

“What is more pleasing than the intermingling of verses?” (Symmachus *Ep.* 1.2.1): With these words Avianius, the father of Quintus Aurelius Symmachus (ca. 342-403 AD) enthusiastically reacts to a letter from his son into which two epigrams were embedded (Symm. *Ep.* 1.1). Avianius’ own letter is also enriched with a series of poems. Apart from the correspondence of Symmachus we find several other examples in ancient letter-corpora from Pliny the Younger (1<sup>st</sup> cent. AD) to late antiquity (6<sup>th</sup> cent. AD) where prose and poems are combined. In most cases the inserted poems are written by the epistlers themselves. A systematic analysis of a phenomenon which we may call the epistolary *prosimetrum* (i.e. the mixing of prose and metre) has not yet been undertaken, and thus the time is ripe to dedicate a study to this special type of the ancient letter-genre. We do not possess a systematic theory of the *prosimetrum* from antiquity; the term was coined in medieval times. Letter-writers using the mixed form, however, repeatedly reflect on the reasons why they combined prose and poetry in their texts.

The project focuses on those cases where epigrams, elegiac and lyrical poems of various length are embedded into prose letters. It examines how the tradition of “small-scale-poetry” (in contrast to the big genres of epic and drama) is integrated into an epistolary frame and how this epistolary subgenre develops from Classical to late antiquity. After in the first century AD writers such as Martial and Pliny the Younger had already experimented with this kind of genre-crossing, it became very popular in the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> century (Ausonius, Sidonius Apollinaris). The following questions will be asked: In which thematic contexts do letter-writers insert poems into their prose-letters? Which functions do these poetic insertions fulfil within the correspondence? How do the prosaic and the poetic sections reflect on each other? How do these letters relate both to pure verse epistles and to other genres where prose and poetry are mixed? Especially the following contexts, in which ancient letter-writers used to combine prose with poems, will build the core of the investigation: 1. Prose-prefaces to poems and poetry-books, 2. Self-quotation and promotion of poetic skills, 3. Quotation and literary criticism, 4. Poems as media of persuasion, and 5. Poems as a mirror of the act of communication.

Most of the embedded poems are part of a larger literary exchange between the letter-writers and their addressees and many of the letters in question contain information about writers who are otherwise unknown to us and whose texts are not transmitted. Thus the analysis will also shed further light on the literary history and cultural interactions of the respective periods.