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On the Obelisk in the Poesis Osca by Jacob Balde

SOMMARIO

Nel 1647, Jacob Balde, SJ, crea un'opera d'arte linguistica: un obelisco con una profezia del Trattato di Ulma in lingua osca. Tra le parole in questo 'osco' creato artificialmente, il poeta inserisce immagini di stemmi, assimilando così il suo manufatto a un obelisco egizio, come se fosse screziato di geroglifici.

Parole chiave: Jacob Balde, lingua osca, antiquaria, obelisco, araldica.

ABSTRACT

In 1647, Jacob Balde, SJ, creates a linguistic work of art: an obelisk with a prediction of the Truce of Ulm in the Oscan language. Between the words in this artificially created 'Oscan', he places images of coats of arms, thus achieving similarity of his artifact with an Egyptian obelisk, as if dotted with hieroglyphs.

Keywords: Jacob Balde, Oscan language, antiquarianism, obelisk, heraldry.

In this essay I would like to straighten out one very ornately twisted parabola, a true creation of the Baroque era: namely, the coming into being of an obelisk, engraved with the prediction of the Truce of Ulm in the Oscan language. In 1647, Jakob Balde (1604-1668)¹, a German neo-Latin Jesuit poet, published a description of an imaginary memorial stone – an obelisk – engraved with the prophecies of the Treaty of Ulm, concluded between France, Sweden, and Bavaria on 14th March of the same year that this bizarre book was published². To show the antiquity of his archaeological artifact, Balde not only notes the damage to the stone, and, accordingly, the reason for the fragmentation of the inscription, but first of all asserts that it was composed in the Oscan language: a language that became extinct by the end of the 1st century BC, and now acknowledge thanks to epigraphic monuments dating from between 400 to 80 BC³. Naturally, Balde's 'Oscan' is a kind of archaized Latin, artificially created from the glosses of the ancients; but the choice itself is remarkable, as it convincingly reflects the Baroque taste for anything out of the ordinary, unusual and strange: such as the irregularly shaped pearls from which this period in art history takes its name (according to one of the etymologies).

Thus, it is the obelisk, engraved with the prediction of the Treaty of Ulm in Oscan, the subject under consideration here. Though the author never hides the

¹ Rediscovered in the 18th century by Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803), Balde, the 'German Horace', was never forgotten since, as can be seen from the constantly updated bibliography by Wilfried Stroh (<https://stroh.userweb.mwn.de/balde-bib.html>).

² BALDE 1647.

³ For a description of the corpus, see, most recently, POCETTI 2020, I am very grateful to the anonymous reviewers for suggesting me this title and for pointing out a typo here. Naturally, all remaining typos are mine, as well as all translations.

completely imaginary nature of his invention, the materiality of the obelisk is implicit in Balde's descriptions, as we shall see later. As an object, this monument had a very short biography: in the autumn of 1647, the Truce of Ulm that the obelisk celebrated was broken, but the Peace of Westphalia was signed a year later, thereby ending the 'Thirty Years' War. Nevertheless, though on paper, the Balde obelisk lives on and today its main value is as testimony to the interest in the Oscan language in premodern Europe. The two main questions of this study are Why an obelisk? and Why the Oscan language?

1. In Balde's time, even the sporadic use of archaic words in the production of Latin was considered inconsistent with the concepts of beauty in rhetoric; it was even worse with the words that the ancients glossed as of Oscan origin. Languages and dialects have reputations: some are considered more elegant and therefore attractive to imitate, others less so. Much to the regret of the Oscan language which was recognized as a distinct language (and not merely a primitive and barbaric phase of Latin) rather late⁴, for a long time, it was denied some inherent eloquence. This reputation was established in antiquity and, later, 15th and 16th centuries humanists merely echoed the ancients, whose status as the highest authorities in the matter of taste was indisputable. *Qui Obsce et Volsce fabulantur, nam Latine nesciunt* («Those who speak Oscan and Volscian, for they do not know Latin», fr. 175 Ribbeck), a quote from Titinius, a Roman author of the *fabula togata* from the first half of 2nd century BC, became a proverb for any illiterate with poor Latin. This expression became known throughout early modern Europe thanks to Erasmus of Rotterdam who included it in the *Adagia*, a collection of ancient proverbs and a true 16th century bestseller⁵. It is believed that Titinius' sentence even attracted the attention of Erasmus thanks to a certain Italian case.

In Rome in 1513, the young Mariangelo Accursio (1489-1546) – who would later become a distinguished classicist – published an *Osci et Volsci Dialogus*, where he re-enacted Titinius' phrase on stage⁶. A proverbial Oscan and Volscian were introduced, speaking together in a purposely monstrous and ridiculous mock Latin, until the personification of Roman eloquence enters the stage to whip them like negligent schoolchildren. Even his contemporaries recognized Giovan Battista Pio (c. 1468-1543), a philologist from Bologna, as a target of Accursio's parody⁷; however, the farther from Italy in time and space, the more insignificant the real events behind the *Osci et Volsci Dialogus* became. This text was to take on

⁴ Thus, for example, Carl D. Buck felt it necessary to emphasize, as late as 1904, that «Oscan was not a mere patois» at the opening of his *Grammar of Oscan and Umbrian* (BUCK 1904, 6). Whatever the reasons for such a statement, properly speaking, the Oscan is called language all the time, from «the earlier Roman authors» cited by Buck (*ibidem*) to, for example, Balde in this work (e.g. *De Veteri Oscanorum Lingua*, BALDE 1647, 1-2). But, in a meaning close to ours today, 'language' (as applied to the Oscan) began to be used from the end of the 18th century: POCCHETTI 2020, 466; POCCHETTI 2021, 243-245. I thank both anonymous reviewers for these bibliographical references and, in general, for their remarks which made me reconsider my original beliefs.

⁵ For a modern edition see SALADIN 2011.

⁶ ACCURSIO 1513; BENEDETTI 2013.

⁷ BENEDETTI 2020, 38-39, n. 123.

a life of its own, becoming popular with philologists, and was republished many times, especially in Germany⁸.

Denouncing the use of archaic Latin words has become a real obsession north of the Alps. Judging by the power of the metaphors used by the authors of treatises on rhetoric – dangerous rocks that threaten to wreck a ship – one would think that many cherished the Asian style⁹, but this is not so. Tom Deneire, who recently interested himself in discovering against whom all these warnings were written, found but only one representative¹⁰. At the same time, Accursio's satire continued to be reprinted, with prefaces repeating the trope about rocks, so that the reader would in no case decide to take the text offered by the reprint as a model¹¹. Like all satires, Accursio's exaggerates too: it renders Giovanni Battista Pio – a quiet and harmless university professor and pedant¹² – a caricature, exposing him as his complete opposite, two barbarians who distort Latin and consider the resulting language as the pinnacle of eloquence. But the question is precisely about language: such satire composed of the words of an artificial language can be found amusing only by similar pedants; as has been remarked on several occasions, it is very hard to believe that *Osci et Volsci Dialogus* could be showcased in the theatre as its title promised as none of the public would understand it¹³. Only in the library could its text bring laughter, read alongside a dictionary.

Balde's work is not a satire, although it contains some humorous notes. It is the first attempt to use the Oscan language not to ridicule a fellow Latinist, but as a gift to a Latinist friend. As the paratext of the book shows, *Poesis osca* is dedicated to *Memmius*, a French diplomat, one of the architects of the Peace of Westphalia, Claude de Mesmes, comte d'Avaux (1595-1650). As Ambassador of Louis XIV, he represented France in the negotiations in Münster that led to the Peace of Westphalia. D'Avaux was a polyglot with an impressive knowledge of classical languages and literature, and at the Westphalian Peace Congress he advocated for Latin to become the language of negotiation¹⁴. He had long noticed the talent of the young Balde as a poet and appreciated his poems. The two became fast friends. As Wilfried Stroh, in an article devoted to this friendship between a poet and a statesman, notes, nobody else at that time wrote so much about peace: Balde's poems were in demand among the (of course, elite) public¹⁵. And it is astonishing how, when asked by the French negotiators to immortalize Ulm's Truce in poem, our poet was able to find a whole new subject yet again¹⁶.

⁸ COMBONI 2020.

⁹ WILAMOWITZ-MÖLLENDORFF 1900; D'AMICO 1984.

¹⁰ DENEIRE 2011.

¹¹ CARVER 2007, 262-280.

¹² WATSON 1993, 12.

¹³ BENEDETTI 2020.

¹⁴ BRAUN 2005.

¹⁵ STROH 2017, 228.

¹⁶ STROH 2017, 237.

He decided to use the Oscan language in the *Drama georgicum* to represent the peasants, a category of people for whom no dramatic genre was prescribed. Dramatic genres were distributed by class: tragedy was intended for the aristocracy, comedy for the bourgeoisie, and peasants was assigned with idyll, poetic compositions in which they could undertake dialogues, but not act – their role was to blend into the landscape¹⁷. But just as collectively – as part of the countryside ravaged by the war – they are the most war-suffering part of the population¹⁸. In the introduction, Balde explains to the reader how he needed «rough, wild, and piercing» (*saevius, hispidis, stridentibus*) words to describe the horrors of war; he used the same lexical material – but in a more positive sense – to convey how the peasants should have enjoyed their long-awaited peace: just as harshly, but sincerely¹⁹.

Of course, he has to justify his choice of language adding a several-pages long insert in prose to his work (which can be compared to a certain dossier, a collection of rather heterogeneous texts) proffering reasons why archaic Latin should not be used in speech²⁰. In essence, he rewrites the main points of many writers before him. Balde shares the findings of previous discussions, literally following their results; by putting ‘Oscan’ words in the peasants’ mouths, he imagines how they could express their feelings there, in their simple huts, where rhetoric never entered. If the Oscan language is to be avoided because of its primitiveness, it would follow then that it would be best suited to represent archaic antiquity. And Balde knows that the oldest stages of a language are best preserved in the countryside, among the peasants²¹.

2. However, Balde does not limit himself to merely making excuses: he translates everything into pure Latin. Indeed, his idea works best between languages; his drama has no formal plot; his work consists in several texts in which the author reads the roles, alternating between Latin and ‘Oscan’, immediately translated into Latin. Used like magical lenses, the two languages allow us to watch the Bavarian peasants in the countryside celebrating the truce – all these visions will disappear as soon as the author falls silent. And he will fall silent when the waters of the magical source of inspiration from which he drinks dries up. Indeed, it is to these waters that the entire work owes its existence. The first pages of the dedication to Claude d’Avaux, together with another two pages summarizing the history of the Oscan language as it was known at the time, are followed by a description of our poet’s walk through the countryside. The first person he meets there is his long-time acquaintance, Thalia, the muse of comedy and bucolic poetry, whom the poet references in many of his poems²². She leads the poet to the spring, which Balde calls *Hipp-osco-crenes*: this neologism represents

¹⁷ BENJAMIN 1974, 244-245.

¹⁸ Cfr. BALDE 1647, 24.

¹⁹ BALDE 1647, 2.

²⁰ *Dissertatio post inventam Hipp-osco-crenem*, in BALDE 1647, 23-26.

²¹ BALDE 1647, 2.

²² See, e.g., KAGERER 2014, 648.

the transformation of the traditional spring of poetic inspiration, Hippocrenes, that was struck by the hoof of the winged horse Pegasus on Mt. Helicon, into a more ‘specialized’ spring for the most ancient, Oscan, poetry. «Plautus drank from here», Balde begins to list, «Actius, Lucretius etc.»²³, so he too follows their example and drinks the holy water, and, gradually, his language changes from pure Latin to less euphonious words, the Oscans. The text that follows is a record of a poetic fury, an *enthusiasmus* that lasted six hours, as Balde notes in one of the subtitles of his work²⁴. In the 1640s, he wrote several such ‘enthusiasms’ – poetic compositions describing possession by the spirit of Apollo or the Muses, known collectively as *furor poeticus*²⁵ – but in our case this genre takes on an unexpected new twist. The classic motif of a poet, whose body becomes a medium for the apollonian verb, usually implies perfect submission to the divine will, and, generally, agreement on both sides, but not in our case. Our poet does not obey the muse Thalia, who is trying to dissuade him from his intention to drink from the spring. In line after line of arguing, Thalia even resorts to threats, until she finally gives in and succumbs to the poet’s whim²⁶. Thus, Balde once again pays tribute to Oscan’s reputation as being unsuitable for poetry. On the other hand, it is the same poetic phrenzy that best justifies the introduction of Oscan in an *enthusiasmus*, when some roughness can be attributed to an overly zealous *furor poeticus*.

But even before Balde begins to speak ‘Oscan’ in verse, we learn that now his friend Didacus Cyrisatus²⁷ has joined the poet’s walk. Balde introduces this character to be a witness to his visions. Firstly, the poet needs a friend with whom to share the amazement of what is happening around them in the forest where they found themselves, and secondly, it is his learned friend who recognizes the inscriptions on the stone as Oscan. Indeed, the monument appears in the story in the most dramatic way. Suddenly, the forest is filled with sounds, which Balde compares to the ringing of bronze tympani produced by the worshipers of Cybele. The source of this metallic noise soon becomes clear: such tinnitus is emitted by the stone itself, dotted with mysterious writings and pictures. Didacus assumes that this is a fragment of Parnassus, and both friends imagine how it is transported to the forest by Fauns and Satyrs with their bare hands, without pulleys or levers or other special machines (*nullis trochleis aut vectibus aliove instrumento opus fuisse*)²⁸. If references to Fauns, Satyrs, Parnassus, and even the sounds of the cult of Cybele aimed to recreate the atmosphere of the

²³ BALDE 1647, 18-19.

²⁴ BALDE 1647, 13: *Inventio Hipp-osco-crenes. Auctor, socio Didaco Cyrisato, comitantibus ad obstacula viae removenda aliquot Satyris, post repertum mysticis plenum characteribus saxum, ad Hipp-osco-crenen penetrat. Bibit. Ex Romano vate fit Oscanus. Primitiae metamorphoseos et sancti furoris in laudes illustrissimorum Claudii et Henrici Memmiorum consumuntur. Enthusiasmus quem passus est auctor Idibus Julii anno MDCXLVII. Duravit sex horas.*

²⁵ For the *furor poeticus* in neo-Latin poetry in general see LEROUX, SÉRIS 2018, 151-313; for the *enthusiasmus* in Balde, see SMEESTERS 2018.

²⁶ BALDE 1647, 5-11.

²⁷ Identified as Johann Baptist Cysat (1587-1657), a Swiss Jesuit priest who was also a renowned mathematician and astronomer, in FALLER 2005, 275, n. 40.

²⁸ BALDE 1647, 61.

most generalized classical antiquity, this last detail comes from a more precise context.

3. All monographs and dissertations on obelisks focussed on the transportation thereof from Egypt to other countries (Rome especially). Camillo Agrippa (before 1535-after 1595), a Milanese fencer and engineer, even devoted an independent work to the issue of moving an Egyptian obelisk to St. Peter's Square in Rome²⁹. While these first studies, which began to appear in print in the 16th century, did not contain illustrations, the transportation of the *Obeliscus Pamphilius* in Athanasius Kircher's famous work was lavishly illustrated. While Agrippa describes an event he witnessed in words and without diagrams, Kircher uses engravings to illustrate the completely imaginary journey of an obelisk in ancient times: first by boats along the Nile and then by ships on the sea to Rome³⁰. Kircher's alleged 'decipherment' of the Egyptian hieroglyphs on Pamphili obelisk were printed in magnificent in-folio volumes a few years after the conclusion of the Peace of Westphalia and the publication of Balde's *Poesis osca*, but many in Europe knew that Kircher had been engaged in obelisks for twenty years before the solemn publication³¹. Although Balde makes no direct reference to his brother in the Jesuit Order, it looks like nevertheless he knew his work and, in any case, he followed the same pattern as Kircher.

It appears, indeed, as if Balde checks all the boxes of the standard description of an obelisk. In a poetic work, he contrasts the epic transportation of the obelisk by land and sea – a triumph of engineering – to the mythical creatures carrying the stone from Greece to Bavaria by sheer muscle strength alone. The next point that was always discussed, was the kind of stone from which an obelisk was cut. Michele Mercati (1541-1593), a physician at the papal court, for example, argued in his *Degli obelischi di Roma* that true Egyptian obelisks were always made only from red granite and no other stone³². In addition to numerous testimonies by ancient authors regarding the material of obelisks, Mercati, known for his interests in mineralogy, also cites samples that he saw in person and could identify their material. In Balde, as we have already said, this examination is entrusted to the learned friend Didacus Cyrisatus, who believed the monument to be a fragment of the Parnassus rock³³. The authoritative opinion of his friend is even more vital in regard to the third invariable point of all dissertations on obelisks: language and content of their inscriptions.

4. Curiously, the text regarding the obelisk does not appear in *Poesis osca* immediately, or even: rather like a hologram, there is interference of the image before it settles. Before being presented to the reader in the form of a careful transcription in the last pages of the *Poesis osca* with all missing syllables or letters

²⁹ AGRIPPA 1583.

³⁰ KIRCHER 1650, 90.

³¹ STOLZENBERG 2013.

³² MERCATI 1589, 3-13.

³³ BALDE 1647, 63.

noted, the obelisk is briefly described at the beginning in verse. Balde and Didacus have just found a stone with letters on it, which they begin to read:

Legamus: ALGU SERPULA CUM BOA
NO CET, GEMUR SIS FLE MINA, SIS PITI
LETUM SIBINNA. Sed, quid ista
significant, Cyrisate, verba?³⁴

Cyrisatus does not answer this question directly, he does not translate the phrase, but explains the context:

Anteiqua, credo, sunt ABORIGINUM
jamque OSCA sunt, per Palladis Aegidem
incisa contemplare saxo
ambiguos simulacra vultus,
ac discolores pone ferentia
et ante formas³⁵.

Thus, we understand that the serpents (*serpula cum boa*) in this enigmatic phrase refer to the Gorgon Medusa from the Gorgoneion on the armour of Athena, and that these words are carved around and thus contemplate those whom the gorgon's gaze turns to stone and that the meanings of the words do not remain the same but change over time. Although the friends read it from the stone, this initial phrase does not appear again in 'Oscan' language in the transcription of the full obelisk text. This example anticipates Balde's interpretive method with regard to all four sides of the obelisk: neither will the full text be translated by the author, but some images will be inserted between the 'Oscan' words to help the reader. As Didacus continues:

Non aliter suas
commiscet Aegyptus figuras,
cum loquitur, reseratque sensa
pictura mentis muta vicaria³⁶.

The mention of Egypt at this point helps the reader to imagine the author's intention to construct his fictional artifact as an obelisk with text interspersed with symbols: unlike obscure Oscan, Egyptian monuments with hieroglyphs were much better known amongst the learned public³⁷. The images that Balde uses interspersed with 'Oscan' words, were known to the public too: these are

³⁴ BALDE 1647, 16: «Let us read: *algu serpula cum boa nocet, gemursis flemina, sispiti letum sibinna*. But what do these words mean, Cyrisatus?».

³⁵ BALDE 1647, 16: «I believe, these are ancient, Oscan words of the original inhabitants. They are carved on the aegis of Athena to gaze at the strange faces of statues made of stone and having different shapes before and after».

³⁶ BALDE 1647, 16: «Not differently Egypt mixed its figures: when a picture speaks, it unlocks meanings, the picture, a mute vicar for the mind».

³⁷ CURRAN 2007; GIEHLOW 2015.

coats of arms of political powers that took part in the signing of the Ulm armistice. In the transcription, Balde will directly name the images as coats of arms as early as the very first footnote, but in the poetic ecphrasis of the obelisk, he can afford to be more mysterious and leave the reader alone to solve riddles³⁸. The authors' eye picks out symbols here and there, emphasizing how similar they are to Egyptian ones. Such comparisons divert the reader's attention, as aenigmas do. Indeed, a «foot, a vulture between the horns of a bull, a dog and an ox»³⁹ could sound very 'Egyptian', but in fact all these, like the rest of the symbols listed by Balde, are found on coats of arms⁴⁰. If a common reader at this stage could continue to be distracted by Egypt, unaware yet about heraldic imagery, the main reader of Balde's work, *Memmius*, should recognise his own coat of arms in these verses:

Subter Leonis bisgemini iubae.
 Utroque coelum Luna versus
 erigitur manifesta cornu.
 Nat stella tractus inter aquatiles⁴¹.

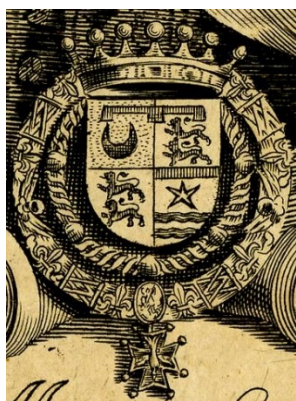


Figure 1. The coat of arms of the comtes d'Avaux, detail from the portrait of Claude de Mesmes in the British Museum (https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P_1868-2196-2196)

The twin lions, the moon, rising both its horns towards the sky, and the star swimming in the waves are all depicted on the coat of arms belonging to Claude de Mesmes, comte D'Avaux (cfr. fig. 1). If not for poetic meter and metaphors, such a description of the coats of arms, carved on stone, could pass for an epigraphic one.

At a time when common protocols for visual information notation had not yet been established, the methods for publishing epigraphic monuments were

³⁸ Cfr. Oedipus, mentioned by BALDE (1647, 18) in connection with the mysteries offered by his obelisk, and Kircher's title *Oedipus Aegyptiacus* (1652-1654); obviously both share a common imagery.

³⁹ BALDE 1647, 16: *Hic pes, et inter cornua bubali / vultur; remorsurove junctus / bubo cani* etc.

⁴⁰ This is especially evident in heraldic dictionaries, where different coats of arms are given for each element, e.g., PALLIOT 1664.

⁴¹ BALDE 1647, 17.

quite simple. As Christopher Wood emphasizes in an excellent article⁴², pre-modern epigraphists could not simply copy inscription texts if they wanted to give them special status, distinct from mere manuscript texts. Fixing the appearance of monuments on paper served not only to confirm their materiality and autopsy of transcription authors; sometimes scholars passed on texts that they themselves did not fully understand to their colleagues, either contemporary or future⁴³. Remarkably, this is exactly what Balde does with the full text on the obelisk. He transmits it but confesses that he does not dare translate it for fear of committing all possible kinds of errors, from linguistic ones to profanation of the sacred text addressed to Apollo. He puts his hopes on his readers, whom he teases to decipher the text in the manner of an exemplary schoolteacher. This is the most adventurous moment in the whole work, when the author conveys to the enthusiasm of two archaeologists, Balde and Didacus Cyrisatus, who had just discovered the obelisk in the forest, and, having already found out that these were ‘Oscan’ inscriptions, suddenly saw the numbers on it. First they see ‘forty’ and ‘seven’; moss, covering the stone, prevents the friends from seeing any other numbers, and after a moment of suspense, they pluck the moss off and see the ‘six hundredth’: that is, the very year in which they are, 1647, read backwards. There is no limit to their amazement and joy; the friends understand that they have found a message from the past, a prediction, and a cascade of exclamations follows:

Si Lapis iste praesagia spirat! si proponit aenigmata! si continet
numen inclusum! si Osco sermone, Phoebus in Obelisco latens
vaticinatur! si usque in nostra tempora, et quidem Annum
defluentem quadragesimum septimum procurrit! Quis autem
explicet? quis suis quaeque conferat locis, disponatque, ut
coniectare possit?⁴⁴

This last question, literally «who divides the passages, distributes them for a conjecture?», suggests that the original text on the obelisk was imagined by Balde to be written in one piece, without spaces between the words. As we know, ancient inscriptions were frequently created as conjoint letters without spaces between words, and in order to be understood, they had to be read aloud. Balde takes on this role: he dictates to his friend the words from the obelisk which learned Didacus writes down. The result of this reading is published as the final part of *Poesis osca*.

5. This transcription looks quite professionally done, even to a modern eye. Jacob Balde marked missing words with dashes (*truncatas, sive corruptas sententias*

⁴² WOOD 2001.

⁴³ WOOD 2001, 94.

⁴⁴ BALDE 1647, 63: «What if this stone breathes presages? Offers riddles? Contains the name of the deity? What if Apollo, hidden in the obelisk, vaticinates in the Oscan language? What if he has reached our times, the current year, one thousand six hundred and forty-seven? But who will explain? Who will arrange the text, making it suitable for an interpretation?».

linea subduximus) and missing syllables with an asterisk at the beginning or end of the words (*praemorsa capita vel extrema verborum, asterisco notata sunt*)⁴⁵. These dashes are calculated and not accidental: if a paper model is made from the printed text, then one can see, for example, that the author imagined the upper right corner of the obelisk was broken (fig. 2). The symbols are not drawn in the text (which would require completely different printing capacities, and Balde was apparently in a hurry with his offering) but are indicated by the letters of the footnotes (*literae inercialares, emblemata visa designant, ad calcem subijcienda*)⁴⁶. What makes me think that these *emblemata visa* should have been just mentally visualized in the text, and not, for example, read in the manner of rebuses? The meter of the inscription.

Line 31 in front of the stone (*auguralis saxi facies anterior*) can be read in full verse: *O Meddix bicolos: Coge admissivas Aves* («O two-colored Meddix, perceive favourable birds [i.e., positive prediction]»)⁴⁷. In the middle, after the word *bicolos*, one had to add an image, a shield, *chypeus*. If this three-syllable word were appended to a sentence, such a reading would break its poetic dimension, as well as its meaning. As a word *chypeus* would be unnecessary here, but very appropriate and even explanatory as an illustration. The word *chypeus* was struck on a taler that was in use in Bavaria at the time. Maximilian's coat of arms was on the other side of the taler and the text *Chypeus omnibus in te sperantibus* («Shield of all who put their hope on you») on the other⁴⁸. Thus, line 31 tells of the elector of Bavaria, he is *Meddix*, Oscan equivalent for *magistratus*⁴⁹. The adjective *bicolos*, two-coloured, was meant to show white and blue, colours that still symbolize Bavaria today. A few lines above, footnote *i* means *fascēs colligati*: a bundle of wooden rods, tied with leather strips, so the reader had to imagine their image between the words. At the same time, the *fascēs* were in the coat of arms belonging to Cardinal Mazarin (1602-1661), who represented France in the Treaty of Ulm. In ancient Rome, a *lictor* carrying the *fascēs* had to follow a government official and personify power with his willingness to punish transgressors. Assuming this was the intention, the mention of the *fascēs* along with Elector Maximilian and Cardinal Mazarin becomes clear: the former is imagined by the poet as a *magistratus* who gives orders, and the latter by the role of *lictor*, as a representative of the executive power. The pictures were not supposed to be read; they have to be imagined as if they were drawn as illustrations of a poem.

Perhaps not all iconic images inserted between Balde's words should have pointed to specific persons. On the right edge of the obelisk an image of a Triton

⁴⁵ BALDE 1647, 64.

⁴⁶ BALDE 1647, 64.

⁴⁷ BALDE 1647, 65. The phrase «favourable birds» is a quotation from the dictionary of the Roman antiquarian Festus (*De verborum significatione libri XX*, s.v. *Admissivae aves*), whom Balde directly names among his sources (BALDE 1647, 25).

⁴⁸ Kreismuseen Alte Bischofsburg Wittstock, <https://brandenburg.museum-digital.de/index.php?t=objekt&oges=7668>.

⁴⁹ See, e.g., the voice *Meddix* in LAUREMBERG 1622, 270. The same term is considered in context in one of the recent titles, CAPPELLETTI 2011, for which I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer.

(*Triton Marinus*) was supposed to be in a verse with a word missing the beginning, which is marked with an asterisk (*At tu ventos* - - - *ockolmia, face*)⁵⁰. This is Stockholm, *Stockolmia*, and it is *ventosa*, windy. With Triton, it was apparently meant to refer to Sweden as a naval power. At the same time, these heraldic symbols also form the pictoriality of the verses themselves: the image of Pegasus was to be added to the line in which Apollo is spoken⁵¹. This winged horse does mean poetry, but the same image was represented on coats of arms, both contemporary to Balde and ancient⁵². The symbols follow each other line by line; those readers who enjoyed solving riddles found plenty of food for thought here.

Naturally, it is difficult for us today to do the same: all these symbols were probably familiar to Balde readers, but for the most part they are mysterious to us. If Balde had not limited himself to words in the footnotes alone but had placed images between the words of the inscription, we could be more certain which coats of arms he had in mind. As is known, in heraldry a virtually infinite number of variations is achieved not only by varying the geometric shapes and background colours of the coats of arms, but also by the characteristic postures of the figures. For example, animals on coats of arms can be found in several positions: an indication *ursus* as in Balde⁵³ is not enough to identify the coat of arms, since the bear can stand on all four paws or only on two, as on the coat of arms of Berlin, or may be represented by its head alone. Where we today must scroll through ancient heraldic treatises⁵⁴, for Balde's contemporaries these symbols were, on the contrary, meant to illuminate the meanings of his work.

The Truce of Ulm, but especially the Peace of Westphalia, was celebrated with many works of art, paintings and jewellery, goblets and statues. Balde the *Sprachkünstler* («linguistic artist» as brilliantly called by Wilfried Stroh⁵⁵), shows himself no less a virtuoso among other great artists, whose imagination was determined by the tastes of the epoch (mythological allegories), by individual craftsman skills and by physical properties of the material. Balde's original impulse to erect a monument to the Truce of Ulm determined all the other elements of his creation. It is not surprising that he chose the obelisk: being a very mastered form in the cultural space, it provided more surface for text along all four sides than a commemorative plate. As for the hieroglyphs – an indispensable attribute of an obelisk – Balde's other, more original, decision to use Oscan as the language of inscription also contained several implications, developed by him with all virtuosity. This choice allows Balde to create the illusion of a truly ancient inscription and to reason about beauty in rhetoric and poetry in a non-trivial way: through dialogues between a poet and a nymph, or between peasants and Mercury, or between an archaeologist Balde and a friend, a sophisticated epigraphist, but above all between the author and the reader.

⁵⁰ BALDE 1647, 69.

⁵¹ BALDE 1647, 65, n. c. *Equus alatus*.

⁵² PALLIOT 1664, 59; CASAUBON 1615, 8.

⁵³ BALDE 1647, 67, n. b.

⁵⁴ [SIEBMACHER], 1657.

⁵⁵ STROH 2017, 241.

Reconstructed from Latin, his Oscan is a tame variant of an ancient mysterious language, with an appropriate balance between the cryptic and the familiar. For his reader, the pleasure of the text, like the pleasure of examining a piece of jewellery, came from recognizing familiar Latin words in their archaic forms, but also from noticing completely new and unusual elements, both linguistic and visual.

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Figure 2. Model of Balde's obelisk, made and photographed by the author