

ONCE MORE *MATAVITATAU*

gladium tamen strinxī et †matavitatau† umbras cecidi, donec ad villam amicae meae pervenerim.

Within the last decade two attempts to solve this crux in Petronius 62. 9 have graced the pages of this journal. The first by G. R. Watson (*CP* 60 [1965]: 118) is one of the best yet made; the other by K. F. C. Rose (*CP* 62 [1967]: 259) is less convincing, although Rose has put his finger on the flaw in Watson's argument. Unfortunately, both scholars were unaware that, at the time of writing, a resolution of the matter was at hand that had the advantage of being very satisfactory without doing violence to the received text. They may, however, be excused for the oversight, since the explanation lay hidden in a study that would hardly lead Petronian scholars to suspect its existence.

Franz Dölger,¹ pointing to the fact that the letter *T* (*tau*) was used to designate soldiers who survived battle in the same way that *theta* indicated those who had fallen, saw a quite understandable juxtaposition of *vita* and *tau*. This led him to postulate that *mata* was a soldiers' word for "death," formed from the Semitic *mat*, as in *checkmate*—"the shah is dead." It is interesting to note that W. B. Sedgwick (*The "Cena Trimalchionis" of Petronius*² [Oxford, 1950], p. 145) also recognized this possibility. Therefore, according to Dölger, *matavitatau* is a strong soldiers' expression or exclamation (*Kraftausdruck*) acquired in Syria: "death, life, tau!"

This perceptive analysis, however, can be improved upon. The use of *tau* with *vita* would logically have called for the balancing of *mata* with a *theta*. If this was the case, it is probable that the *theta* appeared before the *mata*; for then there was no intrusion between *mata* and *vita*, and a chiasmus was created that carried further the cross symbolism inherent in both the *tau* and the rhythmic repetition of the *t*.² We should remember that in Ezekiel 9: 4–9 the *taw* marked the foreheads of those whom death passed by, that the Semitic *taw* was written as a *crux decussata* or a *crux quadrata*, and that Roman soldiers were often marked on their foreheads with the *crux decussata*.³ Consequently, I suggest that *matavitatau* should be emended to *thetamatavitatau*.

But what does *thetamatavitatau* mean in this passage? Obviously it contains a simple statement: "theta is death; life is tau." The implication is that the difference between life and death is insignificant—a slight puff of air. This was exactly the attitude of the *devotus* whose life was dedicated to some higher purpose, of the soldier filled with *furor* in battle, of the Germanic *Berserker*, and, in modern times, of the Malay running amok. Therefore, the expression contains the idea of madly throwing caution to the winds. I would then translate *thetamatavitatau* adverbially as "furiously" or "frenziedly": "But I drew my sword and furiously killed shadows until I came to my girlfriend's house." Rose is correct in observing that only one verb is needed to describe what happened to the shadows.

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1. "Beiträge zur Geschichte des Kreuzzeichens II," *JbAC* 2 (1959): 20–22.

2. See my *Mithraic Origin and Meanings of the Rotas-Sator Square*, *Études préliminaires aux religions orientales dans l'Empire romain*, 37 (Leyden, 1973), pp. 2–4, 7–9, 11 f., for discussion of the pagan significance of cross symbolism and the *T-taw*.

3. H. Lilliebjörn, *Über religiöse Signierung in der Antike mit besonderer Berücksichtigung der Kreuzsignierung* (Uppsala, 1933), pp. 38–41, 63–78; H. von Heintze, "Studien zu den Porträts des 3. Jahrhunderts n. Chr.," *RhM* 64 (1954): 69 ff.