

Papers in Italian Archaeology VII

# The Archaeology of Death

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edited by

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*For the Accordia Research Institute*



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# Recent approaches to early writing

Christopher Smith

## Summary

This paper considers the argument of literacy and the state in the light of the relative absence of civic inscriptions from the archaic Italian world. It argues that whilst this absence is so pronounced as to be difficult to attribute entirely to archaeological invisibility, the very act of writing and dedicating can be reconfigured in such a way as to refer to a claim to participate in civic society, and a claim which is not simply reducible to a display of power, but operates also as a technology of the self.

## Riassunto

Questo studio prende in considerazione la problematica dell'alfabetizzazione e dello stato alla luce della relativa mancanza di iscrizioni di carattere civico provenienti dal mondo italiano arcaico. Lo studio sostiene che, se da una parte questa pronunciata assenza è difficilmente attribuibile solamente a una archeologia invisibile, dall'altra lo stesso atto di scrivere e di dedicare può essere riconfigurato in modo tale da essere riferito a una richiesta di partecipazione nella società civile, richiesta che non è semplicemente riducibile a una ostentazione di potere, ma opera anche come tecnologia del sé.

**Keywords:** Archaic Italy, literacy, power, state formation

In this paper I want to consider three contributions to the debate on literacy in early Italy. The first is the important Accordia volume *Literacy and the State in the Ancient Mediterranean* (Lomas, Whitehouse and Wilkins 2007), which was an important step forward in theorizing and reconceptualising within a broader Mediterranean and specifically Italian context the work of literacy. The second is the monumental corpus *Imagines Italicae*, edited by Michael Crawford (Crawford 2011). The third is the major exhibition at the Museo dell'Accademia Etrusca di Cortona, entitled *Gli Etruschi maestri di scrittura. Cultura e società nell'Italia antica* (2015).

In addressing this issue I am particularly concerned with the problem of power. The central paradox it seems to me of our studies of ancient inscriptions in central Italy is that much of what we find is personal and intimate, but the way we define it is through reference to power, elites and sometimes states. How should we convincingly draw the line between these two positions?

In 2007, Flavia Carraro wrote a rather brilliant piece on 'speaking objects' in which she carefully opened up the consequences of endowing objects with the gift of speech, the capacity to make a declarative statement (Carraro 2007; for an Italian corpus see Agostiniani 1982; see also Maras 2015). Her argument is that the inscription refers to a representation of speech and writing; the self-referentiality is an essential aspect of the inscription, and the object is in dialogue with its context:

They [speaking objects] say 'I' and exchange speech in written signs: speech as gift, speech as memory, speech as guarantee, speech as request for recognition, and finally, speech as an exchange. In writing, these objects become speech, and this speech – like the exchanged objects – is also a gift: a restrictive gift to the reader who will share it with objects. (74).

This seems to me a very interesting notion, in two ways. First, it is a highly successful illustration of the agency of objects, a notion of some currency at the moment, but one which sometimes is rather hard to grasp (Robb 2004; Ingold, 2007; Tilley 2007; Malafouris 2013). Here objects have not only whatever agency we wish generically to assign to materiality through their entanglement with the rest of the world, but they draw attention to this agency (obviously through the action of the inscribing agent).

This act is, on Carraro's interpretation, a mark of the appropriation of writing. The concretization of speech, the rendering of the 'foundation of the social bond in the polis' into an artefact itself, is a recognition of the effectiveness of speech-acts and their representation in writing.

This is some distance from the kinds of ways in which writing is discussed when it is seen as a technology, an intellectual tool which serves the administrative needs of a state, which is how, in summary, Childe and, Goody tended to think of it in the context of Mesopotamian

civilization. As Ruth Whitehouse argued (Whitehouse 2007), this was not especially helpful for the first millennium BC, and therefore a different kind of interpretation is required.

To a large extent this reinterpretation was the subject of Bowman and Woolf's 1994 collection on literacy and power, which tended to focus on elite use of writing, rather than writing as a tool of state control. As Woolf puts it, 'power and literacy are connected ... by the importance of power relations as a context shaping the way that writing was adopted, adapted, used and rejected.' (Woolf 1994: 98).

This kind of interpretation then led Whitehouse to her interpretation of the Venetic and Messapic inscriptions. The largely personal nature of the inscriptions, reflecting identity and relationships, led her to posit two alternative models:

1. the state was present, but did not use writing: writing was taken up by individuals, presumably elite individuals, and used for private purposes.
2. the state was not present, or only weakly developed; writing was used by elite people in processes of power negotiation and may have contributed to state development (which perhaps did not develop fully on a local basis because it was overtaken by Romanisation). (Whitehouse 2007: 104).

Whitehouse chooses the second model, and moves on to suggest that the implication of this is that writing was one of the instruments in the process of state formation.

How does this interpretation stand up against the broader array of Italic evidence? Since 2007, no intervention on Italic epigraphy has been as significant as the publication of *Imagines Italicae* (Crawford 2011). This remarkable collection had given us an essential starting point for further investigation. One of the striking issues about the corpus is the scarcity of public or legislative texts, or texts referring outside private ownership or dedication, before the third century BC. The earliest seems to be a bronze inscription from Roccagloriosa (Buxentum I – Crawford 2011: 1328-31), dated between 300 and 200 BC. (Tocco 2000; Benelli 2015). Yet there are earlier Sabellian inscriptions, so the question is where are the civic inscriptions?

If we turn to the Etruscans we find precisely the same phenomenon. The exhibition at Cortona, which gathered a stunning array of epigraphic material, is for the most part of private inscriptions, and this is brought out by Enrico Benelli in his chapter on epigraphy and society in which he notes that after thirty years of excavation in settlements areas, this can no longer be regarded as

a result of the kinds of areas studied (Benelli 2015). The missing evidence, which is applicable also to Sabellian inscriptions, is inscriptions on bronze, but as so often we cannot be sure that the complete absence of such inscriptions is really the product of the total re-use of bronze. It remains at least a challenge, which has to be explained either by the complete disappearance of the inscriptions because they were on bronze or other perishable material; or because of their rarity.

Importantly we cannot in any way associate this with a failure of capacity to express complex ideas. A wonderful bucchero aryballos (Fig. 1), from the mid-seventh century BC, came from clandestine excavations near Montalto di Castro in the province of Viterbo. A serpent winds its way around the body of the vessel. The inscription is thought to refer a love potion, presumably contained in the vessel (*Maestri di Scrittura* 70).

Even though we struggle to make any sense of the inscription, it is difficult to deny that it demonstrates a sophisticated capacity to unite word and image, and one might well compare it with Nestor's cup, perhaps a century earlier, with its complex and intriguing mythological reference and the way the speaking



Figure 1. Bucchero aryballos, from clandestine excavations near Montalto di Castro (VT) mid-seventh century BC. (Photograph courtesy of the Museo Nazionale di Villa Giulia).

object promises ‘the desire of Aphrodite’ to the drinker, presumably in a sympotic and therefore potentially erotically charged context (Faraone 1996).

The absence of public inscriptions of course simply focuses even more attention on the Pyrgi tablets, whose indisputably early date, complex expression, and highly public position in the temple area of Cerveteri’s port site make them transcend any normal dedicatory text. Although strictly speaking a record of a personal dedication, the inscriptions cross the line towards a public statement (see now two major volumes, Baglione and Michetti, 2015; Belleli and Xella 2016).

Early Roman epigraphy is scant, and comparison between disparately limited datasets is inevitably problematic (Cornell 1991; *GRT* 16-25). Three inscriptions are important. First, the piece of *vernice nera* inscribed with the word *REX* and from the Regia should be interpreted as a mark of ownership, and of scant ‘public’ relevance (*GRT* 1.9). The Lapis Niger inscription, with reference to a king and perhaps to assemblies (*GRT* 3.1.39; see most recently Tassi Scandone 2016); its nature remains completely unclear, but Tassi Scandone’s hypothesis of a pontifical decree is worth considering. For its time, it remains unique. The Satricum inscription (*GRT* 1.10), which refers to a group of *suodales* whom we tend to assume extend beyond the family, is in the context of Italic epigraphy, striking. However, like the Pyrgi Tablets, the Satricum inscription is also probably a dedication by a group operating below the level of the state. If the Pyrgi tablets do in some sense confirm the plausibility of Polybius’ report (3.22) of a treaty between Rome and Carthage late in the sixth century, we might want to allow the text which Polybius found so difficult to read as a genuine late sixth century civic inscription; and perhaps there were more such texts. This would perhaps pose the question in a slightly different way – writing might be used specifically for interstate activity, and individual acts, but not for intrastate public activity.

There is nothing new here, but I want to reframe the question by returning to the gap between Carraro and Whitehouse’s approaches to the evidence. So far the problem has been conceptualised in terms of explaining the apparent absence of ‘public’ epigraphy. We have been able to find some potential contenders, but so far only (and only potentially) in the realm of treaties, and one possible text of religious law. How real is this problem?

Whitehouse’s formulation of the problem seems to me to create two potential tensions. The first is the explicit one that in the period under consideration, the Messapians and the Veneti had not at all, or not sufficiently, developed a condition of social, political and economic complexity, which may have pertained

subsequently, or at least had the potential to exist. The second is the implicit one as to whether others had contemporaneously achieved this condition in other regions. The index is writing on behalf of the state, or to support the functioning of the state.

If this is an appropriate index, one would have to say that the Etruscans would not appear to fulfil this criterion either in the archaic period, and the Romans would be potentially unique if one permitted the Lapis Niger inscription to be a state driven law with references to the process of assembly and to the king. I hasten to say that this is not what Whitehouse says, but such a blunt characterization focuses our attention. Putting this entirely down to a gap in evidence, whilst entirely possible, has obvious weaknesses.

For the most part, introducing the concept of the state causes more problems than it solves. Conceptions of the state which derive from a neo-evolutionary model, even if they are highly modified, run into enormous difficulties when faced with the tiny settlements which characterised the Greek and Italian worlds. Moving to a regional or ethnic definition does not produce evidence either. The awkward problem of the two inscriptions from Penna Sant’Andrea which refer to the *touta* of the \*Safini has been neatly dissolved by Stephane Bourdin, who sees a single community making reference to the wider ethnic group. Similarly he neatly limits the terms of reference of the bronze inscription of the Marrucini at Rapino to a single community. Thus we have evidence of reference to a group, but it is not a supra-community entity (Bourdin 2012: 263-6).

So from one direction our argument has got rid of the state for the archaic period, and thus supports Whitehouse’s second model as applicable to central Italy too. But from another point of view we are in the slightly perverse situation that one could argue that Rome fulfils the relevant requirement, of having a political and public inscription, and perhaps Pyrgi as an outpost of Cerveteri too. Yet this is on the basis of two inscriptions, with a very substantial gap for Etruscan settlements which have been explored and are not self-evidently less advanced in the sixth century.

One way out of this is to classify the few public inscriptions as ritual rather than political, which can have the effect of both explaining why there are so few civic texts, and then one can extend the range of the political; and so quietly allow central Italy to recover a sense of statehood. John Wilkins made this case in a super article in another *Accordia* publication in 1996:

We should not expect all text to have the same social value. Equally we should not expect all states to be alike in the matter of written language. It may for instance be the case that for the classical Etruscan,

written text was always essentially a ritual matter. We have long waited for the truly 'civic' inscription, but even the excavations of city sites have so far not obliged. It maybe that they never existed. The precise pattern of the diffusion of literate skills is something which will differ from state to state. The Etruscan state seems to have been characterised by the heavy dominance of a narrow elite. Perhaps we should not be surprised that the closely ritual nature of all the surviving inscriptions, even given their great number. (Wilkins 1996: 140).

I think Wilkins is absolutely on to something with this, and his focus on the context rather than the text of ritual is also important. However, I am not convinced that we can simply let the state slide back in through the back door of ritual. For me this is not a sufficient explanation of the role of writing, and it does not lead to a sufficient account of the nature of the political in central Italy.

Bruce Routledge's 2014 book *Archaeology and State Theory: Subjects and Objects of Power* offers some new ways through (Routledge 2014). He short-cuts through the morass of neo-evolutionary paradigms and the definitional quagmire to look at what is really essential, and that is power. However, whilst Bowman and Woolf (1994) left power relatively undertheorized, Routledge deploys some important recent work, especially the recovery of the significance of Gramsci, to argue that state formation is the 'configuring of relationships around political authority made transcendent and grounded in violence,' which he defines as sovereignty (Routledge 2014: 26).

Routledge's concentration on coercion and consent, hegemony and spectacle, place him firmly into the tradition of Gramsci, Laclau and Mouffe, and Actor-Network Theory. This tradition draws attention to the continuous redrawing of power relationships and the renegotiation of hegemony. Power is not a given; it is repeatedly rearticulated and even the most stable power structures need to be repeatedly reinforced. Hence spectacle has an important role in the reaffirmation of a social order; and as James Whitley pointed out 'Ritual and commensality were the glue that kept ancient states together, and allowed them to make up through participation what they lacked in administration.' (Whitley 2015).

This seems to me to give ever greater clarity to the argument over how writing participates in power relationships. The simplest version of the argument has writing as a sort of elite tool, a marker of significant and visible superiority. The fact of being able to possess or dedicate something with writing on it is part of the spectacle of power. One obvious problem with this, well-illustrated in Cortona and also through *Imagines*

*Italicae*, is the prevalence of makers' marks, artisanal graffiti and other non-elite epigraphy.

Various contextual arguments can be entered here; are marks on pottery simply the surviving versions of marks on silver, gold and other precious objects? Is sovereignty exercised by the ownership of the skills of a valued craftsmen? Is the object's agency extended and heightened by the location of deposition? Is all the earliest epigraphy genuinely elite? These moves all permit an interpretation which reinstates the notion of writing as supportive of elite behaviour, but they cannot entirely remove the notion that it was not only supportive of elite behaviour, that it had other functions, and that elite behaviour required the overdetermination of other mechanisms of coercion and hegemony.

To bring this argument to a conclusion, I want to try to indicate what I think we can do with writing, and what we cannot. Writing is not an effective index of statehood on any neo-evolutionary basis, and if we want to associate writing with political complexity, we can only do so if it is permitted to stand as a proxy, and not a necessary one. There are instances of complex societies which did use writing for purposes of control, redistribution and bureaucracy, but there are plenty where that evidence is lacking.

Writing does not define an elite. It is not necessarily restricted to an elite, and it was probably not restricted to elite behaviour. It clearly had a role in trade and commerce, as we see for instance in the Greek inscription referring to a just measure in the sanctuary at Gravisca (Torelli 1977), and the penumbra of functional literacy probably spread some way through society, even if the numerical proportions of literate to illiterate remained low. The evident relationship between makers and marks is critical here.

This implies I think that the power of writing lies elsewhere in the archaic period. If we return to the arguments of Laclau and Mouffe (Routledge 2014: 70-1, Laclau and Mouffe 2001), we are looking for discursive practices which help things 'hang together'; mechanisms of coercion and hegemony that are repeatedly and recursively reinforced. One area in which writing may have functioned as a practice in this way is in relation to the intimacy of the act, the personal reaffirmation of inscribing one's name. This is a form of entanglement, the interdependency of humans and things, and the act of inscribing draws attention to this, especially when the object is made to speak.

In this sense, writing as the symbolization of speech acts is much more than the spectacular demonstration of an elite technology, or the shadow of the use of writing as a bureaucratic tool within redistributive states, or a

quasi-functional stop on the road of state formation. It draws attention to the role of speech and the role of the material within communities. In concrete terms one might say that the act of inscribing on an object demonstrates the power of possession in giving agency to material things. Thus ownership and individuality come closer together, in a society that was increasingly acquisitive.

This is heading towards an argument for commodification in the archaic period, and this has been well explored for instance for Greek song; Barbara Kowalzig's account of Greek dithyrambic poetry is helpful here; she talks about how 'the frequent image of the song travelling as a cargo on merchant vessels equally ties music's commodification into the connectivity of the ancient Mediterranean. Maritime mobility, popularizations and diffusion of Greek *mousike*, and its commodification seem to be going hand in hand' (Kowalzig 2013: 55). I wonder if this might offer an interesting way into the world of the Etruscan mirror, often inscribed, and clearly commodifying mythical knowledge (De Grummond 1985; Carpino 2003).

I am therefore placing writing in a context of personal reaffirmation, and intra-elite solidarity, a Foucauldian technology of the self (Martin, Gutman and Hutton 1988), and also one that enabled a network of resonances and exchanges, of gifts and mutual recognition. Writing participates in hegemonic structures without doubt, but it is not intrinsically a tool of control, and it could be used by others. It may instead facilitate the commensality and ritual which help the hanging together of unequal societies, through writing on cups, writing on dedications, writing about rituals. Writing if anything gains significance by not being an administrative tool, but instead an affordance of materiality. Writing, and the forms that writing

takes, organise things and organise us. As Levine has argued, in a dense but fascinating book on the theme of affordances, formal analysis can reveal the clashes between bounded units and network sprawl, between tight hierarchies and more rhythmic ebbs and flows of power (Levine 2015). The formal analysis of the interplay between writing and object breaks down the concept of public and private, and permits an apparently private combination of the properties of an object and its surfaces to participate in a discourse about civic belonging and the role of speech. I would therefore permit the exploration of the affordances of material objects through writing to be supportive of an argument for a more ordered society (whether one wants to use the word state or not), and to allow a wide range of speaking objects to be part of the discourse of civic life, regardless of the specific privacies of their moment of deposition.

To give an example, to bring a highly theoretical paper to a concrete conclusion, here is a seventh century BC anforetta from the Melenzani necropolis of Bologna (Fig. 2; Morigi Govi, Colonna 1981). The inscription, the longest in Bologna, refers to the object, possibly in the first person so as a speaking object, the name or names of the donor or donors (fragmentary), the name of the recipient and his wife, and the name of the artisan who made it. The inscription refers to an entire world of exchange and affirms the relationship between different families, whilst also referring to the capacity to command or acquire, and the continuing that discourse into the grave. The small container configures part of a network; the human agents are entangled in its signification; the object's agency embraces both maker and owners. The act of gift and interment of object and inscription and the wide range of what is signified by them individually and in their own entanglement, operate at levels of individual

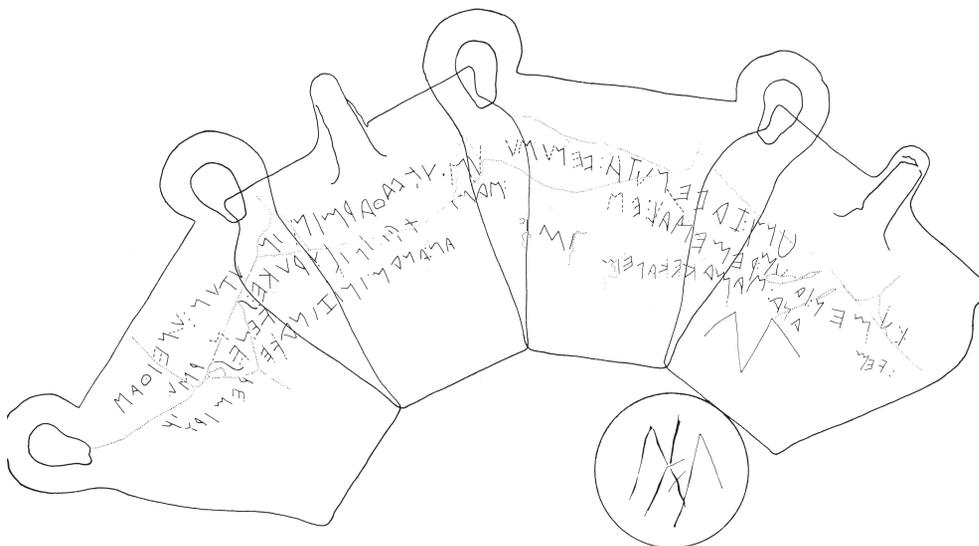


Figure 2. Anforetta from the Melenzani necropolis of Bologna, seventh century. (After Morigi Govi and Colonna 1981).

exchange, and within larger communal networks, and thus can be imagined as mediating between them. So this little anforetta can now become my gift, personal and public, to Ruth and John, and to the extraordinary network which they so admirably wove across many countries and over many years.

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### Abbreviations

GRT = M. Cristofani (ed.) *La Grande Roma dei Tarquini*, Roma Palazzo delle Esposizioni, 12 giugno – 30 settembre 1990. Rome: L' 'Erma' di Bretschneider, 1990.

*Maestri di Scrittura* = Luciano Agostiniani, Enrico Benelli, Dominique Briquel, Paolo Bruschetti, Giovannangelo Camporeale, Giovanni Colonna, Paolo Giulierini, Laurent Haumesser, Adriano Maggiani, Maristella Pandolfini Angeletti, Lionel Pernet, Gilles van Heems, *Gli Etruschi Maestri Di Scrittura: Società e cultura nell'Italia antica* (Milan Silvana 2015).

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