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Oscan VAAMUNIM*

TIMO SIRONEN

*...ad vanum et inritum
victoriam redactam esse...*

Liv. 26,37,8

I. Introduction

One of the numerous Oscan hapax legomena is the noun VAAMUNIM,¹ which has been preserved – unfortunately enough – only five times in an identical archaeological / topographical context. Each example is painted in unusually high (38 cm) red letters on five columns of the southern and the eastern colonnades of the Forum in Pompeii. Below one of these a Latin painted inscription, also in red letters (h. 5,5 cm), reading *Victor* or *Victoria*, can be discerned with difficulty.²

* I am most grateful to Ph.D. Martti Nyman, who pointed out many aspects and insisted on examining everything more systematically and profoundly. I also wish to thank Prof. Paavo Castrén for his precious comments as well as Prof. Dr. Klaus Strunk (Munich) for his constructive criticism. The remaining faults and insufficiencies are of course mine.

¹ E. Vetter, *Handbuch der italischen Dialekte I*, Heidelberg 1953, no. 33. CIL IV 674. Rosalba Antonini, *Iscrizioni osche pompeiane*, SE 45 (1977) 337: only four of the inscriptions are left. My autopsy dates to 16 April 1988 and agrees with that of Antonini. There was no trace of the fifth inscription, which, according to Vetter, possibly might have had VAAMÚNIM with Ú.

² CIL IV 674 by Zangemeister (for *Victor*). Vetter read *Victoria* and I am inclined to agree with him, even though the last letters are extremely shabby.

I think it has never been seriously discussed whether the Oscan inscription and the Latin one are to be dated to the same period³ or not, and, furthermore, if both or at least one of them can be dated to a particular period, and perhaps even connected with some important historical event, e.g. the Social War 90-88 B.C. Naturally, we do have both a relative *terminus post quem*⁴ and an absolute *terminus ante quem*⁵ to rely on, but the margin would remain far too wide. It is probable, however, that both inscriptions belong to the period between the beginning of the 1st century B.C. and A.D. 79.⁶

Various interpretations of the meaning of VAAMUNIM have been proposed, most common of them being 'victory' as an exact equivalent (i.e. translation) of the Latin word *Victoria* immediately below.⁷ This combinatory method is obviously the most applicable, if we can suspect the inscription to be bilingual. Another interpretation is to take VAAMUNIM as a gentilicium name, '*Vamoniōrum*' (genitive plural), though in the first place we do not as yet know of

³ We do have Greek-Oscan bilingual graffiti even from Pompeii and an Oscan-Latin bilingual inscription on a tilebrick from Pietrabbondante in Samnium: P. Poccetti, *Nuovi documenti italici*, Pisa 1979, no. 120*ab* and no. 21*ab* (= CIL I² 3556a, actually originally from Venafrum or Bovianum). Cf. Poccetti, *op.cit.* no. 187*ab*, possibly a Greek-Oscan bilingual inscription, from Cirò (Brettii).

⁴ The construction of the columns (*porticus*) in tufa around the Forum, datable to the end of the Samnite period, i.e., conventionally, the end of the 2nd century B.C. Cf. A.& M. de Vos, *Pompei Ercolano Stabia (Guide archeologiche Laterza)*, Bari 1982, 32-33.

⁵ The definitive destruction in the disaster of A.D. 79.

⁶ Some inscriptions, such as election advertisements were restored during the Roman period at Pompeii. - H. Nissen, *Pompeianische Studien zur Städtekunde des Altertums*, Leipzig 1877, 509 ff., supposed that the VAAMUNIM inscriptions had served for the orientation of troops (as the so-called EITUNS inscriptions, Vetter nos. 23-28, found in various points on housewalls in Pompeii).

⁷ So first Fiorelli in *Monumenta epigraphica Pompeiana* p. 11, then followed by R. von Planta (and Vetter). - Even though the name of the Roman divinity *Victoria* and her cult was adopted by the Italians in the era of the Social War (attested VIKTURRAÍ in Poccetti, *op.cit.* no. 16, from Pietrabbondante in Samnium), it could not have abolished the proper Oscan word meaning 'victory' nor alter the semantic field concerned. I wonder why the supporters of the 'victory'-hypothesis never brought forth the passage of Vell. 2,27,6: *Felicitatem diei, quo Samnitium Telesinique pulsus est exercitus, Sulla perpetua ludorum circensium honoravit memoria, qui sub eius nomine Sullanae Victoriae celebrantur*. Note the words *perpetua memoria* and *Sullana victoria*. Though it is quite improbable that there was any commemoration of the Sullan victory at Pompeii, with ceremonies such as a procession through the Forum, not to mention games, probably organized exclusively at Rome.

any *Vamonius* either in Latin or in Oscan onomastics, and in the second, the ending -IM would be irregular.⁸

Another interpretation could be seen in *vadimonium*, as a loanword from Latin. This will be briefly discussed below in paragraph II: there are some phonetic difficulties, even if not insuperable.⁹

Reconstructing an earlier form of VAAMUNIM we would have an Italic **vāmōnīom*, if we can take for granted that the word is not abbreviated. We can discern an obvious or, at least, a plausible (deverbative) suffix **-mōnīom*. This suffix is well known and fairly common in Latin. The difference between deverbative and denominative *-mōni-* seems not to be totally clear according to M. Leumann,¹⁰ even though most of them are denominative in Latin. In the scarce material of the Italic dialects, we possess only a few cases of the parallel suffix *-mōn-*: in Umbrian AĀRMUNE and PUEMUNE(S), in Vestinian *poimunie-n* and in Paelignian *semunu*, possibly corresponding to Umbrian SEMENIE(S). But all of these are proper names and quite irrelevant for the semantics of the abstract suffix **-mōnīom*.¹¹ Thus VAAMUNIM remains the only case in which the suffix is clearly identifiable and the word is probably not a proper name, but rather an (abstract) general noun.

⁸ One would expect to have -IUM; Zangemeister in CIL IV 674

⁹ Actually, as it seems, this has never been proposed *expressis verbis*, cf. though R. von Planta, *Grammatik der oskisch-umbrischen Dialekte*, Strassburg 1892-97, II § 266.3 on p. 67-68 (on the suffix *-men*). Cf. also J. Perrot, *Les dérivés latins en -men et -mentum*, Paris 1961, esp. p. 25.

¹⁰ M. Leumann, *Lateinische Laut- und Formenlehre*, München 1977, § 276 B 1 and 3 on p. 297, though only two deverbative examples, *alimonium* and *querimonium*, are mentioned to exist. – Anyway, the suffix *-mōnīum* was first connected with VAAMUNIM by F. Bücheler in *RhM* 33 (1878) 50. Cf. the possible parallel suffix *-μωνωμ* in Vetter no. 181c (= Poccetti no. 157) from Rossano di Vaglio.

¹¹ Cf. von Planta, *op.cit.* II § 276.3 on p. 68. There is a possible interference phenomenon of suffix from Latin to Oscan, cf. Oscan TRÍSTAAMENTUD (Vetter, *op.cit.* no. 11 from Pompeii) from Latin *testamentum*.

II. vadimōnium

The temptation to explain VAAMUNIM as a Latin loanword is great. Despite a minor phonetic difficulty the semantics and the topographical context – possibly even the institutional circumstances – would fit in quite well. As regards phonetics, we must suppose that first a syncope took place: **vadimōnium* > **vadmōnium*, creating a phonotactically unacceptable *-dm-*sequence, which was got rid of by pronouncing **vammōnyem* or **vāmōnyem*.¹² It is not at all impossible to see in VAAMUNIM another Latin loanword such as several other institutional loans,¹³ particularly as probably some kind of a lawcourt was situated nearby the Forum, like the Basilica.¹⁴ Thus, VAAMUNIM could be translated 'surety', 'place to present oneself in court', 'guarantee that a defendant will appear before the magistrate at an appointed date', 'bail' or 'security'; in Greek it would correspond to ἐγγύη, πιστόν, παρουσία or ἐγγυᾶσθαι κριθῆναι.

In any case, an Oscan vadimonium would be an institutional novelty, be it coined as a direct Latinism or as an institution of Hellenistic influence present in Campania. But unfortunately enough, it must be noted that there is no trace of a Latin (painted) inscription with a similar indication,¹⁵ and so it remains a mere hypothesis.

¹² This kind of "secondary lengthening" is not common on Oscan (though our material is quite scarce) and would indicate that the possible borrowing is to be dated to an early period. I would not dare to say that the so-called Italic initial accent, if it ever existed at all, could have also contributed to this particular "lengthening" of /a/ (cf. C.D. Buck, *A Grammar of Oscan and Umbrian*, Boston 1928², § 77.2).

¹³ This is quite evident e.g. in the text of the Tabula Bantina and elsewhere just before the definitive Romanization: AÍDIL, KENZSTUR (?), LÍGAT-, KVAÍSSTUR/κφαιστορ, SENAT-/σενατ-, *praefucus*, *pr(aetor)*, *q(uaestor)*, *tr(ibunus) pl(ebis)* and MÚLTASIK-/molto plus *dolom*; cf. E.T. Salmon, *Samnium and the Samnites*, Cambridge 1967, 88-90. It must be noted, though, that the text of the Tabula Bantina contains an unusually high amount of administrative and juridical terminology of Latin origin, as is natural in connection with the Romanizing census.

¹⁴ The Basilica can be dated to 130-120 B.C., cf. de Vos, *op.cit.* 35-37. On the walls there have been found Oscan graffiti and tilebrick stamps NI.PUPIE. We can also suppose that the South-Eastern corner of the *porticus*, near the *Comitium* (cf. de Vos, *op.cit.* 38-39, dating it to the end of the Samnite period) was used for juridical affairs; or possibly all took place in the open air.

¹⁵ Probably there was no need for this kind of indications at all, everybody knew where to go in these affairs.

III. < *uā-mōniom

I would be inclined to support the most common interpretation, i.e. 'victory' (or rather its semantic opposite, as will be seen further below), as the most probable explanation, but it needs further argumentation, both etymological and historical, in order to render it yet more convincing and precise, on a more interdisciplinary basis.

Firstly, I would not at all be too convinced that the word in question corresponds precisely to the Latin word *victoria/victor*, as regards the semantics, at least not necessarily. It could also mean exactly the opposite, '*clades*' or '*exitium*'. It is this what the etymology to be presented below would indicate; obviously, this requires the presentation of some facts regarding the historical context, not least for the synchronic meaning of the word.

But, first of all, we must examine the etymology of the verbal root which has so far remained without explanation. I would suggest the IE verbal root *uā-, 'to hit', 'to wound', even though it is attested only in the Greek and the Baltic branches,¹⁶ with the variant entry *uen- well attested in the German, the Celtic and the Slavic branches.¹⁷ Another, closely related etymology must be mentioned in this connection: the same *uā- / *eu- / *uə-, meaning 'empty', 'desolated', and attested in Indo-Iranian, Greek, Latin (cf. *vānus*, *vāstus*), German, Celtic and Baltic languages.¹⁸ The verb of this root in Sanskrit is particularly interesting: *vāyati*, 'is extinguished', 'is deprived of'.¹⁹ Thus we could assert that the meaning of VAAMUNIM would be something like 'hitting', 'wounding' or 'desolation', taken as a deverbative noun. Further semantic alternatives will be presented in English, Latin and Greek.

¹⁶ J. Pokorny, *Indogermanisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*, Bern 1959, I 1108.

¹⁷ *Idem* *ibid.*

¹⁸ *Idem* *ibid.* I 345-346. In laryngealistic terms *ueə₂*.

¹⁹ M. Mayrhofer, *Kurzgefasstes etymologisches Wörterbuch des Altindischen I-IV*, Heidelberg 1953-1980, III 189-190.

IV. The historical context (reconstructed)

The most probable historical context of the Oscan VAAMUNIM inscriptions (and, naturally, that of the Latin *Victoria/Victor*) might be that of the Social War or of the Sullan era just after it, say 90-80 B.C.; I suppose the inscriptions in both languages are more or less contemporaneous. Anyway, if we do not accept VAAMUNIM as a Latin loanword deriving from *vadimonium*, we would have two or three possible explanations of the word and its context: either 'victory' (i.e. 'wounding of others'), 'defeat' (i.e. 'wounding by others') or, more generally, 'desolation', referring to the bitter battle of Italy between the rebel Italians and the Romans, in this case in Pompeii and its immediate surroundings.²⁰ VAAMUNIM could also have a concrete meaning, referring to a place where public executions took place.²¹

* * *

We can be quite sure that the VAAMUNIM inscriptions were written by an (Oscan-speaking) Italian, but less sure that *Victor(ia)* was written by a (Latin-speaking) Roman, if not by a Romanized (or Philoroman) Italian. Anyway, we cannot suppose a complete bilingualism even in Pompeii.²² It seems probable that

²⁰ We do not know in details what happened immediately after the Sullan siege in Pompeii. Probably some leaders were executed, but most of the residents were just confiscated of their real estates and properties. We know that Pompeii was among the rebel insurgents: App. BC 1,39; Diod.Sic. 37,2,4 counts it among Nola and its neighbour towns. In the spring of 89 B.C. we know that Pompeii was besieged by Sulla and as L. Cluentius, the South Campanian meddix, tried to come to the aid of the Pompeians, he was slain by Sulla near Nola: App. BC 1,50 (giving the incredible figure of one Roman and 50.000 Italic dead [not 23.000 as Salmon, op.cit. 366, mistakenly gives, obviously relying on the Loeb translation, which is incorrect]; the figure is naturally Sullan propaganda, but such a slaughter cannot be excluded to have taken place, in view of other Sullan slaughters on Samnites, such as the slaying of all the Samnite prisoners of the battle fought in the spring of 82 at Sacriportus [Plut. Sulla 28,8]; for the slaughter of the prisoners of the battle of the Colline Gate, cf. notes 23 and 24).

²¹ Naturally execution in such a public place as the Forum was better understood as a clear example which would serve as a warning.

²² We possess only one clearly Roman name written in Oscan at Pompeii: P. KUIÍRINIS (Vetter, op.cit. no. 59c) and perhaps another, MA. KASTRIKIÍEÍŚ (ibid. no. 25). Romans had naturally much less need of Oscan than Sabellians (or Italians) had of Latin, at least in

both inscriptions are documents of (civil) war propaganda of private citizens. VAAMUNIM would hardly have occurred in a resigned, self-ironical sense of 'surrender'. The meanings 'death-blow', 'fall', 'ruin(ous mischief)', 'doom', 'defeat', 'slaughter', 'massacre' and 'execution' will do in English. 'Clades', 'perniciēs', 'exitium', 'plaga' and 'supplicium' would be Latin equivalents. In Greek we would have τιμωρία, ὄλεθρος, διαφθορά, φόνος, σφαγή, θανάτωσις and θάνατος. In fact, many of the historiographical sources use very strong expressions about the cruelties of Sulla on Samnites.²³

I wonder if VAAMUNIM or its Latin equivalents were yelled – if not even hastily written – in the battles around Pompeii, at Sacriportus, by the Colline Gate at Rome

official use and commerce, throughout Italy after, and partly even before the Social War. I am preparing a study on this subject.

²³ There are numerous sources, e.g. App. BC 1,82: ... λύμας καὶ θανάτους...καὶ ἀναίρεσιν ὄλως ἀθρόαν, *ibid.* 1,93; Plut. Sulla 30,2-3 and 31,1, further Dio fr. 109,4-9; Strab. 5,4,11 and Liv. epit. 88 plus [Victor] de vir. ill. 75. Some of the verbs occurring in these passages are: *trucido*, (ἀπο)σφάττω, κατακόπτω, διαφθείρω, ἀποκτείνω, φονεύω and κατακοντίζω. – That the battle of Porta Collina was held to be decisive can be read in Vell. 2,27,1-3 (the point of view of Pontius Telesinus): ...*dux Samnitium, vir...Romano nomini infestissimus, contractis circiter XL milibus fortissimae pertinacissimaeque in retinendis armis iuventutis... circumvolans ordines exercitus sui Telesinus dictitansque adesse Romanis ultimum diem vociferabatur eruendam delendamque urbem, adiiciens numquam defuturos raptores Italicae libertatis lupos, nisi silva, in quam refugere solerent, esset excisa. ..Telesinus postera die semianimis repertus est, victoris magis quam morientis vultum praeferens...*, together with Strab. 5,4,11: ... τούτους (scil. τοὺς Σαυνίτας) σχεδόν τι μόνους συμμένοντας ἑώρα...τοὺς μὲν ἐν τῇ μάχῃ κατέκοψε, κελεύσας μὴ ζωγρεῖν...ἅπαντας ἀπέσφαξε, προγραφάς τε ποιούμενος οὐκ ἐπαύσατο πρὶν ἢ πάντας τοὺς ἐν ὀνόματι Σαυνίτων διέφθειρεν ἢ ἐκ τῆς Ἰταλίας ἐξέβαλε· πρὸς δὲ τοὺς αἰτιωμένους τὴν ἐπὶ τοσοῦτον ὀργὴν ἔφη καταμαθεῖν ἐκ τῆς πείρας ὡς οὐδέποτ' ἂν εἰρήνην ἀγάγοι. Ῥωμαίων οὐδὲ εἰς ἕως ἂν συμμένωσι καθ' ἑαυτοὺς Σαυνίται. The attitude of Sulla is quite totalitarian.

The ferocity of Sulla was condemned clearly by Florus, 2,9,5 (= 3,21,5) *Ultimo.....rabiem supergressum est...eo usque odiis saeventibus, donec deessent qui occiderentur* and *ibid.* 2,9,24 (= 3,21,24) *Quattuor milia deditorum inermium civium in Villa Publica interfici iussit*, as well as later by Orosius 5,21,1 *Sulla mox atque Urbem victor intravit, tria milia hominum, qui se per legatos dediderant, contra fas contraque fidem datam inermes securosque interfecit.*

and during or immediately after the executions following it.²⁴ In this sense the graffiti traditions are still alive in the modern world, wherever there are civil wars.²⁵

²⁴ Cf. Dio fr. 109,4: ...αὐτῶν...θνησκόντων πολὺς μὲν θόρυβος πολὺς δὲ καὶ θρῆνος οἴμωγαί τε καὶ ὀδυρμοί... Note the words describing the lamenting and wailing noise of the executed. Cf. also Plut. Sulla 30,3, using the word κραυγή, 'crying', 'screaming' or 'shrieking'. Probably there was some protest, if we may trust the last words in the passage of Orosius cited in the precedent note; but we do not know if it was any more possible to be expressed *per legatos*, in Latin, as the surrender three days before.

²⁵ Cf. e.g. *boia*, 'executioner', frequently on walls of modern Rome. The latest renaissance of this kind of graffiti tradition has been recently seen in Rumania.