



ATELLANA ACTORS AND PLAYWRIGHTS IN THE EPIGRAPHIC EVIDENCE*

ABSTRACT

This contribution provides a study of the fabula Atellana from an epigraphic perspective. It brings together the existing inscriptions related to this dramatic genre, explaining the challenges that one faces when trying to identify possible Atellana actors. It also examines the status of Atellana performers and playwrights, contrasting the information provided by literary sources, especially Livy, with the data obtained from inscriptions, which indicate an increasing professionalization of Atellana actors in the first century A.D. Finally, this article poses some questions concerning the development, continuity and geographical diffusion of Atellan comedy in the Imperial era in the light of the epigraphic material and also in comparison with the evidence available for other popular shows, specifically mime and pantomime, which suggests that by the second century A.D. the Atellana was no longer performed on public stages but was rather represented in private settings and studied for its linguistic and rhetorical peculiarities.

Keywords: *fabula Atellana*; epigraphy; Roman theatre; Roman actors; Roman playwrights; imperial drama

INTRODUCTION

Originating, as its name implies, from the Campanian city of Atella, the *fabulae Atellanae* are often considered to be one of the few native dramatic traditions of ancient Italy, although they were probably influenced by the strong dramatic tradition of Magna Graecia and Sicily.¹ Originally performed in Oscan, they usually consisted of short comic plays with a small cast of stock characters, generally four (*Maccus* the stupid man, *Bucco* the brawler, *Dossennus* the cunning hunchback and *Pappus* the old man), easily identified by their characteristic masks.² Featuring possibly coarse and vivid

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¹ See P. Frassinetti, *Fabula Atellana. Saggio sul teatro popolare latino* (Genoa, 1953). Regarding the extent of the influence on Atellan farce of Greek popular drama from Magna Graecia and Sicily, especially from the *phylakes* plays, see B. Höttemann, ‘Phlyakenposse und Atellane’, in G. Vogt-Spira (ed.), *Beiträge zur mündlichen Kultur der Römer* (Tübingen, 1993), 89–112 and P.G. McC. Brown, ‘Greek comedy and the Atellana’, in R. Raffaelli and A. Tontini (edd.), *L’Atellana preletteraria. Atti della seconda giornata di studi sull’Atellana, Casapuzzano di Orta di Atella (CE), 12 novembre 2011* (Urbino, 2013), 7–27.

² See F. Graziani, ‘I personaggi dell’Atellana’, *RFIC* 24 (1896), 388–92; Frassinetti (n. 1), 70–2; R. Rieks, ‘Mimus und Atellanae’, in E. Lefèvre (ed.), *Das römische Drama* (Darmstadt, 1978), 348–77, at 352–3.

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language and portraying low-life situations, Atellan plays might have been introduced in Rome shortly after Atella fell within the Roman sphere of influence in 313 B.C.: now performed in Latin, Atellan farce quickly became a favourite of the public, and by the late third century B.C. it was already exerting a considerable influence on Plautine comedy.³

Being short and light-hearted, Atellan plays were usually performed as an afterpiece (*exodium*) to tragedies,⁴ and this may have been a reason why late antique grammarians occasionally compared them to Attic satyr plays.⁵ Additionally, at the beginning of the first century B.C., a period of decline of the *fabula palliata* but also an era of experimentation with new forms of drama, some playwrights tried to revive Atellan farce, conferring a literary status on it.⁶ Thus L. Pomponius of Bononia and Novius were credited with the creation of a new literary form of *Atellana*, although only 115 titles along with some 320 verses have survived, mostly preserved by grammarians interested in the linguistic features of the plays in question.⁷ The title of one of the *fabulae Atellanae* written by Novius, *Exodium*, suggests that these more elaborate plays were nevertheless performed as *exodia*, probably consisting of short pieces as well. It is impossible to know to what extent these new literary creations differed from the traditional *Atellana*, but the extant fragments of Pomponius and Novius allow us an insight into the coarse humour of the genre. In the same period, even some members of the Roman aristocracy devoted their leisure not only to watching Atellan plays but also to writing them: the dictator Sulla is said to have composed, probably during his retirement in Capua, some σατυρικὰ κωμῳδία in Latin, most likely Atellan plays (Nicolaus Damascenus *apud* Ath. *Deipn.* 261c = *FGH* 2.95, fr. 75 Jacoby).⁸ We might have news of yet another Atellan playwright in the first half of

³ On the preliterary *Atellana*, see S. Monda, 'La preistoria dell'Atellana nelle fonti storiche e letterarie', in R. Raffaelli and A. Tontini (edd.), *L'Atellana preletteraria: Atti della seconda giornata di Studi sull'Atellana, Casapuzzano di Orta di Atella (CE), 12 novembre 2011* (Urbino, 2013), 95–124. Regarding the influence of Atellan comedy on Plautus, see W. Beare, 'Plautus and the *fabula Atellana*', *CR* 44 (1930), 165–8 and, more recently, E. Lefèvre, 'Atellana and *Palliata*: gli influssi reciproci', in R. Raffaelli and A. Tontini (edd.), *L'Atellana letteraria. Atti della prima giornata di studi sull'Atellana, Succivo (CE), 30 ottobre 2009* (Urbino, 2010), 15–36; R. López Gregoris, 'Máscaras y personajes en la *palliata*: las máscaras de la *Atellana* y su influencia en la *palliata*', *Perífrasis* 18 (2017), 134–49; C. Panayotakis, 'Native Italian drama and its influence on Plautus', in M.T. Dinter (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Roman Comedy* (Cambridge, 2019), 32–46.

⁴ See Livy 7.2. See also John the Lydian, from the sixth century A.D., but referring to a much older source, possibly Varro (John the Lydian, *Mag.* 1.40): Ἀτελλάνη δὲ ἐστὶν ἡ τῶν λεγομένων ἐξοδιῶν ... μιμικὴ ἢ νῦν δῆθεν σωζομένη. See Monda (n. 3), 116–19.

⁵ Diomedes in *CGL* 1.489.32–490.3 and 1.490.18–20 Keil; Aphthonius in *GGL* 6.82.1–10 Keil (Keil ascribes the passage to Marius Victorinus). See Monda (n. 3), 111–13.

⁶ See S. Monda, 'Il teatro comico di I secolo a.C. tra innovazione e tradizione', *Aevum Antiquum* 20 (2020), 85–96.

⁷ See the edition of P. Frassinetti, *Fabularum Atellanarum fragmenta* (Torino, 1953), which is still a reference point for *Atellana* studies. S. Monda, 'Per una nuova edizione dei frammenti dell'Atellana', in R. Raffaelli and A. Tontini (edd.), *L'Atellana letteraria. Atti della prima giornata di studi sull'Atellana, Succivo (CE), 30 ottobre 2009* (Urbino, 2010), 69–82 announced a new edition of the *Atellana* fragments which has not been published yet. Another edition is underway by C. Panayotakis, who has also edited the remaining fragments of Decimus Laberius' mimes: C. Panayotakis, *Decimus Laberius: The Fragments* (Cambridge, 2010). On the language of the *Atellana*, see W.G.C. de Melo, 'The language of Atellan farce', in R. Raffaelli and A. Tontini (edd.), *L'Atellana letteraria. Atti della prima giornata di studi sull'Atellana, Succivo (CE), 30 ottobre 2009* (Urbino, 2010), 121–55.

⁸ See C. Garton, 'Sulla and the theatre', *Phoenix* 18 (1964), 137–56 (= C. Garton, *Personal Aspects of the Roman Theatre* [Toronto, 1972], 143–67).

the first century B.C.: a much-discussed passage from Varro's *De lingua Latina* reproduces a line from an otherwise unknown Aprissius, which might come from an Atellan play (Varro, *Ling.* 6.68 *io bucco! :: quis me iubilat? :: uicinus tuus antiquus!*).⁹

In a letter written in 55 B.C. Cicero shows that Atellan farce was still performed in Rome (Cic. *Fam.* 7.1.3), although at the same time the genre started to suffer from the intense competition of mime, which by 46 B.C. was replacing the *Atellana* in *exodia* (Cic. *Fam.* 9.16.7). Mime was also undergoing a similar process to that experienced by Atellan farce a few decades earlier, as the mimographers Decimus Laberius and Publilius were attempting to raise it to the category of a literary genre; the popularity of mime would further increase to the point of dominating, together with the newly renovated form of pantomime, the Graeco-Roman stage in the centuries to come.¹⁰ This was a slow development, however, since numerous sources clearly demonstrate the continuity of Atellan plays in the first century A.D., when new playwrights are documented: an anonymous writer executed by Caligula for an excessively ambiguous verse and a certain Mummius, of whom only three fragments have survived.¹¹ The latter is said to have revived the genre after a period of decline since the days of Pomponius and Novius; when Mummius lived is unknown, perhaps in the Age of Augustus, who, according to Frassinetti, might have tried to revive the genre as part of his restoration of Italic traditions, or perhaps later, under the Julio-Claudians, as Bardon preferred.¹² More importantly, many *Atellana* performances, both on public stages and in private houses, are still attested in the first century A.D., which shows the favour still enjoyed by the *Oscum ... ludicrum, leuissimae apud uulgum oblectationis*, as Tacitus describes Atellan farce (Tac. *Ann.* 4.14).¹³ That it was considered to be popular entertainment as opposed to higher drama is also to be inferred from Petronius' *Satyricon*: Trimalchio, having recently bought a company of comic actors, confesses that he makes them perform Atellan farces nevertheless (Petron. *Sat.* 53.13); later, a slave boy recites the *Aeneid* but mistakenly mixes in some Atellan verses, much to the narrator's dismay (Petron. *Sat.* 68.4–5).¹⁴

References to public performances of *fabulae Atellanae* are also attested in the last decades of the first century A.D.: Juvenal alludes to Atellan plays still staged under

⁹ See Frassinetti (n. 1), 126–7.

¹⁰ On the development of literary mime, see Panayotakis (n. 7), 16–32 and L. Cicu, *Il mimo teatrale greco-romano. Lo spettacolo ritrovato* (Rome, 2012), 39–46. On pantomime, see E.J. Jory, 'The literary evidence for the beginnings of imperial pantomime', *BICS* 28 (1981), 147–61.

¹¹ Macrobius, *Sat.* 1.10.2–3. See Frassinetti (n. 7), 78–9. For the development of the *Atellana* in the Imperial period, see S. Monda, 'La cosiddetta Atellana imperiale', *Rationes Rerum. Rivista di filologia e storia* 6 (2015), 121–47, at 129–47.

¹² See Frassinetti (n. 7), 14 and 95–6; and H. Bardon, *La littérature latine inconnue. Tome II: L'Époque impériale* (Paris, 1956), 128. See also A. López and A. Pociña, *Comedia romana* (Madrid, 2007), 304 and Monda (n. 11), 126–8.

¹³ See Suet. *Tib.* 45 (of an Atellan play staged as an *exodium*), *Cal.* 27, *Ner.* 39.3, *Galb.* 13. Monda (n. 11), 130 translates the *leuissimae apud uulgum oblectationis* in Tacitus as 'di scarso interesse presso il popolo', but *leuissimae* should be understood as 'frivolous', 'trivial'; a correct translation is given in a more recent paper by the same author: S. Monda, 'Maschera e comicità nel teatro popolare italo', *Aevum Antiquum* 17 (2017), 25–48, at 35. Strabo (5.3.6) speaks of plays performed in Rome in Oscan, which must refer to *fabulae Atellanae*; he uses the verb μιμολογεῖσθαι to describe such performances, mime perhaps being the closest equivalent to Atellan comedy that came to his mind.

¹⁴ The first passage shows that *comoedi* were not expected to perform *Atellana*: see M. Hanses, *The Life of Comedy after the Death of Plautus and Terence* (Ann Arbor, 2020), 95–6. Cf. Plin. *Ep.* 9.17 for a similar contrast between 'high' and 'low' drama (comedy and mime).

Domitian as *exodia*, although not in Rome, where mime and pantomime had by then become the main form of entertainment, but in the Italian countryside.¹⁵ By the second century A.D. the *Atellana* must have experienced a serious decline, since references to this sort of entertainment virtually disappear. Pliny the Younger, who frequently alludes to performances or recitations of New Comedy, mime and pantomime in banquets, never mentions Atellan farce.¹⁶ Perhaps he felt that the *Atellana* did not reach the literary quality and the moral appeal of New Comedy and it is possible that it was relegated as a curiosity of an earlier era; the *Historia Augusta* reports that Hadrian always presented in banquets, according to circumstances, *tragoedias*, *comoedias*, *Atellanas*, *sambucas*, *lectores*, *poetas* (*HA, Hadr.* 26.4), but given the emperor's antiquarian tastes it is likely that the Atellan pieces alluded to in this passage are the literary plays of Pomponius and Novius rather than the vulgar non-literary plays that were once so beloved of the public. Similarly, in a letter to his teacher Fronto written in A.D. 143, the future emperor Marcus Aurelius explains that he spent many days studying theatrical plays, including the *Nouianae Atellaniolae*, 'the short Atellan farces of Novius'; undoubtedly, the young prince was looking at them as a collection of texts of a bygone dramatic genre, full of linguistic curiosities, such as the *Scipionis oratiunculae* to which he also devoted his time (Fronto, *Epist. ad M. Caes.* 2.8.3, page 29 van den Hout²). In doing so, Marcus Aurelius was following the advice of his teacher, who suggested that he should study the plays of Pomponius and Novius as part of his rhetorical training (Fronto, *Epist. ad M. Caes.* 4.3.2, page 57 van den Hout²).¹⁷ The *Atellana* continued to be studied at least in the second half of the second century A.D.: Apuleius' familiarity with its stock characters in his *Apology*, where he calls his opponents *Macci* and *Buccones* (*Apul. Apol.* 81.4), most probably came from the study of literary plays rather than from attending stage performances.

In the third and fourth centuries A.D., however, references to Atellan plays occur mostly in the works of grammarians, whose vague remarks reveal a lack of direct knowledge of the genre, perhaps with the exception of the erudite Nonius Marcellus, who seems to have had at least a number of plays by Pomponius and Novius in his library.¹⁸ When other authors mention Atellan farce, it is usually in connection with mime, which by then had already superseded it (*Tert. De spect.* 17.2; *Arn. Adu. nat.*

¹⁵ Juv. 3.172–6, who speaks of *pars magna Italiae*. Juv. 6.71–3 also explicitly connects the *Atellana* with *exodia*. See R. Mauri, 'Atellane e spettacoli paraletterari nelle *Satire* di Giovenale', *Aevum Antiquum* 4 (2004), 279–85; F. Loffredo, 'Preletterario, popolare, contadino. Tre categorie "atellaniche" su cui riflettere. I', in R. Raffaelli and A. Tontini (edd.), *L'Atellana preletteraria. Atti della seconda giornata di studi sull'Atellana, Casapuzzano di Orta di Atella (CE), 12 novembre 2011* (Urbino, 2013), 125–39, especially at 132–3; and Hanses (n. 14), 263–4. Regarding the contemporary success of mime, see Mart. 9.28 and Juv. 1.35–6, and cf. Suet. *Dom.* 15 on the performer Latinus, a favourite of Domitian.

¹⁶ Cf. Plin. *Ep.* 5.3, 7.24, 9.17, etc. See Hanses (n. 14), 102–12; T. Hawkins and C.W. Marshall, 'Ignorance and the reception of comedy in antiquity', in C.W. Marshall and T. Hawkins (edd.), *Athenian Comedy in the Roman Empire* (London and New York, 2016), 1–23, at 12–18; and K. Dunbabin, *Theater and Spectacle in the Art of the Roman Empire* (Ithaca and London, 2016), 51–7.

¹⁷ Cf. Fronto, *Epist. ad Anton.* 4.5, page 106 van den Hout². See M. De Nonno, 'I grammatici e la tradizione dell'Atellana letteraria', in R. Raffaelli and A. Tontini (edd.), *L'Atellana letteraria. Atti della prima giornata di studi sull'Atellana. Succivo (CE) 30 ottobre 2009* (Urbino, 2010), 37–67, at 38–40.

¹⁸ See De Nonno (n. 17), 40–67.

7.33; Jer. *Ep.* 52.2);¹⁹ that this genre would eventually be forgotten and equated to mime is also suggested by some glossaries that define *Atellana* actors (*Atellani*) as mimes (CGL 5.441.49; 5.492.11; 5.563.3 *Atellanus mimus theatralis*; 5.342.11 *Atellanus uel mimus histrio*), as well as by the glossary of Ps.-Philoxenus (CGL 2.22.40–2 *Atellani σκηνικοί, ἀρχαιολόγοι, βιολόγοι*, the last two terms being technical denominations for specializations of mime).²⁰

Literary sources do not contribute much to our knowledge of individual actors: the only named *Atellani* are Datus, who dared mock the deaths of Claudius and Agrippina the Younger in front of Nero and was consequently exiled (Suet. *Ner.* 39), and Urbicus, mentioned by Juvenal (Juv. 6.71).²¹ However, Livy's famous excursus on the origins of drama in Rome offers some extremely interesting remarks on the status of *Atellani* in his time (Livy 7.2); according to the historian, a major difference between the *Atellana* and other dramatic genres in Rome was that the former was staged from its beginnings by amateur actors from among the youth of Rome and that, consequently, since they were not tainted by professional performers, the *Atellani* were still in Livy's day the only actors who were not considered *infames* and thus were not excluded from service in the army nor were they removed from their tribe.²² Reproduced by Valerius Maximus as well (Val. Max. 2.4.4), Livy's statement that the *Atellani* enjoyed some sort of special consideration stands in stark contrast to the situation of other stage performers, usually slaves or freedmen subjected to *infamia*.²³ Moreover, according to Festus, *Atellana* actors were the only performers allowed to keep their mask on after the show had ended so as to conceal their identity and preserve their honour (Festus, page 238 Lindsay).²⁴ In spite of this, it is clear, as will be shown below, that *Atellana* actors gradually became more professionalized and that by the first century A.D. some of the privileges that the *Atellani* had enjoyed seem to have disappeared.

¹⁹ According to Monda (n. 11), 142–3 and 146, this would prove that *Atellan* comedy was still staged in the third and fourth centuries A.D., which seems excessive to me. These authors might have been familiar with the *Atellana* only through the study of literary plays; the references to the genre that we find in them are rather, as Monda admits, 'parte di un topos ormai ben consolidato nella polemica verso i giochi e gli spettacoli da teatro'. Their audience perhaps could not always understand these references, hence the association of the *Atellana* with mime, a familiar equivalent. The *exodiarii* attested by Ammianus Marcellinus (28.4.33) in the fourth century were probably mimes.

²⁰ Cf. again John the Lydian, *Mag.* 1.40, cited in n. 4 above. See also J. Irmscher, 'Satire, mimus, togata, *Atellana* – in Byzanz?', *Dioniso* 61 (1991), 283–7, at 284–5. Regarding ἀρχαιολόγοι and βιολόγοι, see R. Maxwell, 'The documentary evidence for ancient mime' (Diss., University of Toronto, 1993), 27–31 and V. González Galera, 'Actors de mim i mimògrafs en la documentació antiga: estudi i corpus documental' (Diss., University of Barcelona, 2019), 45–8.

²¹ Monda (n. 3), 120–1.

²² Monda (n. 3), 101–5 with bibliography in n. 18.

²³ See M. Ducos, 'La condition des acteurs à Rome. Données juridiques et sociales', in J. Blänsdorf (ed.), *Theater und Gesellschaft im Imperium Romanum* (Tübingen, 1990), 19–33; H. Leppin, *Histrionen. Untersuchungen zur sozialen Stellung von Bühnenkünstlern im Westen des römischen Reiches zur Zeit der Republik und des Principats* (Bonn, 1992), 36–44 for their juridical condition and 71–83 for their status as *infames*; C. Hugoniot, 'De l'infamie à la contrainte, évolution du statut de l'acteur dans l'Antiquité grecque et romaine', in C. Hugoniot, F. Hurlet and S. Milanezi (edd.), *Le statut de l'acteur dans l'Antiquité grecque et romaine* (Tours, 2004), 161–81.

²⁴ Festus is referring to the *Personata*, a comedy by Naevius, which, because of the lack of comic actors, was supposedly performed by *Atellani*, who were also called *personati*. Monda (n. 3), 101 is, however, sceptical about the veracity of this statement, considering it perhaps an imaginative explanation of the title of the comedy.

THE EPIGRAPHIC EVIDENCE

In dealing with Atellan farce, most attention, as is natural, has been devoted to the extant fragments and to information preserved by literary sources, but inscriptions concerning this sort of entertainment have largely been neglected.²⁵ Only F. Pezzella has recently attempted to collect some of the available epigraphic material in a broader study centred on ancient Atella and its inhabitants, whereas G.L. Gregori in a paper on the denominations of actors in Latin has focussed only on the epigraphic evidence from Rome.²⁶ However, attention to inscriptions has proved to be of great use in the study of other non-traditional dramatic genres, such as mime or pantomime, for which unfortunately no complete play or libretto has survived.²⁷ Epigraphic sources offer relevant information about these genres (for example geographical and chronological spread, artistic specialization and organization of the performers), and a similar approach might be adopted regarding the *Atellana*.²⁸ Nevertheless, the amount of epigraphic evidence for the *Atellana* is unfortunately much more limited than that for other genres, but it is still useful for our understanding of its development and for our knowledge of the status of the *Atellani* in the Imperial period. It must be noted, though, that, when dealing with epigraphic material concerning any sort of dramatic entertainment, we are faced with some limitations: inscriptions do not usually offer new readings to already known lines or even new fragments (with some lucky exceptions),²⁹ but they normally refer to performers or playwrights at the most, which still constitutes precious testimony for the theatrical culture of the period. Additionally, it is not always easy to identify *Atellana* actors, since some of the terms by which they were referred to were also used in other contexts as *cognomina* or as demonyms. That is the case of the term *Atellanus*, which is usually employed to indicate an *Atellana* performer but can also state someone's provenance from Atella (see *TLL* 2.1016.37–58). The word occurs on a marble slab from Rome, dated to the first half of the first century A.D. and now preserved in the Museo Archeologico Nazionale of Naples (*CIL* 6.26806 = *ILS* 5218 = *EDR* 141563; see *fig. 1*).³⁰

²⁵ On iconographic sources regarding the *Atellana*, see A. Santucci, 'L'Atellana nella cultura figurativa: presenze/assenze e consonanze di temi', in R. Raffaelli and A. Tontini (edd.), *L'Atellana preletteraria. Atti della seconda giornata di studi sull'Atellana, Casapuzzano di Orta di Atella (CE), 12 novembre 2011* (Urbino, 2013), 61–93.

²⁶ F. Pezzella, '«Addenda et errata corrige» al corpus delle iscrizioni latine inerenti *Atella* e gli *Atellani*', *Rassegna Storica dei Comuni* 43/200–2 (2017), 51–83; G.L. Gregori, 'I protagonisti della scena teatrale nella documentazione epigrafica di Roma', *Scienze dell'Antichità* 12 (2004–2005), 575–90, at 576–8 (= *Ludi et munera. 25 anni di ricerche sugli spettacoli d'età romana. Scritti vari rielaborati e aggiornati con la collaborazione di Giorgio Crimi e Maurizio Giovagnoli* [Milan, 2011], 179–94, at 181–3).

²⁷ The only extant pantomime libretto is perhaps the 'Barcelona *Alcestis*' (*P.Barco*. Inv. nos. 158ab–161ab); see E. Hall, 'Is the "Barcelona *Alcestis*" a Latin pantomime libretto?', in E. Hall and R. Wyles, *New Directions in Ancient Pantomime* (Oxford, 2008), 258–82.

²⁸ See Maxwell (n. 20) and González Galera (n. 20) for mime, and S. Evangelisti, *I pantomimi nelle città dell'Italia romana* (Rome, 2022) for pantomimes. Leppin (n. 23) also includes *Atellana* actors in his catalogue, but he does not draw any conclusions about the development of the genre.

²⁹ See *CIL* 6.37635, which has preserved two lines from Laberius' *Colax*, the second of which is attested only in this inscription: Panayotakis (n. 7), 185, fr. 17(a) and 188–9; and also *CIL* 5.5889 and 14.4254, with titles of pantomime plays.

³⁰ G. Camodeca and H. Solin, *Catalogo delle iscrizioni latine del Museo Nazionale di Napoli (ILMN). Vol. I. Roma e Latium* (Naples, 2000), 139, no. 361; 69, no. 4252; and *Suppl.It. Imagines – Roma IV* 4252.



FIG. 1. Inscription of C. Statio Gemellus (image courtesy of the Ministero della Cultura – Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli)

C(aio) Statio Gemello
Atellano Villia
Secunda cont(ubernali) fec(it).

This funerary inscription, most probably from a columbarium, was set up for the *Atellanus* C. Statio Gemellus. The lack of any further information about the deceased makes it uncertain whether Gemellus was an actor of the *Atellana* or whether he simply came from Atella.³¹ It is interesting to note that, although his patronymic is omitted, Gemellus was probably a freedman: the woman who erected the inscription, Villia Secunda, refers to Gemellus as her *contubernalis*, a term usually employed by slaves rather than by an *uxor*. If he were an *Atellana* actor, he could hardly have formed part of the freeborn Roman *iuventus* mentioned by Livy but must have been a professional performer.³²

The word *Atellanus* may also appear on a Greek fragmentary stele dated to the second or third century A.D., found in Athens, near the *Asklepieion* and the Theatre of Dionysus, now preserved in the National Archaeological Museum of Athens (*IG* 2².2986):

[.]Ο[- - -]
Ἡλιό[δωρος - - -]
Σάτυ[ρος - - -]
Ἀτελλ[ανός (?) - - -]
5 [.]ΔΙΑΙΔ[- - -]
[.] + [- - -]ΤΙ[- - -]

Consisting of what appears to be a list of participants in some sort of dramatic festival, it was considered to belong to the same stele as *IG* 3.1280c, which also contains a list of names, including those of two κωμῳδοί, one ἀρχαιολόγος and two παρωδοί,

³¹ See Gregori (n. 26), 578, who also considers it to be uncertain. I. Kajanto, *The Latin Cognomina* (Rome, 1982²), 191 regards *Atellanus* as a second *cognomen* or perhaps an ethnic indication. Pezzella (n. 26), 70 considers Gemellus a possible *Atellana* actor, whereas Leppin (n. 23), 245 regards him as a stage performer.

³² See Leppin (n. 23), 27, who also states that by the Imperial era there must have been professional *Atellana* actors.

although this was later convincingly rejected by J. Robert and L. Robert.³³ In line 4, the inscription mentions what seems to be an Ἀτελλανός; it is possible that it is a personal name³⁴ or perhaps an indication of provenance, but an allusion to an *Atellana* actor can safely be excluded on the grounds of the dating of the inscription and the setting in which it was found, in a Greek-speaking context where Atellan farces could hardly have been staged.³⁵

Luckily, other inscriptions offer fewer doubts in relation to possible associations with Atellan farce. Among these, there is a fragmentary marble slab from Labici, Latium, now unfortunately lost, although a squeeze was made before its disappearance. The text can be dated to the first or second century A.D. on palaeographic grounds (*CIL* 14.2771 = *CLE* 236 = *EDR* 158269; see [fig. 2](#)):³⁶

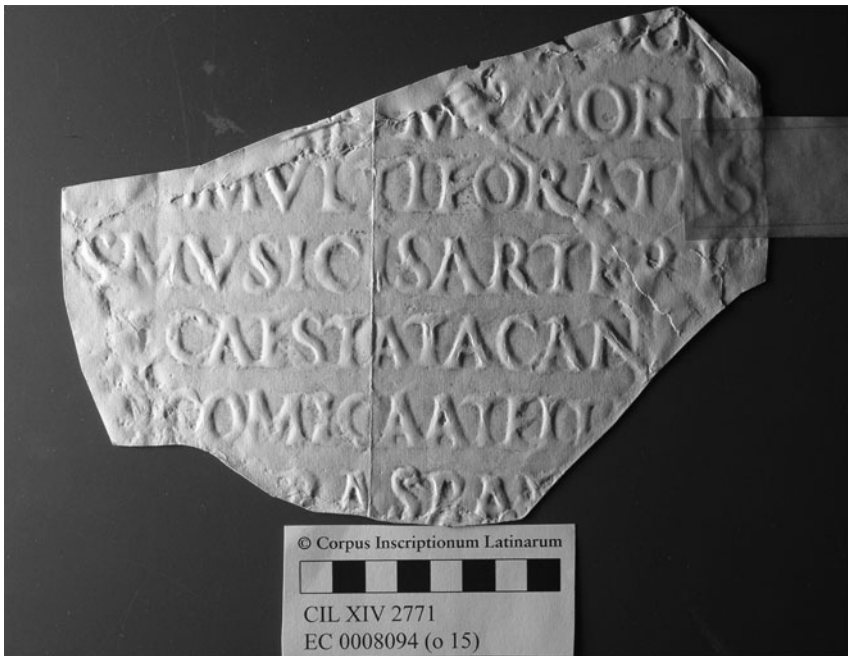


FIG. 2. Cast of the metrical inscription of an anonymous *Atellanus* (image courtesy of *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*, EC0008094).

 [- - -]SO + [- - -]
 [- - -] memoria [- - -]
 [- - -] + S multi foratas [- - -]

³³ See M.T. Mitsos, 'Some lists of Athenian epebes: VI.1', in D.W. Bradeen and M.F. McGregor (edd.), *Φόρος. Tribute to Benjamin Dean Meritt* (Locust Valley, NY, 1974), 117–20, at 120 no. 6; and J. Robert and L. Robert, 'Bulletin épigraphique', *REG* 89 (1976), 415–595, at 456 no. 214.

³⁴ Cf. *AE* 1971, 351 and *IDR* 2.67, which also attest the *cognomen Atellanus*.

³⁵ The *Atellana* fragment cited by Suet. *Ner.* 39 (= Frassinetti [n. 7], *Incerti Nominis Reliquiae*, fr. 5) is certainly in Greek (ὕγιανε πάτερ, ὕγιανε μήτηρ), but it was most likely a joke inserted in a play written for the most part in Latin: see Monda (n. 11), 138.

³⁶ See also Pezzella (n. 26), 51–3.

5 [- - -]S musicis arteria[- - -]
 [- - -]+ caestata CAN[- - -]
 [- - -] comica Atella[- - -]
 [- - -]PAS PA + [- - -]

Most likely a funerary inscription, it contains the remains of a metrical text, probably in hexameters. H. Dessau suggested in *CIL* the following reconstruction:

 [- - -]son[ore - - -]
 [- - - cum teneret] memoria [- - -]
 [- - - nomin]is multi foratas [- - -]
 [- - -]S musicis arteria[s - - -]
 5 [- - -]+ caestata can[tica - - -]
 [- - -] comica Atella[- - -]
 [- - -]PAS PA + [- - -]

Given the state of the inscription, any reconstruction should be treated with caution (for instance *CLE* line 5 [- - - *ips*]e caestata can[ebat - - -], line 6 [- - -] comica Atella[nica - - -]), but it is clear that it refers to a stage artist who performed in Atellan farces. Whether he was an actor, a playwright or rather an accompanying musician, as is perhaps suggested in line 4 by *musicis*, is unknown, but the inscription serves as a reminder of the importance of music in the *Atellana* at least in the Imperial era.³⁷

Apart from the term *Atellanus*, *Atellana* actors could also be referred to by the character that they usually played. Some inscriptions also attest to this habit, although a cautious approach is again needed. The most relevant inscription is another marble slab, dated to the first century A.D., discovered in the catacombs of SS Gordianus and Epimachus in Rome, where it had been reused, and now set in the walls of the portico of Santa Maria in Trastevere (*CIL* 6.10105 = *ILS* 5219 = *CLE* 823 = *EDR* 108850; see [fig. 3](#)).³⁸



FIG. 3. Epitaph of the *Maccus* M. Annaeus Longinus (image courtesy of Santa Maria in Trastevere, Segreteria parrocchiale).

³⁷ Cf. Suet. *Ner.* 39 and *Galb.* 13, with allusions to *cantica* in the *Atellana*. Frassinetti (n. 1), 130–1 and Monda (n. 11), 133–6 note that *cantica* might have been an innovation of the imperial *Atellana*, given the lack of lyric metres in the extant fragments of Pomponius and Novius.

³⁸ See Leppin (n. 23), 256–7, who mistakenly dates it to the second rather than to the first century A.D., and Gregori (n. 26), 577.

M(arcus) Annaeus M(arcus) f(ilius) Esq(uilina)
 Longinus Maccus uixit
 dulcissime cum suis ad supremam diem.
 C(aius) Gaius Primigenius uix(it) ann(os) VII.
 5 Desine iam mater lacrimis renouare
 querellas, namque dolor talis non tibi contigit uni.

This funerary inscription marked the resting place of two individuals, M. Annaeus Longinus and C. Gavius Primigenius. It is uncertain how the latter, a seven-year-old child, is related to the former; Primigenius, to whom the elegiac couplet in lines 5–6 is addressed, may have been fostered by Longinus, who perhaps had married the child’s mother. What is relevant to us, however, is that Longinus is referred to as *Maccus*, that is, an *Atellana* actor specializing in playing this well-known character. Interestingly, his patronymic indicates that Longinus was freeborn, which made Gregori suggest that he was one of the amateur actors alluded to by Livy. However, although a significant number of stage performers in ancient Rome were certainly slaves or freedmen, the epigraphic material shows that freeborn professional actors were not exceptionally rare.³⁹ In addition to this, the tribe to which Longinus belonged, the Esquiline, also suggests a professional rather than an amateur theatrical involvement. In spite of being the least attested of the urban tribes, with only about ten known individuals ascribed to it, five members of the Esquiline tribe were clearly associated with the stage: Longinus himself, the patron of a mime-actress (*CIL* 6.10107), an *actor tertiarum partium* (*CIL* 6.10103), a *manu[ductor* (?) *scaenae Latinae* (*AE* 1926, 51) and a singer (*CIL* 6.10097). Mommsen therefore suggested that the Esquiline was the tribe to which actors and other individuals with dishonourable professions marked by *infamia* were displaced.⁴⁰ If so, Longinus can hardly have been an amateur actor; he may rather have been a professional performer, and this possibility is perhaps also suggested by the fact that the inscription explicitly states that he was a *Maccus*, something improbable if he were an amateur artist, but understandable if that were his profession. The situation described by Livy must consequently have changed in the first century A.D., revealing an increasing professionalization of Atellan farce possibly owing to the evolution of the genre from a sort of improvised occasional entertainment to more complex and frequently represented plays, a change perhaps induced by the innovations presented by the literary *Atellana*. This process probably had already taken place at least by the reign of Tiberius, who expelled the *histriones* from Italy because of the excesses of *Atellana* actors (*Tac. Ann.* 4.14); the measure must have been aimed at professional actors, as the word *histrion* implies, rather than at amateur performers.

There are other inscriptions possibly alluding to the remaining roles of Atellan farce, although they are more problematic. A graffito from a Pompeian house (*CIL* 4.10041a, Reg. II, ins. 2) bears the following text:

Dosse(n)ne

³⁹ Cf. *CIL* 6.10103; 14.2408; 14.2988, regarding mime actors.

⁴⁰ See his commentary on *CIL* 6.10097, and also A. Ferraro and V. Gorla, ‘Le tribù urbane. Verifica della loro composizione sociale sulla base della documentazione epigrafica’, in M. Silvestrini (ed.), *XVIIe Rencontre sur l’épigraphie du monde romain. “Le tribù romane”* (Bari, 8–10 ottobre 2009) (Bari, 2010), 341–7, at 342–3. However, other members of the Esquiline tribe were not stage performers (an *argentarius* is attested in *CIL* 6.9165), while some artists did not belong to this tribe: see *CIL* 14.2408 for an archmime of the Pomptina and 14.4624a–b for a pantomime of the Teretina. Leppin (n. 23), 73 is sceptical in this respect.

The word, written in the vocative case, alludes to a *Dossennus*, perhaps a nickname based on the familiar character from Atellan plays, as the *CIL* suggests, or perhaps it is simply a *cognomen* referring to a physical trait of its bearer.⁴¹ In fact, the only inscription that can safely be attributed to an *Atellana* actor that specialized in portraying the *Dossennus* has been transmitted by Seneca the Younger, who preserved the first line of an interesting epitaph (Sen. *Ep.* 89.7):

sapientia est quam Graeci ‘sophian’ uocant. hoc uerbo Romani quoque utebantur, sicut philosophia nunc quoque utuntur, quod et togatae tibi antiquae probabunt et inscriptus Dossenni monumento titulus:

hospes, resiste et sophian Dossenni lege.

The line, a *senarius*, must have been the first verse of a metrical epitaph from Rome dated at the latest to the beginning of the first century A.D.⁴² In the poem, the deceased (or perhaps the tomb itself) addresses the passer-by with a fitting adaptation of a well-known commonplace in funerary poems; instead of being asked to read the *titulus*, the traveller is requested to read the ‘wise words of a *Dossennus*’, which would have been inscribed below, most likely an invitation to enjoy life.⁴³ The poem might have contained other allusions to the profession of this anonymous actor, but, if that were the case, they were unfortunately omitted by Seneca.

Regarding another typical character from the *fabulae Atellanae*, the *Bucco*, in 1749 a group of fifteen plaster theatrical masks was found in Pompeii, in what has been considered to be a workshop where these stage props were produced, although it is unclear whether they were intended for the stage or for decorative purposes.⁴⁴ The masks, which were perhaps made as templates for the artisans in the workshop or to be shown to potential customers, belong to different dramatic genres: two of them are clearly pantomime masks, as their closed mouths show, while others have been ascribed to tragedy and comedy.⁴⁵ However, two of the masks bear a carved inscription on their mouth: one of them has the enigmatic text *AIAO* written on it, while the other one (see fig. 4) displays the word *BVCO*, which must refer to the *Bucco* in the *Atellana*.⁴⁶ Two other unscrubbed masks but very similar to the latter clearly portray the same character;⁴⁷ and a third mask, again without an identifying inscription but featuring a grotesque face with a large nose, wide-open eyes and mouth and wrinkled skin, may depict the *Pappus* or perhaps the *Dossennus*.⁴⁸ This exceptional find, unique in many ways,

⁴¹ Cf. *CIL* 5.2256 and 11.6166 for the *cognomen Dossennus*, and Kajanto (n. 31), 130 and 226. An inscription from Theveste mentions the legionary Ti. Claudius Manduccus (*CIL* 8.16547): the *cognomen* is a hapax legomenon, but *Manducus* was an old name for the *Dossennus* (Varro, *Ling.* 7.95).

⁴² M. von Albrecht, ‘*Dossennus*’, *DNP* 2 (1967), col. 154 considers it a ‘fabricated epitaph’, although there is no reason to believe that the inscription did not exist.

⁴³ See G. Manganaro, ‘La «sophia» di *Dossenus*’, *RFIC* 87 (1959), 395–402, at 399–402; and De Nonno (n. 17), 46 n. 21, although it is excessive to consider *Dossennus* to be some sort of Epicurean philosopher. Many funerary inscriptions invite the reader to enjoy life: cf. *CIL* 6.17985a = *CLE* 856, *CLE Pann* 38 and 39, to mention but a few.

⁴⁴ M.R. Borriello, ‘La bottega dell’arte di Pompei’, in M.R. Borriello, L. Malnati, G. Montevicchi, V. Sampaolo (edd.), *Histrionica. Teatri, maschere e spettacoli nel mondo antico* (Milan, 2010), 80–5.

⁴⁵ Borriello (n. 44), 85, nos. II.14 and II.15 (pantomime); 80 and 82, nos. II.1 and II.2 (tragedy); 84, nos. II.11–II.13 (comedy).

⁴⁶ Borriello (n. 44), 82–3, nos. II.3 and II.6. See Santucci (n. 25), 79–80.

⁴⁷ Borriello (n. 44), 82, nos. II.4 and II.5.

⁴⁸ Borriello (n. 44), 83, no. II.7.



FIG. 4. *Bucco* mask with didascalical inscription on its mouth (image courtesy of the Ministero della Cultura – Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli).

may attest to the continuity of Atellan farces in Pompeii in the first century A.D., which is not surprising given its Oscan origins and its close proximity to the city of Atella.

A graffito from another Pompeian house might also refer to the *Bucco* (CIL 4.4720, reg. VII, ins. 7):

Bucco

As in the aforementioned graffito of a *Dossennus*, this too could be an insult or the nickname of someone known as a ‘brawler’, perhaps taken from the homonymous character of Atellan comedy. There is a similar case from Sousse (Hadrumetum) in North Africa, on a marble slab dated to the late first or second century A.D., found in the necropolis of the city and preserved *in situ* (CIL 8.22922 = *ILTun* 160):

Dis Manibus.
 Q(uintus) Pescennius Fus=
 cus Bucco hic situs
 est; uixit annis XVII.
 Egnatia Donata mater
 filio pi(i)ssimo fecit.

5

This funerary inscription was erected by Egnatia Donata to her seventeen-year-old son Q. Pescennius Fuscus, who is described as a *Bucco*. Again, it is not clear whether *Bucco* is here a nickname or, as *CIL* is inclined to think, an indication of Fuscus' profession. *Bucco* is certainly attested as a *cognomen* in North Africa for individuals who were clearly not stage artists, as in an inscription from Thugga mentioning the *duumvir* L. Manilius Bucco.⁴⁹ As in the epitaph of the *Atellanus* C. Staius Gemellus, there is unfortunately no other element which makes it possible to conclude that Q. Pescennius Fuscus was an *Atellana* actor; if that were the case, it would be the first document regarding Atellan farces outside Italy.

Sadly, no epigraphic evidence has survived of the fourth Atellan character, the *Pappus*. Other inscriptions simply refer to *exodiarii*, that is, stage performers who acted in *exodia*, the afterpieces in which Atellan farce was still represented in the first century A.D., in spite of strong competition from mime. None the less, since *exodia* could also have consisted of mime, music, dance or other similar exhibitions, it is impossible to determine with any certainty whether an *exodiarius* was an *Atellanus* or another sort of stage artist. A now-lost stone block, dated to the late first or second century A.D. and found in Beja (Pax Iulia) in Portugal mentions one such *exodiarius* (*CIL* 2.65; see [fig. 5](#)):

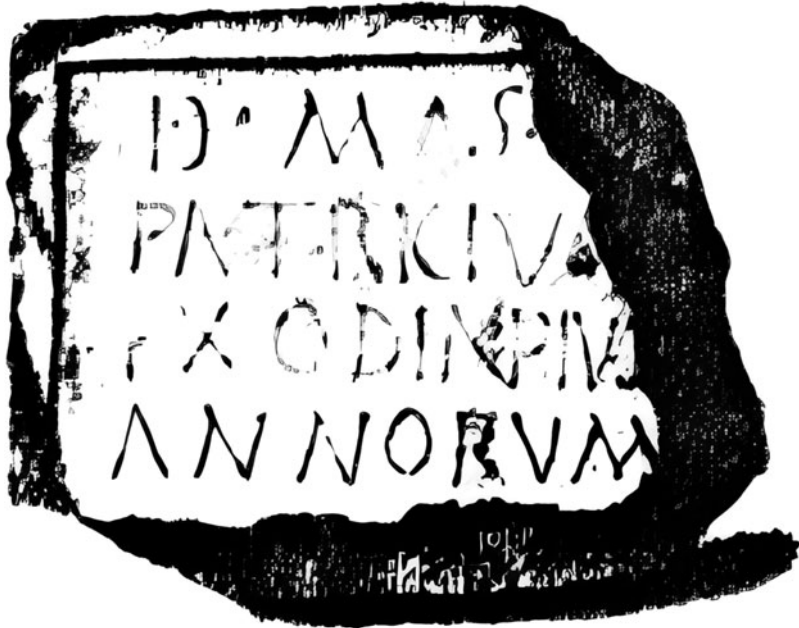


FIG. 5. Epitaph of the *exodiarius* Patricius (from do Cenáculo, n. 50).

D(is) M(anibus) s(acrum)
 Patriciu[s]
 exodiarius
 annorum

⁴⁹ See *IL Afr* 558, dated to A.D. 36/37. Other inscriptions attest the existence of this *cognomen* in Africa proconsularis: *CIL* 8.24542 (Carthage, A.D. 43, perhaps the same Bucco from Thugga) and *IL Afr* 162.69–70 (Ammaedara, first century A.D.). The name is also attested elsewhere, especially in Italy: see *CIL* 1.3189; 6.20884; 6.23249, etc. See also Kajanto (n. 31), 63 and 268.

Apart from the problems that the inscription presents (the only existing drawing records an unintelligible *IXODIÑPIVS* for line 3 which was rightly corrected to *exodiarius*),⁵⁰ there is no indication of the kind of show in which Patricius appeared, other than it being performed as an afterpiece. The other two epigraphic attestations of *exodiarii* are too long to be reproduced here, but any association with Atellan farce can definitely be excluded. One of them is a funerary inscription dated to the second quarter of the second century A.D. and dedicated to Ursus, a *pilicrepus* or juggler, who used to perform in the Baths of Trajan, Agrippa, Titus and Nero in Rome (*CIL* 6.9797); in this text in *senarii*, Ursus humbly confesses to being the *exodiarius* of his former master, the three-times consul M. Annius Verus, grandfather of Marcus Aurelius; it is probable that the term *exodiarius* is used in the inscription as a joke, stating that Ursus was merely a second-rate juggler when compared to his patron. The other inscription mentioning an *exodiarius* is a complex epigraph dated to the beginning of the third century A.D., recording a theatrical show organized and performed in Rome by a group of *uigiles* and sailors from the fleet at Misenum (*CIL* 6.1064): many of the participants, most of whom are mime-actors, are described by their artistic specialization, whereas only one is said to be an *exodiarius*, although, given the late date of the inscription, it is highly unlikely that he was an *Atellana* actor.⁵¹

The epigraphic evidence for *Atellana* performers is, as can be seen, scarce and uncertain, but a surprising addition to this short corpus, which records not an actor but a playwright, has been made recently. It is the left half of a marble plaque dating approximately from the reign of Augustus. Most probably found in Cuma, in the mid twentieth century it was still walled in the medieval castle of Castellammare di Stabia, although it is now lost (*EDR* 179613; see fig. 6):⁵²

⁵⁰ M. do Cenáculo, *Álbum de Antiguidades Lusitanas e Luso-romanas e Lapidés do Museu Sesinando Cenáculo Pacense* (manuscript in the Biblioteca Pública de Évora, c.1800), 39. See also J. d'Encarnação, *Inscrições romanas do Conventus Pacensis: subsídios para o estudo da romanização* (Coimbra, 1984), 320 no. 247.

⁵¹ Regarding this inscription and a very similar one (*CIL* 6.1063), see M.H. Garelli-François, 'Des soldats sur la scène comique: espace dramatique et espace civique sous les Sévères dans l'Empire romain', *Pallas* 54 (2000), 321–36; and González Galera (n. 20), 229–44 (nos. RO 21 and RO 22).

⁵² It was first published in St. Adamo Muscettola, 'Maschere a Cuma. Il teatro instabile di Silla', in C. Gasparri and G. Greco (edd.), *Cuma: il foro. Scavi dell'Università di Napoli Federico II, 2000–2001* (Pozzuoli, 2007), 209–28, at 219–22. It was again presented as an unedited inscription by M. Martins Magalhães and Á.A. Bragança Junior, who were unaware of the inscription's first publication by Adamo Muscettola: 'A inscrição do poeta Lucceius conservada em Stabiae: as *fabulae Atellanae* e o *exodium Atellanicum*', in A. dos Santos Borges and R. de Morais Soutelo Gomes (edd.), *Escrito para a eternidade. A epigrafia e os estudos de antiguidade* (Curitiba, 2018), 197–221.



Fig. 6. Inscription of Cn. Lucecius (from Puglia, n. 54; image courtesy of Vita e Pensiero, Pubblicazioni dell'Università Cattolica).

Cn(aeus) Lucecius Cn(aei) f(ilius) [- - - ?]
 poeta [[- - -]]
 prior Pomponi in fabulis palm[- - -]
 secundus a te et primus exodiis
 5 Domitia poet[ae - - - ?]

Its first editor, St. Adamo Muscettola, considered that the Cn. Lucecius to whom this funerary inscription was dedicated was a member of the Capuan elite, most probably one of the two Cn. Lucceii, father and son, who were elected as *praetores* of the city and restored the local temple of Demeter (*CIL* 10.3685 and also *CIL* 10.3686), although, as M. Martins Magalhães noted, the *nomen* is also attested elsewhere in Campania and in the Italian peninsula.⁵³ Nevertheless, in the inscription, Cn. Lucecius is not celebrated for his civic involvement in his hometown but for his literary talent, being called a *poeta*, a playwright, in both line 2 and line 5 (cf. Suet. *Cal.* 27 for an Atellan playwright referred to as *Atellanae poeta*). As E. Puglia notes, there seems to be in line 2 after *poeta* an erasure of four or five letters, which is also suggested by the word *poeta* being in an off-centre position.⁵⁴ It is impossible to know what the erased word was; perhaps the carver mistakenly engraved the first word of line 3 after *poeta* and then corrected it. Lines 3–4 specifically address the literary achievements of Cn. Lucecius, as he is

⁵³ See Martins Magalhães (n. 52); unfortunately, the digital version of this paper to which I had access has no page numbering; it also has a different layout from the printed version. Pliny the Elder mentions a *mima Lucceia* active (in Rome?) in the same period (Plin. *NH* 7.158); see Leppin (n. 23), 257.

⁵⁴ E. Puglia, 'Un distico in memoria di Gneo Lucceio, autore di commedie Atellane', *Aevum Antiquum* 20 (2020), 75–84.

explicitly compared with Pomponius. The meaning of line 3 is unfortunately uncertain owing to the loss of the right half of the slab; Adamo Muscettola suggested that the two verses should be reconstructed as follows:

prior Pomponi in fabulis palm[aribus],
secundus Ate(llanis) et primus exodiéis.

The interpretation of Adamo Muscettola, according to whom the poem alludes to Cn. Luceius' participation in some sort of dramatic competition in which he would have obtained second place with an Atellan play and the first place with some *exodia*, is not without difficulties. The existence of *fabulae palmares* is attested nowhere else; as the editor herself admits, the only close parallel is some *ludi palmares* referring to athletic or gladiatorial games documented in an inscription from Beneventum.⁵⁵ Moreover, the abbreviation *Ate(llanis)*, implicitly suggested by Adamo Muscettola and accepted by Martins Magalhães, is unmotivated given that the carver had no lack of space, and it also seems strange that in the epitaph of an Atellan playwright one would abbreviate precisely such an important word. S. Monda, who also noted the strangeness of the abbreviation *Ate(llanis)*, proposed that the problem presented by *palm[aribus]* should be solved with *palm[am habet (?)]*.⁵⁶ However, more recently E. Puglia correctly identified lines 3–4 as two *senarii*, so there is no need to suppose that *ATE* is an abbreviated word, but the preposition *a* followed by the personal pronoun *te*:

prior Pomponi in fabulis palm[- | √ -]
secundus a te et primus exodiéis [√ -]

As Puglia suggests, the second-person pronoun *te* implies that Cn. Luceius is addressing someone who can be no one but Pomponius himself, who therefore appears in the vocative case and not in the genitive. Considering the missing endings of both verses, Puglia proposed the following reconstruction of the text:

prior, Pomponi, in fabulis palm[a est tua].
secundus a te et primus exodiéis [fui].

If Puglia's reconstruction is right, and I believe it is a plausible one, the poem not only mentions Pomponius but also addresses him directly and establishes a comparison between him and Luceius, who is modestly set in a second place, but not in *exodia*, for which Luceius must have written something different from the *fabulae Atellanae* of Pomponius.⁵⁷ The distinction between *fabulae Atellanae* and *exodia*, as if they were two different genres, is puzzling. Did Luceius write two types of plays, perhaps literary *Atellana* in the style of Pomponius and a subgenre of *fabulae Atellanae* (non-literary *Atellana*?), which would only be performed in *exodia*, as Monda and Puglia suggest? When literary sources allude to Atellan plays being performed in *exodia*, they do not specify whether they are referring to the literary or to the non-literary version of the genre; nevertheless, there is nothing to suggest that the plays of Pomponius or

⁵⁵ *CIL* 9.1666 = *ILS* 5068.

⁵⁶ Monda (n. 11), 128–9 n. 17.

⁵⁷ The first *senarius* is reminiscent of the canon of comic playwrights established by Volcarius Sedigitus (*apud* Gell. *NA* 15.24.1, line 5 = fr. 1.5, page 46 Morel: *Caecilio palmam Statio do mimico*). It seems natural that literate playwrights in the Imperial era would try to emulate the classics: cf. Plin. *Ep.* 7.21.

Novius were performed as the main dramatic entertainment. On the contrary, the diminutive used by Marcus Aurelius when referring to the *Nouianae Atellaniolae* might indicate that they were rather short and therefore fit for *exodia*, unless the diminutive is used here just to convey a sense of informality (Fronto, *Epist. ad M. Caes.* 2.8.3, page 29 van den Hout²). Could it be possible, then, that Atellan plays written during the Age of Augustus were longer than their late Republican counterparts and therefore could be staged independently of other sorts of dramatic plays, and not always as an afterpiece? If that were the case, the inscription of Cn. Lucceius could be another proof of the existence of an ‘imperial *Atellana*’ distinct from that of Pomponius and Novius.⁵⁸ On the other hand, the *exodia* in which Lucceius also excelled may have consisted of crude non-literary Atellan plays, which must have had a script of some sort (since Lucceius must have written something, even if it were just an outline of a play), but also not conforming to the literary standards that Pomponius set for his plays: perhaps in prose instead of a metrical text, and shorter than literary plays. In this respect, it might be useful to adduce a similar case offered by mime, in which two variants coexisted: the metrical literary mimes of Laberius and Publilius, on the one hand, and non-literary scripts such as the so-called *Charition* and *Moicheutria*, on the other, which were written in prose without any literary pretension in a second-century papyrus from Oxyrhynchus.⁵⁹ In the light of the inscription of Lucceius, it is therefore likely that at the beginning of the first century A.D. the *Atellana* could be performed both as the main play in its literary form (in some contexts at least) and as an *exodium* in its original cruder version, and that some authors such as Lucceius could write both types of *Atellana*.

Regardless of how the distinction between Pomponian *fabulae Atellanae* and *exodia* may be interpreted, the reference to *exodia* seems to imply that at least this sort of plays was intended to be represented on stage, which might seem surprising considering the social status of their author, if Cn. Lucceius is indeed to be identified with one of the Cn. Lucceii from Capua. However, writing dramatic texts as a *divertissement* had been a well-established practice among Roman aristocrats for a long time and would continue to be so into the Imperial era, as the examples not only of Sulla but also of Caesar, Augustus, Seneca and Pliny the Younger (just to mention a few) illustrate.⁶⁰ An interesting second-century funerary inscription from Aeclanum tells us of M. Pomponius Bassulus, a *duumvir* who as a pastime translated some Menandrian comedies into Latin and also wrote new ones (*CIL* 9.1164 = *ILS* 2953 = *CLE* 97).⁶¹ Certainly most of these plays were never written to be performed in a theatre, but some of them could have been staged, such as the mimes of the *equus* Laberius, who

⁵⁸ See n. 38 above for the presence of music as an innovation of the imperial *Atellana* and Monda (n. 13), 26–7. The concept of an ‘imperial *Atellana*’ was first introduced by Frassinetti (n. 1), 128–33.

⁵⁹ *P.Oxy.* III 413r and 413v. See M. Andreassi, *Mimi greci in Egitto. Charition e Moicheutria* (Bari, 2001). Cicu (n. 10), 79–81 distinguishes between complex and simple mimes (ὀρθόθεσις and παίγνια), based on Plut. *Quaest. conv.* 7.8 = *Mor.* 712E.

⁶⁰ See S.M. Goldberg, ‘The fall and rise of Roman tragedy’, *TAPhA* 126 (1996), 265–86, especially at 270–5. Cf. Suet. *Dom.* 10 for a mythological play staged as an *exodium* under Domitian and with an allusion to contemporary politics, although it is unclear whether it was an Atellan play or a mime, since both could stage mythological plots.

⁶¹ See also a late fragmentary metrical inscription from Ammaedara possibly mentioning a playwright, published in Z. Benzina Ben Abdallah, R. Carande, C. Fernández, J. Gómez Pallarès, N. Jorba, ‘Carmina Latina Epigraphica inedita Ammaedarae’, *ZPE* 152 (2005), 89–113, at 101–2, no. 5.

certainly did not depend on his writings for a living. That Cn. Lucceius, a member of the Capuan elite, chose to write Atellan farces might be regarded as a conscious assertion of a deeply rooted *Atellana* tradition in the region, as the *Bucco* mask from Pompeii shows, but it also testifies to the interest for this genre in the Early Imperial era.

CONCLUSIONS

Epigraphic documents regarding the *Atellana* are certainly far from numerous and in many cases they are also difficult to identify. Apart from the initial line of the epitaph of a *Dossennus* cited by Seneca, only four inscriptions can be safely associated with the *fabulae Atellanae*: those of the *Maccus* M. Annaeus Longinus (fig. 3 above) and the playwright Cn. Lucceius (fig. 6 above), the anonymous funerary inscription from Labici (fig. 2 above) and the *Bucco* mask from Pompeii (fig. 4 above). Other documents, such as the epitaph of the *Atellanus* C. Staius Gemellus (fig. 1 above) and that of Q. Pescennius Fuscus Bucco, should be regarded with caution, since it is not possible to determine with any certainty whether they were stage performers or if the terms *Atellanus* or *Bucco* should rather be considered a demonym and an *agnomen*, respectively. Moreover, considering as *Atellana* actors the few *exodiarii* attested in inscriptions is equally problematic, given the relatively late date of some of these texts and the wide range of shows that the term *exodium* could encompass. In spite of this, the study of these inscriptions can also show some tendencies with regard to *Atellana* plays and actors. The epitaph of Longinus suggests that by the first century A.D. there were already professional *Atellani*, a development perhaps induced by the advance of the literary *Atellana*, which might have required trained artists for it to be staged, as opposed to the simpler non-literary Atellan farces once easily performed by amateur actors. The inscription of Cn. Lucceius and the reference to music in the inscription from Labico might also attest to the evolution of the genre into more complex and longer plays in the Imperial era. Furthermore, the epitaph of Cn. Lucceius confirms that *fabulae Atellanae* were still written and staged in the first century A.D., at least in Rome and in Campania, even as a literary pastime.⁶²

On the other hand, the very scarcity of references to the Atellan plays in the epigraphic material might be indicative of the limited success of this sort of entertainment in the Imperial era as opposed to other theatrical genres. Although it is true that relying on quantitative data is not always advisable when dealing with inscriptions because of the randomness involved in the preservation and discovery of the epigraphic material, it is remarkable that so little evidence has survived for the *fabulae Atellanae* in comparison with the amount of inscriptions available for mime and pantomime, the two direct competitors of Atellan farce in the Imperial period: Rome alone has furnished no fewer than twenty-five inscriptions for mime-actors and eighteen for pantomimes.⁶³ The paucity of epigraphic documents confirms that the *Atellana* could not withstand the rise of mime and pantomime, and the lack of references beyond the second century A.D. suggests its disappearance as a living theatrical tradition, with literary Atellan plays perhaps only being studied and appreciated for their

⁶² See G. Manuwald, *Roman Republican Theatre* (Cambridge, 2011), 113 and 177; against this opinion, see Monda (n. 11), 137.

⁶³ González Galera (n. 20), 179–254 for mimes and Evangelisti (n. 28), 158–60, tab. II for pantomime, as well as Gregori (n. 26), 580–5 for both genres.

antiquarian value. It is also telling that there is no evidence of *Atellana* actors belonging to the *familia Caesaris*, the slaves and freedmen of the imperial household; this suggests that the *Atellana* actors owned by the *domus Augusti* must have been significantly fewer than other stage performers.⁶⁴

Additionally, the lack of inscriptions from outside Italy must also pose the question whether the *Atellana* was actually represented in the provinces or if it was instead staged only in central Italy. The only documents that might indicate the presence of *Atellani* in the western provinces, the inscriptions of Q. Pescennius Fuscus Bucco and the *exodiarius* Patricius (fig. 5 above), are too uncertain to be taken into account: *Bucco* in the first might have been just a nickname, while Patricius could have been a mime-actor. Perhaps the study of iconographic sources regarding *Atellana* could throw more light on this issue, but this is also not without risks: it is tempting to associate some grotesque masks found in Crete and in the Rhine area with Atellan comedy, the latter perhaps related to the presence of military encampments where Italic soldiers could have brought this form of entertainment with them,⁶⁵ but the lack of any didascalical inscriptions that help us identify them as *Atellana* masks makes any attribution to this genre extremely bold.

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⁶⁴ Again, see González Galera (n. 20), 82–3 and 85 regarding mime-actors, and Evangelisti (n. 28), 18 and 157–8 for pantomimes.

⁶⁵ See Santucci (n. 25), 84–8. However, the first notices of dramatic performances organized by the army date from the Severan period: see Garelli-François (n. 51) and González Galera (n. 20), 147–52.