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The Iguvine Tables and ritual language: Teaching culture through formula and variation

Italic rituals of purification by fire are attested in the Iguvine Tables (IT), a sacred text repertoire managed by the ‘Atiedian Brethren’ of the Umbrian city of Iguvium. These rituals can be understood in greater depth in light of the actual ritual language. This paper reviews earlier work by Nagy on the IT’s sacral language and reconsiders the syntax of the fire ritual prescriptively formulated in the Latin and native Umbrian alphabets. By studying the ritual language of Umbrian as attested in the formulaic descriptions—or, better, prescriptions—of the IT, we can gain insights into the ritual language of Latin, as reflected in the form and usage of some key Latin words, especially *purgo* ‘purify’. A key word in the IT fire ritual is *ahiti-* ‘movable fireplace’, central to Iguvium’s religious life (IT III 1ff.). First, *pir* ‘fire’ is kindled on the way leading *arven* ‘to the field’ (IT III 11-12). The *pir* ‘fire’ is then placed *ase* ‘on the altar’, which is *vuke* ‘in the grove’ (IT III 21-22). Then a sacrifice is made *iuvepatre* ‘to Jupiter’ at the right side of the altar (IT III 22-23) for the following four entities:

fratrusper atiieries ‘for the Atiedian Brethren’
ahtisper eikvasatis ‘for the *ahiti-s eikvasatis*
tutaper iuvina ‘for the people of Iguvium’
trefiper iuvina ‘for the *tribus* of Iguvium’

In the archaizing Latin *Acts of the Arval Brethren*, there are similar formulas: there too we find mention of a prescribed sacrifice *in luco* ‘in the grove’, and it takes place *in ara* ‘on the altar’, and *in foculo* ‘on a movable fireplace’. Moreover, the sacral Umbrian expression *ahtisper* ‘for the *ahiti-s*’ is parallel to the sacral Latin expression *pro aris focusque*. The actual fire ritual of the Umbrian IT is prescribed in two versions: one is written in the Latin alphabet (IT VIb 48-53), while the other is in the native Umbrian alphabet (IT Ib 10-16). The “Latin” version is marked by periphrasis of central elements of the ritual: for example, the noun *ahiti-* ‘movable fireplace’, regularly used in the “native” version, is avoided and replaced by *pufe pir entelust* ‘where the fire is placed’. Such ritualized periphrasis in referring to *ahiti-*, the sacred receptacle of communal *pir* ‘fire’, is compared with other periphrastic expressions referring to sacred objects of central importance to the community. An essential point of comparison is the Latin verb *purgo* ‘purify’. While the Umbrian noun *ahiti-*, designating a receptacle of sacrificial *pir* ‘fire’, is derived from a verb cognate with Latin *ago*, the Latin verb *purgo* is derived from **purigo*, derived from the syntactic combination of **pur* with *ago* in the sacral sense of ‘carry fire’. That sacral sense is still preserved in the fire ritual of the IT. Comparative linguistic approaches (applied here to ritual periphrasis, variation, and formulaic language) open up broader horizons of precise cultural reconstruction. The Latin *Arval Brethren* and Umbrian IT evidence together supply a rich source of illumination of the religious, historical, ideological and linguistic development of central Italy, benefiting and deepening the teaching of the Latin language and its Italic cultural context.