

Introduction

This study focuses on analyzing, primarily through literary and epigraphic sources, the figures of the *delicati* and *delicia* in the Latin-speaking Roman Empire during the Imperial period—an aspect that remains problematic and has yet to be unanimously interpreted.

Delicati, often equated with *delicia* or *deliciae*, are portrayed in literary tradition as young individuals of servile or, at most, libertine status, mostly very young, admired for their beauty and grace, and designated to accompany their masters throughout various daily activities—at the table, during play, in the bath, while walking—therefore becoming objects of affection for their *domini*, sometimes even the focus of sexual attention. However, the erotic connotations sometimes associated with the relationship between the *dominus* and the *delicatus/delicium/deliciae*, particularly in literary sources, appear to be contradicted by epigraphic evidence, which presents an image of a slave integrated into the emotional life of the family to which they belonged.

This discrepancy necessitated a more in-depth investigation of the available sources, beginning with the etymological-lexical field to attempt to clarify, as much as possible, the controversial derivation of the adjective *delicatus*, *-a*, *-um* from the term *lax* or *-lex* and a compound of the verb *lacio*, *-is*, *-ere*, that is, *delicio*. This step allowed for delineating the extent of the influence of various common terms, such as *delicia*, *deliciae*, and *delicium*, on the formation of the adjective. Moreover, a meticulous review of literary sources enabled the identification of occurrences of both the adjective and the nouns under investigation, with the aim of delineating any existing semantic boundaries between them and determining the possible contexts of their application.

The research then extended into the philological-literary field, focusing on a precise and attentive analysis of Latin literary sources that mention *delicati* and *delicia*. For this aspect of the research, a rigorous and analytical examination of all passages by ancient authors was crucial to attempt to reconstruct the evolution of these terms from their first appearance in the comedies of Plautus. This work allowed for the isolation of the erotic connotation of the term *deliciae* and, rarely, and only in the elegiac genre, of the adjective *delicatus*.

The third line of investigation involved analyzing epigraphic sources, dedicated to the collection and study of all inscriptions bearing the terms *delicatus*, *delicia*, *deliciae*, and *delicium*, along with their variants. The choice was made to focus on inscriptions where these terms were used in reference to people, thereby excluding those inscriptions where the terms were used as, for instance, *cognomina*, or in reference to animals or situations like

states of mind or emotions. The selected sources were collected in a catalogue derived from a review of the *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum* (CIL) and all relevant *corpora* and epigraphic journals. Online databases, particularly the Epigraphic Database Roma (EDR) and the Clauss-Slaby Database (EDCS), significantly contributed to this effort. Despite the meticulousness of the research, there is a possibility that some data may have been overlooked, for which I take full responsibility.

The epigraphic collection not only enabled the creation of a prosopographical profile of the *delicati* and *delicia* in the Roman Empire but also facilitated analyses of the different geographical distributions of these terms. Based on these data, it was possible to recognize a technical use of the term when applied to slaves within their own families. Sometimes, although cautiously, these terms can be interpreted as expressions of affection or epithets with which parents—usually slaves or freedmen, and thus unable to legally claim the blood relationship—commemorated their biological children on funerary monuments.

For this aspect, the research was enriched by socio-anthropological studies focused on families formed by former freedmen and legal studies dedicated to the examination of legislative sources related to so-called informal manumissions—those that occurred against the legislative provisions of the Augustan era. Some *delicati* and *delicia* were certainly manumitted according to this practice.

The work is organized into four parts. The first part opens with a chapter entirely dedicated to the history of studies, where different hypotheses proposed since the eighteenth century regarding the status of the *delicati* are presented, with an effort to establish the *status quaestionis*. The discussion begins with the reflections of Raffaello Fabretti, the first scholar to hypothesize a familial and affectionate relationship between *dominus* and *delicatus*, an opinion later fully shared by Ludovico Antonio Muratori, and continues to more recent works, particularly those related to the history of sexuality in the ancient world. This chapter also highlights the diversity of research methods employed by eighteenth-century scholars, who were more attentive to “non-literary” sources, such as numismatic, archaeological, and epigraphic evidence, considered more truthful and immediate, compared to nineteenth-century scholars, who were more inclined toward the rediscovery of literary sources. The studies conducted by Arnaldo Momigliano were particularly important in deepening these aspects.

The second part is reserved for analyzing the linguistic aspect of the problem and consists of a chapter dealing

with the etymological issue, followed by a chapter where the semantic question is developed, with an examination of literary passages in which the adjective *delicatus*, *-a*, *-um* and the terms *delicia*, *deliciae*, and *delicium* appear. This chapter attempts to illustrate the various fields of application and document that while there are sometimes strong semantic similarities, they do not entirely coincide. In particular, when applied to people, the adjective *delicatus* and the terms *delicia* and *delicium* seem to indicate the *amatus* or *dilectus*, but only when the adjective is used in a figurative sense and the term *delicia* is employed metonymically. In fact, when used in their proper sense, these terms do not seem to be semantically similar.

The examination of literary sources begins with Plautus, the first to use the adjective *delicatus*, and extends to late antiquity. Chapter 3 of the book addresses the issue of the different meanings of the examined terms depending on the literary genre; for example, in Virgil, Catullus, Tibullus, Propertius, and Ovid, the adjective *delicatus* almost exclusively has an erotic connotation. Also notable is the section dedicated to the historiographical genre, where the use seems to be the result of a literary stereotype, not faithfully reflecting the objective reality of events. A separate chapter is devoted to the Suetonius passage concerning Flavia Domitilla, wife of Vespasian and mother of the future emperors Titus and Domitian, since the historian narrates that she was the *delicata* of Statilius Capella in her youth. This passage is particularly interesting, and since it cannot be understood without reference to the epigraphic documentation and legal sources, it has been included at the end of the book.

Separate chapters are dedicated to the analysis of Petronius' *Satyricon*, the figure of Glaucias, the *delicatus* of Atedius Melior in Statius, Erotion in Martial, and Bissula in Ausonius. The choice of these in-depth studies is mainly due to the lively debate that scholars have engaged in for decades on these figures, for which it was necessary to clarify the issue in light of the results emerging from epigraphic sources—an approach that has so far been missing in the literature.

The third part of the book is dedicated to analyzing epigraphic sources: it examines, with the aid of tables and charts, the different geographical distribution of the terms, the gender, age, and legal status of the *delicati* and *delicia*, as well as the commissioners of the funerary monument, the possible epithets used, with interesting observations on local customs and the gap between daily practices and legal prescriptions. This section also includes the study of legal sources related to so-called informal manumissions—those that occurred against the legislative provisions of the Augustan era, particularly the *lex Aelia Sentia*, the *lex Junia Norbana*, and the *lex*

Fufia Caninia—since some *delicati* and *delicia* were manumitted according to this practice. This aspect could not be separated from the study of families composed of former slaves and the difficulties their members faced in having their familial and blood ties legally recognized. This section is further supplemented by a catalogue of the inscriptions examined, analytically cataloged according to the criteria outlined in Chapter 9.

The fourth and final part consists of an examination of funerary monuments accompanied by iconography, which revealed interesting results that complement those emerging from literary and epigraphic sources.

Despite the limitations of this research, which have been outlined throughout the writing of this book—such as the partiality of Latin writers, particularly the historiographers, especially in composing imperial biographies, the randomness of epigraphic findings, and the iconographic choices dictated by fashion and local lapidary workshops—it is possible to affirm, albeit cautiously, that the current interpretation of these terms with solely or predominantly erotic connotations, which is often presented even in specialist essays, is misleading and the result of stereotypes repeated over centuries. It is possible to assert that the presence of *delicati* and *delicia*, particularly in Rome and especially during the Imperial period, with an almost total absence in the Christian era, renders them a typically urban, imperial, and pagan phenomenon. The phenomenon that emerges in other regions is instead more associated with affection, probably familial in nature, and sometimes used to celebrate a parent-child relationship that was not legally recognized but deeply felt.

This work does not aim to be exhaustive, but rather to provide scholars with a solid foundation from which to explore numerous unresolved aspects that warrant further investigation. For instance, a more in-depth analysis using different research tools could better examine the cases of metrical funerary inscriptions and their interaction with literature, specifically how this interaction manifested in practice. Another area worth exploring is the nature of the devotion that masters displayed toward these slaves, considering that early manumission was rarely granted, especially in light of the restrictive Augustan laws on manumission. Additionally, was their presence also attested in the Greek-speaking regions of the empire? Were there figures comparable to the *delicati* and *delicia* of the Latin part of the empire? The near disappearance of these figures in Christian epigraphy raises further questions: was this due to a negative perception of these figures, or were they assimilated and integrated differently? These are just a few of the questions that deserve to be addressed and developed further.