(CIL VIII 16516 – Theveste, Africa Proconsularis)

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Abbreviations

CIL – Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum

ILAlg – Inscriptions latines d'Algérie

ILCV – Inscriptiones Latinae Christianae Veteres

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