

Towards a Redefinition of "Context" – Some Remarks on Methodology Regarding Historical Sociolinguistics and Texts of Antiquity

By *Flavia Pompeo**

This paper aims to more sharply define – and perhaps even redefine – the notion of "context" in research on written texts of Antiquity (particularly inscriptions) where a situation of documentary scarcity is involved. Indeed, in these circumstances, where apparently "bad" (Labov 1994: 11) or "imperfect data" (Janda and Joseph 2003: 14) might seem to be even less suited to a useful sociolinguistic analysis, to reconstruct as accurately as possible linguistic and extra-linguistic contexts (historical, social and cultural, including scribal practices) constitutes an essential step in the understanding of a document (Mancini 2012). This applies not only to Restsprachen, the corpus of which is notoriously restricted, but also, in certain cases, to Latin and Ancient Greek. Indeed, particularly in areas where Greek and Latin peoples were linguistic minorities, epigraphic documents written in these languages may even constitute a unicum. In this respect, particular attention will be paid to the advantages obtained by comparing a very limited corpus, or even a "single" text, with documents of the same typology, even when written in a different language to the text under investigation. The applicability and the appropriateness of this approach are demonstrated by a case study.

Keywords: Achaemenid Empire, Ancient Greek, Context, Elamite, Historical Sociolinguistics.

Introduction

In research on written documents of Antiquity – especially inscriptions – it is not uncommon to work with an extremely limited number of texts. As is known, this situation applies first and foremost to the so-called *Restsprachen*, that is, to languages which survive through a very restricted corpus. However, in specific cases, even Latin and Ancient Greeks can be considered "scantly attested", although clearly in a different way to *Restsprachen*. Particularly in areas where Latin or Greek people were linguistic minorities or where their presence was occasional – for example, as travellers or traders – available epigraphic documents written in these languages may be part of a fragmentary collection or may even constitute an isolated case, or *unicum*. In these circumstances, apparently "bad" (Labov 1994: 11) or "imperfect data" (Janda and Joseph 2003: 14) might seem even less suitable for useful historical sociolinguistic analysis. Indeed there is no doubt that the further we go back in time, the greater the challenges are for Historical Sociolinguistics, in that Labov's (1994: 21) "historical paradox" appears increasingly difficult to overcome. Thus, while this discipline has greatly benefited from the contributions of both Corpus Linguistics and Social History in studying, for example, Early English phenomena (Hernández-Campoy and Conde-Silvestre 2012), the situation changes dramatically when considering documents of Antiquity.

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However, in this field of study, the central question is not only, or not mainly, the quality of the data, but rather the quality of the method used in the analysis of a given document or class of documents, and how it is to be adapted appropriately for each occasion. In such cases the involvement of other disciplines is necessary – even though this is not always sufficient – in an attempt to overcome the difficulties of interpreting the documents. In this respect, Mullen's paper (2012) demonstrates the importance of a multi-modal approach when analyzing multilingualism in ancient epigraphic material, admirably combining linguistics, history and archaeology. Certain criteria are adopted, based on different types of parameters which not only relate to linguistic elements but also to extra-linguistic features, such as the iconography, the material support of the document, etc.

Moreover it should be stressed that the analysis of ancient documents produced in multilingual environments implies the adoption of both a micro- and a macro-sociolinguistic perspective since, in parallel with the linguistic analysis of the document, issues such as the reconstruction of linguistic repertoire, multilingualism, language contact, etc. are often involved. This kind of approach – which, from a historical-sociolinguistic point of view, we might define "holistic" – also has consequences for the research method.

These brief observations are enough to indicate the need to reconstruct both the linguistic and extra-linguistic contexts in which a given epigraphic document was produced with extreme accuracy. In this specific field, which in recent years has seen an increase in interest on the part of many respected researchers, Mancini's studies (2002, 2012) are particularly significant. In his 2012 paper – a variationist analysis applied to Oscan *defixiones* – Mancini (2012: 239) proposes a method that combines the "hermeneutics of epigraphic texts" with a "socio-historical interpretation", based on extreme attention to "little things", to details detected from the text as well as from the context. Indeed, attention is paid to two distinct stages: a) the reconstruction of the linguistic event in all its aspects; b) the identification of textual elements (micro-phenomena) useful for a sociolinguistic analysis (comprising diastatic variables), through textual comparison following designated steps. Finally, one aspect of Mancini's (2012: 251) method deserves our attention as it is particularly significant for the case study under consideration. This regards the advantages gained from the analysis of *defixiones* in his comparison of the Oscan texts with analogous texts of other linguistic traditions. As we will see, this process is also extremely useful for other types of texts and document scenarios.

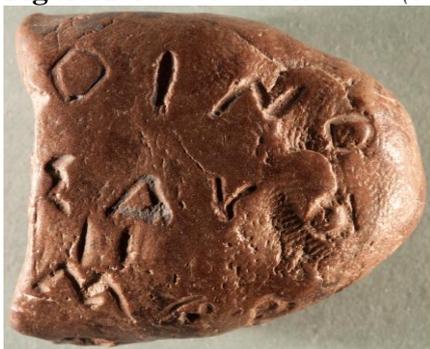
Let us now examine this more closely by focussing on a particular case study in which context, or rather contexts, are involved in the analysis of an ancient epigraphic text.

The Greek Tablet of the Persepolis Fortification Archive

The document under consideration – edited and analysed by various scholars (Hallock 1969, Lewis 1977, Schmitt 1989, Canali de Rossi 2004, no. 230, Stolper and Tavernier 2007, Rougemont 2012, no. 54 and references therein, Pompeo 2015) – is the only administrative tablet in the Ancient Greek language and script found in the Persepolis Fortification Archive (henceforth PFA). It is marked by the sigla *Fort. 1771*, and scholars agree in dating it to around 500 BC for various reasons: firstly, in consideration of the Ionian writing from that period; secondly, the state of integrity in which the whole Archive was found not only confirms the dating of the tablet but also guarantees its authenticity. This is also proven by the impression of a seal (Stolper and Tavernier 2007: 22-25).

The text is arranged in five rows, with part of the word $\mu\acute{\alpha}\rho\iota\varsigma$ engraved on the curved surface of the lower edge, and immediately underneath it, in the line below, is the word $\tau\acute{\epsilon}\beta\eta\tau$; i.e. it is engraved on the reverse of the tablet together with the impressed figures of animals (Figures 1, and 2).

Figure 1. *Fort. 1771: Reverse (Photography Courtesy of PFA Project)*



Fort. 1771

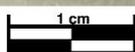
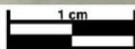


Figure 2. *Fort. 1771: Lower Edge (Photography Courtesy of PFA Project)*



Fort. 1771



The text is as follows: OINO | Σ ΔΥΟ | ΙΙ | ΜΑΡΙC | ΤΕΒΗΤ

This should be read οἶνος δύο ἢ μάρης Τέβητ, and it can be translated as "Wine, two 2 maris; (month of) Tébet".

It immediately appears evident that it is necessary to adopt a series of steps examining different kinds of contexts in order to understand such a document. Thus, after having briefly reviewed data concerning the presence of Greeks in the Achaemenid Empire – i.e., the *initial cultural and historical context* – we will take into account the *documentary context* to which the tablet belongs, i.e., the PFA.

The Historical and Cultural Context: Greeks and Greek Inscriptions in the Achaemenid Empire

At its greatest extent, the Achaemenid Empire (550-330 BC) was characterized by significant multilingualism and multiculturalism, which was also the result of the tolerant official attitude of rulers towards ethnic, cultural and linguistic minorities (Rossi 1981, 1984, Schmitt 1993, Tavernier 2008, Basello 2013). Interpreters and multilingual scribes were employed to resolve communication problems, and Aramaic was the supra-regional bureaucratic and diplomatic language of the Empire.

The epigraphic documentation in Greek dating back to this period is poor, both from a qualitative and quantitative point of view, even though in the satrapies of the Asia Minor, for fairly obvious political and geographical reasons, the presence of Greek people and the reflection of this at the documentary level is significant (Huysse 1995). In this area we find both public and private Greek inscriptions also in bilingual or trilingual documents¹. In contrast, there are mostly private monolingual Greek inscriptions in the eastern and central areas of the Empire (Benvenuto et al. 2015, Pompeo 2015).

From Greek authors, Achaemenid royal inscriptions, and the few Greek epigraphic texts found in Iran, we know that Greeks arrived at the Achaemenid court as visitors, served as mercenaries in the Persian army, and operated as skilled workers. Sometimes – as with the Eretrians of Ardericca – their presence was the result of deportation. Recent archaeological discoveries are making fundamental contributions to our understanding of this period, providing access to new information or strengthening what is already known. For example, PFA tablets have confirmed Herodotus's (*Histories* VII, 23.1) observation regarding the existence of groups of workers, identified by different ethnic or geographic labels, travelling all over the Empire. Greeks, in particular, were called *Yauna* in Old Persian, *Yaunap* in Elamite, and *Yamanāya* in Babylonian (Rollinger and Henkelman 2009, Basello 2013). Moreover, groups of Greeks, comprising adults of both sexes and also boys and girls, were probably a workforce (*kurtas*) employed by the administration of Persepolis (Rollinger and Henkelman 2009).

Let us now consider the second kind of context, that is, the *documentary context* of the Greek tablet.

¹ Benvenuto (2016) presents the reconstruction of a repertoire of a satrapy in Asia Minor.

The Documentary Context: the Greek Tablet in the PFA

As already mentioned, Greek epigraphic documents found in the central area of the Empire are scant – fewer than ten – and of these, six have been discovered in the area of Persepolis: five graffiti (5th century BC) written in stone quarries, which show no local language interference, and the Greek tablet of the PFA (Pompeo 2015). Indeed, in the 1930s, two archives containing clay tablets were discovered in Persepolis²: the Fortification Archive – whose material has been dated to 509-493 BC, i.e., during the reign of Darius I – and the Treasury Archive, where approximately 800 tablets and fragments have been found which date back to 492-457 BC, i.e., from the last years of Darius I's reign to the first part of that of Artaxerxes I (Henkelman 2013). The richest archive is the PFA where up to now more than 7,000 tablets in Elamite (intact or, at least, readable), 800 in Aramaic, one in Old Persian, one in Babylonian, one in Phrygian and one in Ancient Greek have been identified (Jones and Stolper 2008, Henkelman 2013)³.

As for the content, the tablets record purely administrative texts. In particular, the PFA tablets concern the collection, storage and distribution of foodstuffs prepared for the king and the royal family, for high officials of the administration, priests (or individuals belonging to the religious environment), and groups of people employed in various types of work in the area of Persepolis; cattle feed is also registered (Briant 2002: 422). The so-called "category Q", concerning the distribution of food rations to people and groups travelling within the Empire, is particularly interesting since it reveals the mobility of people of different ethnic groups over such a wide territory (Giovinazzo 1994). In contrast, the tablets of the Treasury Archive mostly record payments in silver. It is worth stressing the extreme concentration of documents regarding time (little more than fifty years) and space (the Fars area, except for the category Q tablets). The tablets at our disposal, however, are probably only part of the Achaemenid archive material, which perhaps also contained parchments in Aramaic and wooden tablets covered with wax from peripheral areas of the Empire (Naveh and Shaked 2012, Basello 2013: 68).

Although the tablets are mostly in Elamite – the language of the central administration of the Empire (Henkelman 2008, Tavernier 2008, Basello 2011) – and, to a lesser extent, in Aramaic, there must have been a great ethnolinguistic and cultural variety in Persepolis, as we can deduce, for example, from the content of the Elamite tablets, from indirect sources (especially Greek historians), from seals found in the Archives themselves, from the architecture and from the iconography of the reliefs.

² The literature on this subject is extensive and growing; see, among others, Henkelman (2013), and references therein.

³ The *Persepolis Fortification Archive (PFA) Project* is working on the examination and publication of the entire corpus of the Fortification Archive, stored in large part at the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago (<https://oi.uchicago.edu/research/projects/persepolis-fortification-archive>). The PFA is available on the *Online Cultural and Historical Research Environment (OCHRE)* website.

It is also worth noting that there were probably two groups of scribes in the Persepolis Archives (Tavernier 2008: 64). The first group consisted of those who used the Aramaic alphabetic script, writing on parchment which, being perishable, has not survived. In Elamite they were called *teppir* or *KUŠ ukku* "(who write) on parchment" or *Papilip* "Babylonians"; Tavernier maintains that these scribes were bilingual or multilingual. In contrast, the second group was formed of scribes who used cuneiform scripts, as their name, "those who write (elam. *talliš*) on tablets", indicates (Tavernier 2008: 64).

Bearing this in mind, we can observe that the content of the text, and the seal impression, make the Greek tablet a document which is fully consistent with the rest of the PFA material. It is, in fact, the actual record of an economic transaction – the delivery of a certain amount of wine – which is also documented in other tablets in Elamite. Regarding seal impressions, according to the most common hypothesis (Lewis 1977: 12-13 and no. 55, Stolper 1984: 304) they indicated the wine supplier and the recipient⁴. It must be emphasized that the seal impression *PFS 0041*, which represents a fight between a lion and, perhaps, a stag, also appear on other tablets in the same Archive, and always in documents dealing with wine supplies (Garrison and Root 2001: 6). This characteristic confirms that *Fort. 1771* belongs to this documentary collection and gives us an initial clue regarding one of the participants in the transaction. Indeed, since this seal impression is also on other tablets, we can assume that its owner was part of, or frequented in some way, the administration environment of Persepolis (Stolper and Tavernier 2007: 4, no. 2).

The fact that the tablet fits in well with the rest of the PFA regarding its content and sealing does not imply, however, that we cannot distinguish a series of features which make it unique, obviously starting from the fact that it is written in Greek. In this respect, given the uniqueness of this document in this particular corpus, the importance and the usefulness of comparing it with documents of the same kind – even when written in a different language to the text under investigation – is evident. The *text class* to which the Greek tablet belongs is, in fact, the third kind of context that we will consider in our analysis.

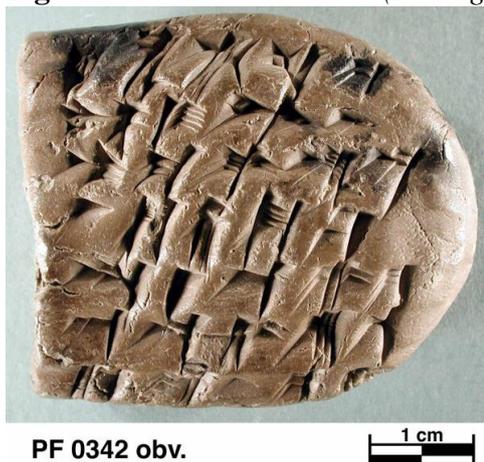
A Third Context: The Text of the Greek Tablet within a Text Class

Regarding the analysis of textual and linguistic aspects, we will adopt Mancini's (2012) method and compare our text with Elamite documents of the same text class – that is, archive records of economic transactions – which are of similar content (wine supplies). A representative Elamite text of this category is tablet *PF 0342* (Figure 3 and Table 1), which is reproduced below, transliterated⁵ and translated⁶.

⁴ On hypotheses regarding the complex sealing protocols in Persepolis, see Henkelman (2008: 129-135) and references therein.

⁵ Here we have adopted the transliteration published in Hallock (1969) with no substantial changes.

⁶ Translation by G.P. Basello, personal communication.

Figure 3. PF 0342: Obverse (Photography Courtesy of PFA Project)**Table 1.** PF 0342

	Transliteration	Translation
Reverse		
(1)	5 mar-ri-iš ^{GIS}	5 mariš
(2)	GESTIN ^{MES} kur-mín ^{HAL}	wine; by the hand
(3)	hi-ba-tur-ra-na	of Ibatra
(4)	^{HAL} ma-ir-ma-ka ₄	Marmaka
(5)	du-šá ^{AN} um-ba-	received; for Humban
(6)	an-na ha ú-ut-	made/used here
(7)	taš-da ^{AS} su-lu-	by Sulushuna
Lower edge		
(8)	šu-na-mar la-	sent
Reverse		
(9)	ka ₄	
(10)	be-ul 20+2-um-	Year 22nd
(11)	me-man-na	

The text of PF 0342 can be translated as follows: 5 mariš of wine, by the hand of Ibatra (that is, "provided by Ibatra"), Marmaka received (and) used here (Basello 2012: 151-154, Basello 2013: 69-72) (that is "carried out a rite") for the god Humban; (wine?) sent⁷ by Sulushuna. Year 22nd.

The comparison between the two documents clearly shows that the Greek text is to some extent atypical. While, in fact, the Elamite text is structured and "rich" – albeit to a limited extent given the typology of administrative text – in that it contains anthroponyms, toponyms (although not in PF 0342), names of gods and verbal forms, the Greek tablet only provides the essential content and the text is very simple. It is similar to a list, poor in morphosyntactic features and lacking in verb forms. This schematic structure can be explained – at least in part – as a consequence of the "essential style" typical of administrative texts. In this regard, the parallelism between οἶνος δύο μάρτις and the items

⁷ The verbal adjective *laka* possibly refers to "wine", but this is not clearly expressed; Henkelman (2008: 198-199 and *passim*) also interprets *laka* as "offered".

which open the Elamite text (5 mar-ri-iš^{GIŠ} GEŠTIN^{MEŠ}) is significant, since both sequences are a simple juxtaposition of the elements in a list-like structure. Let us briefly consider the Greek text with an analysis that also makes recourse to the *multilingual context* of the PFA. This is our fourth kind of context.

The Greek Text and the Multilingual Environment of the PFA

The first element to be considered is οἶνος "wine" which is in the nominative form, rather than the genitive⁸. This might itself constitute – as mentioned above – a stylistic feature, although it could also be the result of interference between Greek and the other languages of the administration, or indicate the lack of proficiency in Greek of the scribe or the person who composed the text. At the moment, however, these are only hypotheses that need to be supported by a broader linguistic analysis, also considering the Aramaic documents. Furthermore, οἶνος was likely a *Kulturwort* (Stolper and Tavernier 2007: 20), which circulated among Persian connoisseurs of Greek wine⁹.

The numeral δύο "two", again in the nominative, is the only other Greek word in the text. In the row immediately below δύο, however, the same numeral is repeated, but with a numeric sign formed by two vertical lines <II>. R. Schmitt (1989: 304) notes that the strokes seem to have been added in the space between δύο and μάρεις after the rest of the text had already been written, an observation which appears valid, judging by the arrangement of both rows and spaces clearly seen in the reproduction of the tablet (Figure 1). What, in my opinion, has not yet been noted is that the numeral systems to which the sign <II> might belong are the Greek system, called the "acrophonic" (or "decimal") system, and the Aramaic system. In both systems, in fact, the number 2 was represented by two vertical strokes in the sequence. In contrast, it was represented in Old Persian by two small wedges one on top of the other, while in the Babylonian cuneiform and in the Elamite system – which originates from the Babylonian one – there are two wedges next to each other (Table 2).

Table 2. *Numbering Systems*

Aramaic	Old Persian	Babylonian and Elamite
2	1 2 3	1 𐎶
	𐎠 𐎡 𐎢	2 𐎶𐎶
		3 𐎶𐎶𐎶

⁸ Cf., e.g., οἶνου πέντε μάρεις (Aristotle, *Historia animalium* 8, 9 596a).

⁹ Posidonius (quoted by Athenaeus 28d) mentions the custom of the Persian king importing wine from outer areas of the Empire.

Consequently, the numeric symbol added to the tablet can most likely be interpreted as Greek or Aramaic, even though its similarity to the Babylonian and the Elamite symbol does not allow us to exclude other possibilities. In any case, the symbol <II> on this tablet was probably meant to clarify the δύο written in Greek letters, as a kind of gloss (Stolper and Tavernier 2007: 20).

The noun μάρτις is a unit of capacity used for liquids or cereals and equivalent to approximately 33 litres. In an interesting analysis of this term from a historical-comparative perspective, R. Schmitt (1989) argues that on the basis of both μάρτις and the terms related to it (Elamite *mar-ri*, *mar-ri-iš*; Aramaic *mry*; Partic *mry* /*mar*/; Armenian *mar*) there was probably an unattested Old Iranian form **mariš*, the nominative form of **mari-*, masculine or feminine, for which he proposes two etymologies (Schmitt 1989: 311).

It is worth noting that in Greek authors the term μάρτις is rarely attested and is only found in the technical works or contexts – some concerning the Eastern and Achaemenid world – and where it does appear it is followed by an explanatory gloss (Schmitt 1989). Moreover, in the Persepolis tablet, μάρτις, unlike what occurs in the aforementioned Greek texts, does not agree in number with its quantifier δύο, a phenomenon which again lends it to various interpretations: a stylistic feature, an error on the part of the tablet author or a new loanword in Greek.

Therefore, we can briefly conclude that the word **mariš*, which belonged to a variety of Achaemenid Old Persian, most likely spread within the Empire in the languages of administration and trade, substantially maintaining its meaning and form. It is a technical term, borrowed by people of different languages and cultures: they each had their own measurements, but had to trade or carry out economic and administrative affairs managed by their Persian rulers and so they provisionally adopted the latter's system. Consequently the different terms relating to **mariš* did not enter the various linguistic systems definitively, and, where used, had to be glossed.

Τέβητ (cf. Babylonian *Ṭebēt(u)* and Aramaic *Ṭbt*) indicates the tenth month of the Babylonian calendar (December-January). It is transliterated in Greek without any significant linguistic adaptation, and is used to date the transaction. If the use of a Semitic month name – as noted by various scholars (Schmitt 1989: 304, no. 13, Stolper and Tavernier 2007: 20) – is already a noteworthy element in itself, even more interesting, in my opinion, is the fact that this detail renders the Greek tablet similar to the Aramaic texts in the same Archive. The text of the tablet, in fact, concurs with the dating system in the Aramaic tablets which used Semitic names of the month, while it differs from the Elamite texts, where the so-called "Elamites" or Old Persian month names are found (Basello 2002).

Conclusion

To sum up, the analysis of the Greek tablet requires various kinds of context to be considered, each casting light on different aspects of the document in question. There are several conclusions that can be drawn from a historical socio-linguistic perspective.

Firstly, the text of the tablet probably represents a case of *code-mixing* – according to Consani's definition (2014) –, which arose in the multilingual and multi-ethnic environment of the administration of Persepolis. Secondly, we can surmise that this "textual event" involved at least three different participants, of which we can attempt to provide an identikit, even though partial. Indeed, one was likely a Greek speaker; otherwise the use of Greek would be meaningless; maybe, given the type of transaction, he was the wine provider, that is, a merchant or his agent. On the other hand, we know that at least one person had reduced competence in Greek or perhaps knew only the script (Stolper and Tavernier 2007: 20). The following evidence supports this hypothesis:

- 1) the extreme conciseness of the text,
- 2) the presence of only two "real" Greek words: οἶνος is a *Kulturwort*, while δύο is glossed by the sign <II>,
- 3) the use of two loanwords, μάρης and Τέβητ.

Furthermore, if we consider the presence of the same seal impression on other tablets of the Archive, we can conjecture the involvement in this commercial transaction of a dignitary of the court or an official of the administration, who was most likely responsible for the supply of beverages and whose competence of Greek was probably limited.

On the other hand, the lack of competence in the Greeks and, above all, the link with the Aramaic's shown by the month name and, possibly, by the number <II>, might indicate that the person who actually created the document was a *teppir*, whose area of competence ranged from Aramaic script to another alphabetic writing system, i.e., Greek, even if the Greek text was written rather than painted on a clay tablet.

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