Evidence for the Spoken Language in Roman Britain: A Study of the Curse Tablets from the Sulis Minerva Sanctuary in Bath

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Crynodeb

Bu darganfod ynganiad a nodweddion ieithyddol eraill yr hen fyd yn rhan o astudiaethau ieithyddol o'r cychwyn. Allweddol yw tystiolaeth epigraffig yn hyn o beth, ac mae llawer o'r ymchwil i acen a datblygiad iaith wedi edrych ar graffiti. Mae i'r corpws o lechi melltith ar safle teml Sulis Minerva yng Nghaerfaddon rai heriau ychydig yn wahanol i'r rheini a gafwyd mewn astudiaethau blaenorol, ond cynigiant gyfleoedd amheuthun am eu bod yn set gymharol fawr o destunau o leoliad penodol ym mhellafoedd gorllewinol yr ymerodraeth. Yn yr astudiaeth hon, ymchwilir i'r rôl y gallai'r llechi melltith ei chwarae yn dystiolaeth i'r iaith lafar yn ardal Caerfaddon, archwilir y dulliau methodolegol a ddefnyddiwyd gan ysgolheigion eraill wrth astudio cyrff tebyg o destunau, ac i gloi rhoddir rhai casgliadau posibl o'r llechi melltith gyda chyfeiriad at eu cronoleg a'r newidiadau ieithyddol disgwyliedig yn yr ymerodraeth orllewinol.

Geiriau allweddol: Caerfaddon, Lladin, llechi melltith, ieithyddol, ymerodraeth, Tomlin

Abstract

The reconstruction of pronunciation and other linguistic features of the ancient world has always been a feature of linguistic study. Epigraphic evidence plays a key role in this, and a large amount of the research done on accent and language development has looked at graffiti. The corpus of curse tablets found at the site of the temple of Sulis Minerva at Bath presents a slightly different set of challenges to those faced by earlier studies, but also provides rare opportunities as a relatively large set of texts from a specific location in the far west of the empire. This study examines what role these curse tablets could play as evidence for the spoken language of the Bath area, explores the methodological approaches other scholars have used when looking at similar bodies of text, and finally draws some possible conclusions from the curse tablets with reference to their chronology and expected linguistic changes in the western empire.

Key Words: Bath, Latin, curse tablets, linguistic, empire, Tomlin

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Excavations at Bath in 1979–80 discovered the largest trove of curse tablets from a single location ever, a hugely diverse corpus that has attracted a great deal of interest, both scholarly and popular, ever since.[1] Romance linguists and classical scholars alike have used bodies of inscriptions to provide evidence for linguistic change and diversity for quite some time with varying methods and varying degrees of success. This paper will try to evaluate some of these methods as applied to the Bath curse tablets (which will be referred to in their published order as *Tab. Sul.*)[2] and to look at some of the issues inherent in the corpus itself when studied as linguistic evidence. By doing this, a working methodology can be established, along with a snapshot of certain aspects of the language during the period in which the curse tablets were written in the area around Bath, focusing on the phonology. These features identified may or may not be unique to the Bath area or Britain as a whole; indeed, it is likely that they will not be.[3] One of the problems that will not be dealt with is that of chronology, since the dating of the tablets is imprecise at best. Therefore, where broad distinctions in time period can be made they will be commented on, but otherwise only general points will be made. Other bodies of epigraphic evidence will not be commented on, except to demonstrate linguistic background or general trends.

The corpus of tablets itself consists of 130 tablets, of which *Tab. Sul.* 112–130 bear no legible text. Similarly, a number of the tablets are so fragmented as to be useless as linguistic evidence. These, along with those tablets containing lists of names alone, will be disregarded, except where they can provide background information (class of authors, "British" vs "Roman" authorship, etc.).[4] This leaves us with a corpus of 59 texts which bear a certain number of words, ranging from the almost complete (such as *Tab. Sul.* 10; 94) to those bearing only one word (*Tab. Sul.* 21 for example). With the exception of *Tab. Sul.* 95–96, each tablet has a different author, or at least a different scribe.[5] Naturally these tablets are highly diverse in quality, length and tone. Their authors vary from the well-practised (*Tab. Sul.* 30) to the practically illiterate (*Tab. Sul.* 112–116), although the majority appears to have been written personally.[6]

The question of how to approach such a varied corpus is not immediately obvious. At first glance, it could be assumed that, since curse tablets largely have to do with petty theft and are personal communications with a deity, the authors would have written as they spoke. However, the problem is, in fact, much more complicated. As mentioned before, several of the tablets are of very high quality, and, in addition to this, a large number of these tablets display common formulaic or stylistic points that suggest a certain level of imitation.[7] Therefore, for these tablets to be useful for a comparative analysis of any kind, a number of factors must be considered: the general background as to late Latin and dialect formation; the idea of "British" Latin as displaying certain features; the degree of language and dialect contact that would have occurred in Bath in the cases of the authors of these tablets; and finally, questions of authorial intent and imitation.

Tomlin tentatively dates the earliest tablets to the late second century,[8] by which point a number of the linguistic features that typify later Latin had already come about.[9] In recent years there have been a number of debates concerning the nature of Latin across the empire. The first of these has been summarised by Väänänen as between what he calls the "thèse unitaire" and the "thèse differenciale".[10] The "thèse unitaire" suggests that Latin was largely uniform and homogeneous across the empire until a relatively late stage before showing trends towards dialect formation and the Romance languages, whereas the "thèse differenciale" suggests that local variation in Latin occurred from the imperial period onwards.[11] The evidence for the "thèse differenciale" position, and for the view that Latin became koinenised, is very strong[12] but there are several points on which a "thèse unitaire" viewpoint is useful for the interpretation of the Bath curse tablets. It seems likely

that written language was largely homogeneous but ceased to reflect pronunciation, as suggested by Velius Longus (54, 1–13).[13] Therefore, taught Latin would largely reflect classical forms.[14] This would suggest that there was an awareness of higher status dialects. The importance of this and the evidence for it within the corpus itself will be discussed later.

The second debate that must be dealt with is the question of whether Latin propagation was mono-genitive, reflecting the date of conquest.[15] If this were the case, it would suggest that Latin, written in Britain in the second to fourth centuries, would have characteristics more typical of mid-first century Latin. Therefore, for deviations from standard spelling to be phonetically significant they would have to be deviations from first century rather than later spelling practices. For example, whereas in a first century text, spelling *obfero* > *offero* would be significant; in a later text it would simply be reflecting the practices of the period.[16] A mono-genitive model of linguistic spread seems unlikely due to the large amount of trade that Bath had with the rest of the empire[17] and the linguistic contact via the legions who were stationed nearby, not to mention a certain level of trickle-down effect from the better travelled upper classes.[18] There is also no reason to assume linguistic features and dialect did not arise naturally from language contact.[19] On the other hand, certain aspects of day to day linguistic contact could be said to be mono-genitive. In particular, civic cults and legal texts could both have been set in stone to a more or less literal extent and read by the clearly literate writers of the curse tablets. This could have created an archaic linguistic standard which could have been imitated by the writers of the curse tablets, as will be shown below.

The question of authorial intent has been touched upon above but needs to be dealt with more thoroughly. The presence of several formulaic elements makes it likely that the composers of the tablets were imitating set forms when writing, for example the phrase *si baro si mulier* ('whether a man or a woman'), appears frequently, drawing striking parallels with the all-inclusive phrasing of Roman legal texts.[20] Similarly, certain phrases appear that seem to be imitations of Roman religious practices. This supports the idea that these inscriptions in particular are not intended to be colloquial, but are in fact examples of Latin intended to be standard with errors.[21] This suggests that there was a certain level of awareness of high status variants, perhaps in addition to a more colloquial everyday Latin, and that in a religious context the writers felt they should adopt an elevated tone.[22]

Owing to the formulaic nature of the text, it would be hard to identify features of syntax that might characterise Latin speech in the area around Bath, since the level of imitation shown inherently biases the writer towards certain structures. Therefore, it is more important to look at possible phonological and morphological tendencies that might be revealed through trends in variant spelling of words. Approaches in scholarship to this type of problem have varied in style and scale considerably. Barbarino (1978) and Gaeng (1968), working with larger areas, used large scale statistical and comparative methods which compared frequency of standard spellings against those of variants for specific substitutions.[23] Adams criticises these large statistical methods on the basis that they do not take into account variations in literacy[24] and suggests also comparing their figures against the overall percentage of errors in the text.[25] However, this tweaked approach does not provide clarification in a body of text with multiple authors of varying literacy. It would also lead to variance being regarded as not statistically significant in areas of unusually high deviation from the norm, possibly leading to a misinterpretation of the results. One method for getting around this would be through analysis of broad groupings by area and level of education or status. Such groupings would be unfeasible for a collection such as the Bath curse tablets, since most of the texts are so fragmentary as to make analysis by status impossible, leaving a collection too small for useful statistical analysis.

Herman (1990: 347–350) used a similar approach but a different comparative method, comparing frequencies of long and short vowel sounds in accented and non-accented positions from across a large body of later work to those found in Cicero. This approach highlights broad phonological trends rather than precise shifts. Despite the issues caused by spelling not reflecting sound, relatively small changes of frequency could be indicative of trends when combined with other evidence. On the other hand, in the case of the Bath curse tablets, there are two major problems. Firstly, the problems caused by the size of the corpus, in that it is a relatively small study which could be distorted easily; this would mean that much larger changes in frequency would be needed for a result to be called significant. Secondly, the formulaic nature of the texts could create a bias towards certain phrases and certain vowel sounds that would not be present in everyday speech. This is a criticism that could be levelled at this type of study generally but is particularly important in a body of texts which show general formulaic tendencies. Since formulaic sections comprise a large proportion of the text of the curse tablets – particularly the longer texts – such a study would be unsuitable. It is highly unlikely that the second to fourth century residents of Bath would have used so many forms of *sanguine* so frequently, for example, which would distort the [ui] count considerably.

Other studies, such as Mann (1971), Väänänen (1981: 62–65), Smith (1983), Adams (1990) and Adams (1992), have focused on identifying similar variant spellings within bodies of work and have analysed them specifically on a case by case basis. This allows speculation on linguistic trends in specific cases and areas, but misidentification of the cause of certain errors (hypercorrection, poor handwriting) can disproportionately affect the result; it also does not require comparison of the frequency of variants with the frequency of standard spellings, since this method focuses on identifying exceptions to general trends. It is, however, the most useful style of enquiry for small scale groups, such as an analysis of these curse tablets. Therefore, the following will be a close study of the utility and implications of the phonologically significant variant spellings listed in Tomlin (1988: 74–78).[26]

Beginning with the variant spellings as noted by Tomlin in the listed order, the question of dropped diphthong -*ae*-, primarily in *ae* > *e* substitutions ought to be addressed. This variant spelling is noted most frequently in the feminine case ending -*ae*.[27] Of those cases listed, it seems likely that *d(e)ae* (*Tab. Sul.* 19.3) is a simple error, although it could suggest that [ae] and [e] had merged so entirely as to render this spelling phonetically equivalent to *de(ae)*. The case of *deae* itself is particularly relevant as it naturally appears frequently in the tablets; of the 18 instances of the word 14 are correct, 3 are *de(ae)*. This would suggest that these 3 are phonetic spellings, and that *d(e)ae* may be semi-phonetic, but attempting to use the correct case endings. In all four cases of the diphthong at the start of words, it has been used correctly.[28] In a mid-word position, the diphthong is used correctly except for a single hypercorrection (*Tab. Sul.* 54.2). The hypercorrections suggest that [ae] and [e] are closer in Bath Latin than classical Latin, and this fits with the common observation that they merged entirely by the second century.[29] The small number of instances within the corpus itself makes it hard to draw conclusions; however, in other studies, word-final instances of *ae* have been substituted far more than mid-word or initial instances.[30] This might suggest a final vowel sound that was more backed and that tailed off, perhaps in the region of /ɜ/.

The instances Tomlin lists in cases of -*er*- > -*ar*- and -*ĕ*- demonstrate the commonly noted Vulgar Latin merger trend for ĕ > ɛ,[31] which could easily be mistaken for a short [a], with the exception of *Senicio* (*Tab. Sul. 51.5* variants in *Tab. Sul.* 8.5; 98.16 *senicianus*). Tomlin states that this was simply a standard variant at Bath.[32] This merger, in a stressed

position, would be more characteristic of a long classical [ē] in a stressed position which merged in Vulgar Latin with the short [ĭ].[33] It is more likely, however, that the quantity of the word was unchanged, but that the stress is misplaced, leading to an unstressed phonetic spelling – perhaps a local quirk as Tomlin suggested. Mann records a similar variant spelling in CIL vii 1305 *seniciane*.[34] The *i > e* variation of *nessi* listed is a common Vulgar Latin variant.[35] Tomlin seems to be correct in suggesting that *perdedi* and *redemat* show recomposition, by analogy, to their non-compounded forms. The form *mantutene* (*Tab. Sul.* 98) is interesting, since generally Vulgar Latin would not conflate classical [ī] and a vulgar [e] in a stressed position (regardless of its use, the word would end *-tutin-*). However, since the tablet employs reversed lettering, this is probably just a case of a misplaced *e,* and not significant. Tomlin is probably right in suggesting that the *u* for *o* variant in *numen* (*Tab. Sul.* 102) is significant, especially since the tablet is in new Roman cursive script.[36] Grandgent suggests, on the basis of other texts, that *u* became *o* in most of the empire before the fourth century, and this is reflected by the later cursive script on this tablet.[37] No variation is noted in *Tab. Sul.* 8, 15, 16, or 94 which have different forms of *nomen,* all of which are likely to have been earlier than 102 (94 is not a certainty). It would be hard to make an argument from this without a larger sample.[38]

The unstressed vowels show much less variation from standard forms. Apart from Tomlin's inference that [e] and [i], in hiatus, would have been indistinguishable, there is very little of phonological significance in the vowels in hiatus. The one example of *au > a* in *A(u)gustalis* is unconvincing as linguistic evidence, since *Tab. Sul.* 4 has reversed letter order and is error filled generally. The single listed instance of *e > a* in *Valaunecus* (*Tab. Sul.* 96 suggested from *-vellaunos*) is also unconvincing, coming as it does from a proposed name reconstruction. The change is not one common in vulgar Latin generally, nor are there any comparable examples from Britain. The variant *u > i* in *liminibus* (*Tab. Sul.* 97.4) is an unlikely phonetic error due to the large distance between [u] and [i] generally in Latin. Since the writer's *u* and *i* are very similar, it can only be a visual mistake,[39] and the same can be said for the only comparable examples which come from the same tablet, both cases of *anilum* for *anulum*. On the other hand, the two mistakes in the same text suggest that the author, at least, considered himself correct. Smith suggests that this is a vulgar spelling,[40] and this is likely to be correct, although the same word comes up in *Tab. Sul.* 59 in a more classical form.[41] From the variants *san(g)uene* (*Tab. Sul.* 46.7) and *sangu(i)ne* (*Tab. Sul.* 47.4; 65.11) it might be suggested that the pronunciation largely glossed over the second syllable, perhaps merging the ng to /ŋ/, leaving [ui] which would be easily glossed over; this will be discussed further with other medial consonants below. The diphthong [ui] seems to have survived into late Latin,[42] but a phonetic substitution *ue* in *Tab. Sul.* 46.7 would not be unreasonable, especially since the other variants *sangu(i)ne* suggest that the *i* was not emphasised. Only 4 of the 14 examples of *sanguine* in various forms show variant spelling. Further evidence for the non-emphasised *i* in [ui] comes from the *cus* for *quis* in *Tab. Sul.* (31.1); the two complementary phonetic spellings provide good evidence for a slightly weakened pronunciation of this diphthong.

It is interesting that there is no evidence of the *b/v* confusion and merger that is frequently noticed in late Latin text. Tomlin notes that this confusion is not seen natively in Britain.[43] Medial *-v-,* however, is very frequently lost in the text and in late Latin generally, especially in *ser(v)us*, which occurs 12 times in the text. I would, however, hesitate to suggest that this shows a weak or non-fricative [v]. It certainly shows that the *vu* of *servus* was not pronounced long, but there is no reason to draw a distinction between the use of [v] as a vowel and as a consonant. It may be that without the need of gemination to show quantity, the simplified spelling had become popular, showing the

ū > u of later Latin.[44] This would fit well with the trend for simplification from the first century onwards.[45] The lack of a need for distinction between the vowel and consonant forms of *v* is shown best by the example of *Bellaus* (*Tab. Sul.* 30.8) for *Bellavus*.[46] The loss of the medial *-g-* in *san(g)uine* (*Tab. Sul.* 97.4), *Ri(g)ovassum* (*Tab. Sul.* 53.12) and *san(g)uene* (*Tab. Sul.* 46.7) has been discussed a little, as, in the two *sanguine* variants, it is likely to have merged into /ŋ/. The alternative is the loss of [g] before [u] or [o] as suggested by Tomlin.[47] This would seem to make the [g] phoneme more like the labio-palatial approximate /ŋ/. This seems unlikely when in other British inscriptions *g* is substituted for a hard *c*.[48]

The geminated consonants listed are largely graphical errors and appear to have no phonological significance. The substitution *c* > *qu* appears twice (*Tab. Sul.* 4.2, 31.1); this is very rare, considering the legalistic language, but it is entirely likely that the writers may have read legal inscriptions and been used to the spelling. This substitution appears to be phonetic, emphasising the fairly common hard [qu] sound. The *x* > *s* substitution is very interesting. The examples given are all significant softenings of [x] before both consonants, as in *destrale* (*Tab. Sul.* 15.2), *Espeditus* (*Tab. Sul.* 13.6), and before vowels.[49] However, the parallel substitutions *x* > *xs* suggest that [x] retained its harder sound. Therefore, it seems likely that classical [x] became much softer before a hard consonant, but kept its harder sound when preceding vowels. *Ussor* (*Tab. Sul.* 9.6, 9.8, 30.3) must, therefore, have changed in pronunciation with the softer -ss- sound. *Mascntius* (*Tab. Sul.* 37.8) is a name, and *laset[ur]* (*Tab. Sul.* 37.2) is conjectural; therefore, both are less likely to be reliable. The two instances of *-nd-* > *-md-* both come from *Tab. Sul.* 52, whose author uses very similar characters for m and n. Therefore, they do not seem to be significant. Tomlin ascribes the last two errors in nasal groupings to hypercorrection.[50]

The curse tablets, therefore, allow us to draw a few tentative conclusions about spoken language in the Bath area. There is strong evidence that [ae] and [e] became closer, and that the word final *-ae* was weakened and often lost entirely. The common vulgar Latin vowel trend [ĕ] > /ɛ/ took place around Bath, as did the phonological merger *i* > *e* (the case for which is strengthened by the evidence of their similarity in hiatus), although there is not sufficiently strong evidence to date these trends on the evidence of the Bath tablets alone. The evidence makes it very likely that *u* and *o* merged to a significant extent, but further work with British epigraphy might make a stronger case. The [ui] diphthong was preserved, but with a weak *i* component. The bilabial merger b/v is not seen, and this is in line with trends across the western empire which saw the merger later than more eastern areas. The loss of medial *-v-* is not of great phonological significance. It is very hard to draw conclusions as to the loss of medial *-g-* in several cases, and, again, further research into British epigraphy generally would help this. The phoneme [x] appears to have softened before consonants, but kept its hard sound before vowels. These conclusions tend to be in line with trends in vulgar Latin in the western empire generally, and these similarities suggest that Britain, and Bath in particular, was not linguistically isolated, but, presumably through regular contact with the European mainland, underwent broadly similar changes in language.

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Notes

1 Tomlin, 1988: 59.
2 Tomlin, 1988: 59. The tablets are published in full in Tomlin, 1988: 107–277.
3 For the difficulties inherent in declaring any feature to be geographically specific, see Adams, 2007: 582–612.
4 These constitute *Tab. Sul.* 1–3, 22–30, 46 (text cannot be reconstructed), 56, 58, 67–70, 72–93, 95–96, 104, 106, 109–111 the majority of these have only a few letters and traces, or consist of names alone.
5 Tomlin, 1988: 99.
6 Tomlin, 1988: 98–101 gives evidence for temple scribes in other areas, and does not give an unequivocal opinion.
7 Adams, 1992: 24–26. For a summary of these features see Tomlin, 1988: 63–74.
8 Tomlin, 1988: 88.
9 For an in depth review of the features and trends of second century Latin see Wright, 1982: 55–56; Grandgent, 1962; Pei, 1976: 271–276.
10 Väänänen, 1981: 27, 27–57.
11 Adams, 2007: 684–685.
12 In the most exhaustive recent study of the topic Adams (2007) takes up over 600 pages arguing for earlier diversification of Latin and his excellent arguments are too numerous to comment on here. In addition to these Väänänen (1981: 29–30) for variation in pronunciation attested in grammarians.
13 Wright, 1982: 55.

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14 Väänänen, 1981: 32–39. This is often reflected in the tablets, for example *d(e)ae Tab. Sul.* 19.3 is a phonetic spelling, but one that shows good awareness of the classical case system.
15 Bonfante (1999) in Hawkins, 2001: 90–91 and Edmondson, 2002: 48 are some of the more recent scholars to take this position.
16 Grandgent, 1962: 16 for the later practice of restoring prefixes.
17 Significant amounts of continental pottery, mainly with Gallic territories, have been found at the Bath site (Brown, 2007: 34–48). For an overview of British trade links with the Rhine provinces, see Hassall, M. 41–48.
18 For criticism of the archaic Britain theory and monogenetive model see Parsons, 2011: 115–116; Adams, 2007: 582–612.
19 Russell, 2011: 141–143 after Schrijver (2002) and Thomason and Kaufmann (1988) proposes significant substrate influence on morphosyntactical elements of southern British Latin by the native British languages. Russell demonstrates significant lexical borrowing on the part of the British languages, nevertheless it would be hard to identify the morphosyntactic elements suggested (143). Tomlin, 1988: 77 notes that the case structure is intact in the Bath corpus, but this does not refute the suggestion due to the problems with identifying syntactical features mentioned below. Hamp (1975), a proponent of the archaic British theory does propose large amounts of substrate influence, however his findings pre-date the discovery of the bath tablets and many other British inscriptions, making his conclusions problematic.
20 Tomlin, 1988: 63–68, 70–72 discusses legalistic language in some depth
21 Versteegh (2002: 64), other scholars have noted this with particular reference to the Bath curse tablets, as in Tomlin, 1988: 74
22 Fishman, 1991: 340–341; Trudgill, 1986: 1–38, for evidence for a situational shift to higher status variants of a language.
23 Methodology discussed at length in Adams, 2007: 6–7, 624–628.
24 Adams, 2007: 628.
25 Adams, 2007: 629.
26 Conventional notation will be followed throughout. Written Latin will be in italics, *exemplum*. Phonemes will be in square brackets [a]. Allophones will be between forward slashes /a/, using standard IPA notation.
27 Tomlin, 1988: 74.
28 Tomlin (1988: 74) suggests that the initial *ae* of *Aessicunia* is a hypercorrection, however, since names do not necessarily follow convention it may not be relevant.
29 Smith, 1983: 899–900.
30 Mann (1971: 220), very similar results have been found in studies of inscriptions in Spain, Edmondson, 2002: 48.
31 Pei, 1976: 271–272 for Vulgar Latin vowel mergers.
32 Tomlin, 1988: 75.
33 Pei, 1976: 271–272; Parsons 2011: 116.
34 Mann, 1971: 221.
35 Smith, 1983: 910–912 common also in Britain.
36 Tomlin (1988: 239) noting the same mistake in *Britannia*, xviii (1987), 360, No. 1.
37 Grandgent, 1934: 87; Smith, 1983: 908.
38 Mann (1971: 221) has a certain number of similar vowel changes,but not enough to be conclusive.
39 See Tomlin, 1988: 231, 94.
40 Smith, 1983: 934.
41 This tablet is extremely hard to read and quite fragmentary, it appears to be genitive *anulis* but not enough context can be restored to be sure of the word or its use.
42 Grandgent, 1934: 90.
43 Tomlin (1988: 75), no such native instances are recorded in Mann (1971). Parsons, 2011: 116 notes that this was true of a great deal of the western empire.
44 Pei, 1976: 271. Smith, 1983: 916 notes a similar *v* for *vv* on stone inscriptions.
45 Adams, 1990: 238–239.
46 Tomlin (1988: 75) this is his own reconstruction, but it seems likely that it is accurate, since it would be very odd to end a word *-aus*.
47 Tomlin, 1988: 76.
48 Mann, 1971: 221 *fegit* RIB 99; *sang(to)* RIB 1986; *sangto* RIB 1335. Smith, 1983: 913–914 regards them as scribal corruptions, which seems unlikely, but notes modern spanish *c-* for *g-* derivation in *gato*.
49 Tomlin, 1988: 76.
50 Tomlin, 1988: 76.