Hyperboreus 25:2 (2019) 340–350

INSCRIPTION ON A ROMAN STYLUS FROM LONDON*

Was ich mich auch sonst erkühnt...
Goethe

During excavations of the site for Bloomberg's European Headquarters in 2010–2014 by archaeologists from the Museum of London Archaeology, an iron stylus with a remarkable inscription was discovered. Its full-fledged publication is yet being prepared by R. Tomlin,[1] but two brief accounts, with a preliminary interpretation of the text, have already appeared in print.[2] In summer 2019 the stylus was displayed in an exhibition "Last Supper in Pompeii" at the Ashmolean Museum and gained much attention on the internet. Reports of the find along with photos (mostly retouched) and Tomlin's text and translation were iterated in digital media[3] and on Facebook.

The octagonal stylus, dated according to Tomlin to c. AD 62–70, is 132 mm long and 5 mm thick. Its four alternate facets are inscribed with letters ca 2 mm high. The inscription of curious content, almost certainly metrical, has survived in astonishingly good condition (almost all the words appear to be legible), which is indeed a gift of fortune to small epigraphy.

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* I am grateful for discussions of my paper at the Department for Classical Philology, Saint-Petersburg University (23.09.2019, the Students' Academic Circle) and St. Petersburg Classical Gymnasium (23.11.2019, the Alumni Conference on the occasion of its 30th anniversary) and in particular to Vsevolod Zeltchenko for his valuable comments. I learned about the stylus from his Facebook page.

[1] R. Tomlin, *Roman London's First Voices*..., Museum of London Archaeology Monographs (forthcoming). His first volume of MoLA's report on the excavations (Tomlin 2016) gives an impressive publication of wooden waxed tablets; some of these left imprints of texts due to cutting of the styli through wax into the wood.

[2] Tomlin 2018a; Hilts 2019, 14–15 (I owe this reference to R. Tomlin himself).

[3] Unretouched photo: https://danq.me/2019/08/22/stylus-souvenir/ (reposted from: https://www.livescience.com/66066-ancient-roman-pen-was-joke-souvenir.html, where now a combination of unretouched and retouched photo in GIF animation is available [09.12.2019]). The stylus became an internet meme because of its comparison to the jokes of modern souvenir industry ("…and all I got was this lousy T-shirt" *et sim.*).

I reproduce below, with R. Tomlin's generous permission,[4] his meticulous drawing, made with the help of enlarged photos and improved by examining the original under the microscope (see Fig.).

Stylus from London, repr. from: Tomlin 2018a, 6

The text is carefully inscribed in *litterae punctatae*.[5] Since the letters are very small, only 2 mm high, their forms and proportions differ from those I have seen, mostly punched on wide plates (e. g., the middle hastas of *A* and *E* on the stylus consist of only one dot). Noteworthy are the ones resembling cursive letters: *D* with a long peak and *Q* with a small circle and a long tail.[6]

The craftsman kept to wide gaps between the words and even intervals between the letters within each word, which makes the inscription easy to restore. Notably, the gaps between the words tend to be smaller at the beginning of lines and grow sprawling afterwards, as if at first the maker were concerned not to run out of space, and then it relieved him to see that there was still enough room[7] (in lines 1 and 2 he ended up punching the last letters on the *spatula*).

[4] I am immensely grateful to the *editor princeps* for generously giving permission to publish his drawing prior to his own full publication about the find (n. 1). I offer my interpretation in anticipation of further fruitful discussion.

[5] Hübner 1885, XXXVII; 322–326 *et saepius*.

[6] For D cf. Hübner 1885, 323–324, no. 932, 934.

[7] I owe this observation to Vsevolod Zeltchenko.

In line 3, too, large gaps did not allow the craftsman to accommodate *largius* in the same line, so that letters and gaps in line 4 are distinctly smaller than in lines 1–3. Had *largius* been placed in line 3, the letters would be almost evenly distributed between the four lines. The smallest gap between the words is the one between *largius* and *ut* in line 4: it approximately equals the width of a letter with intervals on both sides of it, and can perhaps be taken as a minimum possible gap between the words (in most cases gaps are larger and equal the width of several letters).

Tomlin's restoration and translation of the text runs as follows (he interprets the inscription as four lines of iambic senarii):[8]

> ab urbe v[e]n[i] munus tibi gratum adf(e)ro
> acul[eat]um ut habe[a]s memor[ia]m nostra(m)
> rogo si fortuna dar[e]t quo possem
> largius ut longa via ceu sacculus est (v)acuus
>
> I have come from the city. I bring you a welcome gift with a sharp point that you may remember me. I ask, if fortune allowed, that I might be able [to give] as generously as the way is long [and] as my purse is empty.

Most of the restorations proposed by Tomlin seem legitimate to me, so does the general interpretation of this dedicatory inscription as implying an apology for the cheapness of the gift (as well as the analogy with Catull. 13. 8 *plenus sacculus est aranearum*). However, I have my doubts about the restoration of single letters and, more importantly, objections to metrical interpretation and the translation of the last two lines.

I shall start with remarks on single letters, though, since I can only judge by the drawing, in most cases it is mere thinking aloud – the trump cards are in the hands of those who have done the autopsy.

– Line 4, *(v)acuus*: I do not find it likely that the initial *V* was omitted in the original. Since there is enough space for it on the drawing, one can assume that it was present and subsequently lost; it seems reasonable to restore *[v]acuus*. Some middle letters of the inscription obviously left no traces; why not suggest the same for initial or last ones?

– Line 2, *nostra(m)*: If the last *M* were omitted due to lack of space this would be surprising, given the rest has been punched very carefully.

[8] Tomlin 2018a, 6.

Is it not possible that *M* was instead pressed into at the very end, but has not survived?[9]

– Line 3, *dar[e]t*: this seems likely to me, but I wish I could say with certainty that the third letter might not admit *B* (if so, *dab[i]t*).

– Line 2, *acul[eat]um*: it fits into the context perfectly, but I have a slight concern as to whether there is sufficient space for three letters. It appears to me that even the smallest *E*, *A* and *T* of the inscription can only be accommodated into the gap end-to-end, with the intervals between the letters considerably smaller than in *ACVL...VM* or in the rest of the inscription. One might consider *acul[e]um*, but in this case the intervals left and right of *E* would be, on the contrary, too large. It seems that the 'spacing' would be impeccable if two letters were to be restored. The only possibilities I can think of are *Acul[ei]um* (= *Aquileium*, 'made in Aquileia')[10] and *acul[at]um* (< *acula,* deminutive of *acus*;[11] since, however, it would be a hapax derived from a very rarely attested form, I am reluctant to suggest it as a better option).

The crucial point for interpretation is the following:

– line 4, *ceu*: both the drawing and the photo convince me that the last letter is *N* much rather than *V*. The traces of the left hasta of *N* are clearly seen in the drawing and even the unretouched photo of low quality (see n. 3 above) makes at least one dot of it discernible. One might assume that it was punched by mistake (e.g., *E* in *adfero* in line 1, conversely, misses the dot that should stand for its lowest horizontal hasta); yet, even so, if the letter were interpreted as *V*, its right hasta would be almost vertical, which seems abnormal as compared to the other 17 *V* letters of the inscription.[12] Moreover, as I hope to show further, if we read *ceu*, the text will be problematic both metrically and semantically. Admittedly, if the letter is identified as *N*, its left hasta will be slightly slanted, while it is strictly vertical in *fortuna* and *longa*; but perhaps this is not a great obstacle.

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[9] *Memoria nostra* instead of *nostri* is remarkable, as it is typical of Medieval Latin. Cf., however, *CIL* 8. 9052. 6 *decentem memoriam meam*; Tac. *Ann*. 4. 38. 1 *...memoriae meae tribuent*; Scaev. *Dig*. 20 (*Dig*. 34. 1. 18. 5) *memoriam meam quotannis celebrent*. "Memoriae suae" in the dative appears to be more common (*CIL* VI 36058 *et saepius*; [Cic.] *Inv. in Sall.* 5 [genitive]; Tert. *De spect.* 10. 5; Fronto *ad Ant.* 3. 5. 9; Donat. *Interpr. Verg.* 1. 1. 5–9).

[10] In this case the gift would come from Aquileia instead of Rome. The adjective *Aquileius* is poetic (see *Th.l.l.* s.v.). For *Acul- = Aquil-* cf. *Aculeiensis* (*CIL* 3. 12925; *AE* 1953. 0093), Gk. Ἀκυλήιος. For *munus* with a geographic epithet cf., e.g., Mart. 13. 9. 1 *accipe Niliacam, Pelusia munera, lentem*.

[11] The meaning of *aculatum* could be either the same as *aculeatum* or else 'dot-punched with a sharp point'.

[12] *V* in *largius* might be an exception, but it has not survived in full.

The inscription is highly likely to be metric: (1) separate parts of it can be read as metric (line 1 is an impeccable iambic senarius, though the rest is more problematic); (2) it has some poetic diction (*fortuna daret*); (3) dedicatory inscriptions are generally much shorter and more formulaic; letters in prose also have strict forms of address;[13] if one cared to punch such a long message, it must have been regarded as aesthetically valuable.

Is it possible to read the inscription as four iambic senarii? If so, its metric interpretation would seem to be as follows:

> ab úrbe v[é]n[i] múnus tíbi gratum ádf(e)ró |
> ac*ú*l[eát]um ut hábe[a]s mémor[iá]m n*o*strá(m) |
> rogo sí fortúna dar[é]t quo póssem | lárgiús
> ut lónga vía ceu sáccul*ú*s est (v)*á*cuús.

This would imply harsh prosodic and metrical mistakes: short vowels in thesis (ac*ú*leatum, saccul*ú*s, v*á*cuus) and spondee in the last foot (n*o*stram).

Latin metric inscriptions, of course, often contain mistakes. A fleeting glance at iambic epigrams in Buecheler's *Carmina Latina Epigraphica* shows, however, that normally they have either more respectable or, on the contrary, much more dreadful meter and prosody than this (verses conglutinated from both hexameter and iambic senarius, wrong number of feet and so on). Spondee in the last foot is very rare. Short vowels in thesis do occur, but mostly in cases when they coincide with the spoken accent of the word.[14] I have found no examples when metrical ictus would fall on the last open syllable with a short vowel (like saccul*ú*s).

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[13] For extant dedicatory inscriptions on styli see, e. g., Fuegère 2000, 228–229. It is notable that some of them are difficult to interpret. The one from Rouffach (Haut-Rhin, France) is usually read *amori* / *ars mea* / *cum studio* / *procedet*. Whatever the exact meaning might be, I wonder if another sequence of facets might be intended: *ars mea* / *cum studio* / *procedet* / *amori*: this would give an incomplete hexameter (can *studio* <*dio*> be supplied?). Another from Cologne (*CIL* 13. 10027. 229) reads *hego* / *scribo* / *sinem* / *manum*. It is usually understood as *ego scribo sine manu*, with oddly blatant solecisms in *h*ego and *sinem* and accusative instead of ablative in *manum*. I like the idea of Clermont-Ganneau 1918, 250–260 (risky as it might seem), who explains *H* in *hego* and *M in sinem* as ligatures (H = *ET*, M = *MI*) and reads as follows: *sine mi* (= *mihi*) / *manum* / *et ego* / *scribo* ('give me the hand and I [will] write'). Finally, the one from Frankfurt has been explained either as *Felix* / *felicior* / *scribe* / *dicta* ('O 'Fortunate', write dictations more fortunately', Riese 1889, 67) or as *dicta* / *felix,* / *felicior* / *scribe* ('dictate fortunately, write more fortunately', Bücheler 1889, 119).

[14] Cf., e. g., *CIL* IV. 5092 (= Bücheler, *CLE* 44): *Amoris ignes si sentires, mulio,* / *magi(s) properares, ut videres Venerem.* / *diligo ~~puerum~~ iuvenem venustum; rogo, punge, iamus.* / *bibisti: iamus, prende lora et excute,* / *Pompeios defer, ubi dulcis est*

Though I cannot say with certainty that such an interpretation is impossible, it strikes me as very dubious. One would expect dedicatory verses that were dot-punched on a writing tool, probably with a help of a craftsman, to show more literacy than does graffiti on walls or funerary scribble of the poorly educated.

My strongest objections are, however, to the translation of lines 3–4. Whatever awkwardness there might be in the Latin phrasing, it cannot be taken to mean "I ask, if fortune allowed, that I might be able [to give][15] *as generously as* the way is long [*and*] as my purse is empty".

Both *ut* and *ceu* are problematic. *Ut* is rendered as if it were dependent on the comparative (as *quam ut*?), but the comparative itself is turned into a gradus positivus (= *...quo tam large possem, quam via est longa*). Further, *ceu* is taken as if it were *seu* or *aut* or even a copulative, like *atque*. Neither of these is legitimate, nor coherent.[16]

One might consider taking *ut* as causal,[17] but even so, the following *ceu* (which is very likely to be *CEN*) lacks any explanation.

Ceu with indicative can only mean something like 'as (in comparison)', and if it were to give any sense at all, it would be 'a long road is like an empty purse'. Yet, (1) this figure of speech would clearly be an impossible way of saying that 'long roads make purses empty'; (2) I have found no examples when *ceu* would introduce a predicate (like *tamquam*).

My suggestion for restoring and interpreting the text proceeds from the fact that *si fortuna daret quo possem largius* is an almost complete hexameter, while *sacculus est vacuus* is very much like a hemiepes. One might therefore consider the possibility that *si fortuna...* introduces a new section of the text in the metrical form of an elegiac distich. A combination of iambic senarii with elegiac disticha is attested, e. g., in *CLE* 1545.

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amor / *meus es [- - -?]*. Here *ubi* and *Venerem* have short vowel in thesis due to their spoken accent and line 3 does not succumb to metrical interpretation at all.

[15] Dimitrija Rašlijč (Belgrade) persuaded me against objecting to the ellipse of the verb by reference to *largiter posse* in Caes. *BG* 1. 18. 6.

[16] A minor oddity is that the parenthesis contains a *modus irrealis* (*si fortuna daret*, 'if fortune allowed'): one would expect 'if fortune allows' (*si fortuna dat* / *dabit* / *det*).

[17] I owe this idea to Elena Zheltova. See *OLD* s. v. *ut* B.21; Hofmann–Szantyr 1972, 635 (§ 342 Zus. α), 647–648 (§ 352); Karakasis 2005, 56–57; Löfstedt 1907, 11–14. Causal *ut* is a feature of Early Latin. Apart from formulaic expressions like *ille, ut erat* / *ut fuit*... (with the same subject in the main and the subordinate clause) it is very rare in Classical Latin, and in Late Latin it is mostly construed with subjunctive.

The first line gives a metrically correct iambic senarius, and the second line can also be interpreted as a iambic senarius, if we extend it to *rogo*. In this case if one reads *acul[eat]um*, it must be interpreted as an anapest with a synizesis (*-ea-* monosyllabic[18]); *Acul[ei]um* would give anapest with normal prosody.[19]

The clause *ut habeas* must then be taken not as *ut finale/consecutivum* depending on *adfero*, but as *ut obiectivum* depending on *rogo*:

> acul[e͡at]um. ut hábe[a]s mémor[iá]m nostrá(m) | rogó.
>
> ...I ask you to remember me.

The first part of the poem thus consists of two iambic senarii with three asyndetically joined clauses with verbs at the end (*...veni, ...fero...,*[20] *...rogo*). It is quite common in both Greek and Latin metric inscriptions for line endings not to correspond to verse endings.

In the following part it seems tempting to restore a hexameter by adding only one letter:

> si fortuna dar[e]t quo possem | largius ut[i]!

There is enough room for the last *[i]* and the following gap before *longa* (it might have been erased, since in *veni* and *memoriam* the restoring of *-i-* is certain).[21] As the following provides no apodosis, the conditional clause is to be taken as exclamatory (*si* introduces a wish like *utinam*):[22] 'If only Fortune would bestow upon me something that I could use more lavishly!' This gives good meter, good Latin and good sense that corresponds to the second half of the pentameter (*sacculus est vacuus*).

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[18] Cf. in the last foot of the hexameter: Hor. *Sat*. 2. 2. 21 *ostre͡a*; Ov. *Am*. 1. 8. 59 *aure͡a*; in the first foot: Verg. *Aen*. 1. 698, 7. 190 *aure͡a*; 10. 487 *una e͡ademque*. Cf. also *CIL* IV. 5092 (n. 14 above) *iamus* (= *eamus*). See Kühner–Holzweissig 1912, 147–149 (§ 30 aα, bβ, cα). I must admit that I have not found examples for monosyllabic *-ea-* in the middle syllable. It seems harsh, but possible that the preceding short open syllable remains unlengthened (*acŭle͡atum*): cf. Ter. *Heaut*. 1038, *Ad*. 275 *prohībe͡ant* (however, Gratwick 1999, 88 pro͡hibeant). For unlengthened short vowels before the synizesis of *-i-* Kühner–Holzweisig 1912, 148 (aγ Anm. 1) cite Plaut. *Trin*. 200 *mendacilŏqujus*; Lucil. 438 *domĭnja*; Lucr. 2. 991 *ŏrjundi*.

[19] Meter would allow *acul[e]um* as well, with three resolutions.

[20] The postposition of *acul[eat]um* makes *fero* an exception.

[21] The phrase *largius uti* is attested in Sall. *Cat*. 16, 4 *Sullani milites, largius suo usi* and Macrob. *Sat*. 6. 4, 22 *sed hac licentia largius usi sunt veteres, parcius Maro*.

[22] Cf. *OLD* s.v. 10; Hofmann–Szantyr 1972, 331 (§ 185 I Zus. α). Usually this kind of *si* is preceded by the exclamatory particle *o*, but sometimes goes without it.

Now one has to consider if the first half of the pentameter can be made out of the rest of line 4: *longa via CEN*. It seems that there is not enough space for a letter between *via* and *CEN* (possibly, with the exception of *I*, but even this seems unlikely). After *CEN*, however, there is enough space for any last letter with a following gap.

Longa via is likely to be the original text, as it fits into the context. It could be nominative, if the following word started with a long vowel and the last syllable in *via* were elided.[23] As this seems not to be the case, *longa via* must be ablative scanned monosyllabically with a synizesis (*vja*). This kind of synizesis is common in poetry,[24] though rare in two-syllable words.[25] Besides, it is attested in another metric inscription from Britain (also elegiac distich).[26]

As for *CEN*, I can suggest two ways of restoring it. The most obvious one would be *cen[a]*: arranging a banquet, as well as travelling, is a typical source of financial problems. It may be objected that if a banquet was held to celebrate one's arrival (*cena adventicia* or *adventoria*), this was normally arranged at the expense of friends.[27] One has therefore to assume that it refers to some particular circumstances, of which the recipient may have been aware.[28]

Due to synizesis and asyndeton in "*via, cena*" this pentameter looks much clumsier than the hexameter, yet it seems tolerable enough for a non-professional versifier.

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[23] *[I]cen[i]* might be an intriguing option, if the gap after *via* were long enough.

[24] In common nouns: Enn. *Ann*. 425 *insidjantes*; 89 *avjum*; Verg. *Aen*. 6. 33 *omnja*; 2. 492, 7. 105, 12. 706 *arjete*; 2. 16, 5. 663, 8. 599, 11. 667 *abjete*; *G*. 1. 482 *fluvjorum*; 4. 243 *steljo*; *Aen*. 2. 442, 5. 589 *parjetibus*; Hor. *Epod*. 12. 7 *vjetis*; *Sat*. 1. 7. 30 *vindemjator*; *Carm*. 3. 4. 41 *consilj(um)*; 3. 6. 6 *principj(um)*. See Kühner–Holzweissig 1912, 148–149 (§ 30 aγ, bγ, cβ).

[25] Enn. *Ann*. 212, 467 *prjus quam*; Ven. Fort. *Carm*. 2. 15. 8 *filius ut dicunt, quia est creatura dei*. Monosyllabic *vja* is attested in iambic senarii: Ter. *Heaut*. 101.

[26] *RIB* 1228 (= *CIL* 7. 998): *Somnio praemonitus miles hanc ponere iussit* / *aram quae Fabio nupta est Nymphis venerandis.* The verses are not easily intelligible; for a possible explanation see Tomlin 2018b, 208. The scansion of *milēs* may well imply lengthening of a short vowel in arsis rather than a prosodic mistake. Even for the same metric position (in the fourth foot) examples are abundant: e. g., Verg. *Aen*. 1. 478 *pulvīs*; 4. 222 *adloquitūr*; etc. See [Conington]–Nettleship 1898, 469–474 and other literature cited in Mynors 1990, 211 ad *G*. 3. 189 *invalidūs*.

[27] Plaut. *Bacch*. 94, 185–186, 536–537; Col. 12. 3. 4; Petr. *Sat*. 90. 5; Mart. 12 praef.; Suet. *Vit*. 13. 2.

[28] E.g., the donor might have arranged a *cena aditialis* on entering an office or treated his friends to dinner on some other occasion than arrival.

Another possibility would be *Cen[i]*, a vocative from *Cenius*.[29] In this case the pentameter is less awkward and contains a name of the addressee, which would be apt for a dedicatory epigram. Besides, *Ceni* would leave a longer and more accurate gap before *sacculus*. On the other hand, both the name and its monophthongised form is rare, and I admit to some hesitation in restoring it.

As a result I propose a new interpretation of the text that is based on restoring two additional letters and alternative punctuation. It consists of two iambic senarii and an elegiac distich:[30]

ab urbe v[e]n[i]. munus tibi gratum adf(e)ro |
acul[eat?]um. ut habe[a]s memor[ia]m nostra(m) | rogo.
si fortuna dar[e]t quo possem | largius ut[i]!
longa via cen[a?] sacculus est [v]acuus.

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l. 2 Acul[ei]um?
l. 4 Ceni (< Cenius)?

I have come from the city. I bring you a welcome gift
with a sharp point (?). I ask you to remember me.
If only Fortune would give me something that I could use more lavishly!
Due to long journey (and) the banquet (?), my purse is empty.

If my interpretation is correct, the author's versification was confident, but the tendency to stack established colloquial formulas into verse and resorting to synizesis (in *via* and, possibly, *acul[eat]um*)[31] betray the work of an amateur.

Whether the inscription implies that the donor came from Rome to Britain remains an open question: the addressee might have taken the gift with him on his way to Britain from another part of the Roman Empire.

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[29] See Šašel Kos 2018, 277 (on *Cenius* mentioned in *CIL* 3. 3985): "C(a)enius is a rare Latin *gentilicium*, attested a few times in Italy (three times in Tarquinia and once in Aquileia), twice in Gallia Narbonensis, once in Dalmatia and Sicilia, and three times in Pannonia"; for references, *ibid*. n. 57.

[30] Indecisive as it might seem, I prefer to add a question mark where I have doubts about the reading and translation.

[31] Though classical poetry admits this poetic license (n. 24 above), it is still taken not frequently and is naturally avoided in short epigrams.

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I interpret the metric inscription on the stylus from the Bloomberg excavations in London (Tomlin 2018a, 5–6) as a polymetron that consists of two iambic senarii and an elegiac distich. In *acul[eat]um*, if this restoration is correct, *-ea-* must be scanned monosyllabically with synizesis. In lines 2–3 I punctuate before *ut* and after *rogo*, so that the *ut* clause depends on *rogo*.

In line 4 I restore *ut[i],* which provides a hexameter: *si fortuna daret quo possem largius uti!* (*si* introduces a wish, like *utinam*). In the word that follows *via* the third letter must be identified as *N* (not as *V*); I suggest to restore either *cen[a]* (the ablative that is asyndetically coordinated with *via*) or *Cen[i]* (the vocative of *Cenius*). In either case *via* must be scanned monosyllabically with synizesis.

Стихотворная надпись на стилосе, обнаруженном при раскопках на месте штаб-квартиры “Блумберг” в Лондоне (Tomlin 2018a, 5–6), интерпретируется как полиметрическая, состоящая из двух ямбических сенариев и элегического дистиха. В слове acul[eat]um, если оно восстанавливается правильно, -ea- посредством синидзесы скандируется как один слог. В стк. 2–3 знак препинания следует ставить перед ut и после rogo; таким образом, придаточное с союзом ut зависит от rogo.

В стк. 4 предлагается восстанавливать ut[i], что дает гекзаметр: si fortuna daret quo possem largius uti! (в этом случае восклицательный союз si вводит желание, как utinam). В слове, которое следует за via, третью букву следует читать как N, а не как V. Для него предлагается два возможных восстановления: cen[a] (аблатив, однородный с via и соединенный с ним бессоюзной связью) или Cen[i] (вокатив имени Cenius). В том и другом случае via скандируется как один слог посредством синидзесы.

CONSPECTUS

Статьи сопровождаются резюме на русском и английском языке
Summary in Russian and English