

Fig. 8: Example of arrow-shaped alpha. From Agostiniani, L., *Albanese Procelli*. Drawing by Valentina Mignosa after R.M. 2018. "Montagna di Marzo (Piazza Armerina); la tomba Est 31". *Cronache di Archeologia* 37: 151-208.

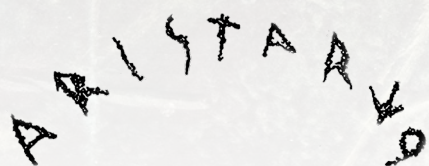


Fig. 9: Fragment of pottery with ownership inscription from Gela (ISic020476). Drawing by Valentina Mignosa after Arena, R. 2002. *Iscrizioni greche arcaiche di Sicilia e Magna Grecia. Iscrizioni di Gela e Agrigento, vol. II*. Torino.

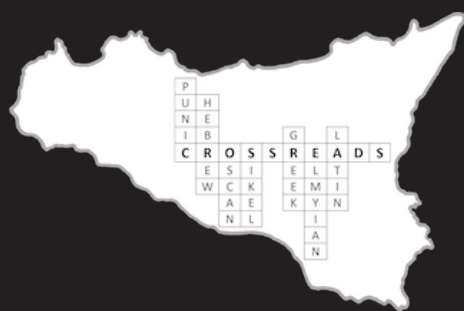
delve into the paths of Greek archaic epigraphy, an epigraphic document is first and foremost an archaeological piece of evidence. "I have tried throughout", she writes, "to remember that, particularly where archaic inscriptions are concerned, epigraphy is a branch of archaeology; the letters are written on objects of varying type and material, and inscription and object must be considered in relation to each other." This is the second cornerstone of the research carried out within *Crossreads*: to study the epigraphic

objects in their materiality and to integrate the investigation of the inscribed text with data related to the object and the archaeological context.

Even if a habit is consolidated in a place — and we have just seen that few habits remain the same for a long time in archaic Sicily — one cannot work on the palaeography of an inscription on pottery found in a private context, or in a tomb, in the same way as one works on a decree inscribed to be affixed to a temple. While it is true that there were workshops (especially from the middle of the 6th century onwards) that also provided 'private' inscriptions, for certain documents (such as clumsy graffiti on pottery, fig. 9) one must often assume a 'domestic' and not a workshop production, which therefore implies less attention to the ductus of the letters. This 'domestic' production took place according to criteria of emulation that often followed more tortuous paths than we can imagine. Such a process is perhaps to be assumed in the case of a curious document on a bronze lebes found in a tomb in Sabucina (ISic030024) with an ownership formula and a non-Greek name (*Dyspsetas emi*) in which the second part of the name is written backwards as opposed to the rest of the text, as is often the case with the numerous *defixiones* on lead found in Sicily, in which the torsion of the name was intended to mirror the torsion of the tongue or body that was hoped for the accursed. Whether or not this intuition of mine is correct, what I intend to show is that epigraphic practice must be understood, especially in its formally

'younger' and more experimental phases, as a craft activity that develops a praxis but is subject to the historical and cultural events of the context in which it is located, the network in which it is immersed and much less than is believed, at least for the archaic age, by 'state' directives or by a need to express identity of some sort.

The work of survey and new analysis of the documents proved to be as exciting as the premises of the project promised, and made it possible to develop an overall picture of the inscriptions of the Archaic period in Sicily without the distinctions between the attested languages vitiating the objectivity of the analysis: the parallel survey of Elymian, Greek and Sikel inscriptions, conducted with the same methodology and posing similar interpretative problems, has allowed us to look at the epigraphic picture of archaic Sicily through a single lens, which we hope to apply also to the Punic material being surveyed. It is worth noting that part of this 'equality' of methodological approach comes from the need for standardisation and objectivity of interpretation required by the encoding of texts in TEI xml format. This standardisation can be meticulous and laborious at first, but in the long run it proves to be not only useful, since we are dealing with very different and non-homogeneous texts, but it encourages us to ask exactly the same questions for all documents while also allowing us to work with a large amount of data, and this enables us to rethink, as has often happened to us in recent months, approaches and categorisations.



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Background image: Fragment of a decree engraved on a bronze tablet, ca. 525–500 BCE (ISic030002). © The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



# Roman everyday Writing

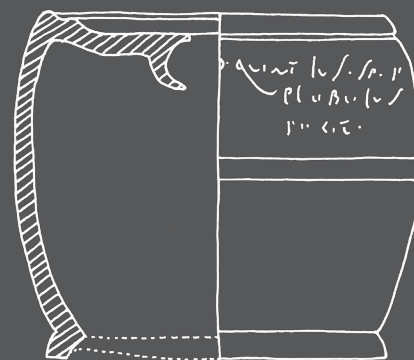
Alan Bowman

2021 sees the online publication of the two-volume 'Manual of Roman everyday Writing', one of the products of LatinNow, an ERC-funded research project (PI Alex Mullen). This focusses on the Latinization of the northwestern provinces of the Roman empire from sociolinguistic, epigraphical and archaeological perspectives. An important stimulus to undertaking this research is the fact that in the last few decades the amount of newly discovered documentary and archaeological evidence, along with the huge increase in availability of digitized collections in museums and archives, has demanded a synthesis and reassessment of the character and development of writing practices in the Roman empire and of the impact of the spread of the Latin language through northwestern Europe into late antiquity and the early mediaeval period.

The manual consists of two complementary e-volumes. Volume 1 is an analysis of cursive texts and scripts by Alex Mullen and Alan Bowman. Volume 2 is a comprehensive survey of the evidence for writing equipment by Anna Willi. The authors relied on the support of the whole LatinNow team, whose expertise and access to different resources during lockdown was particularly valuable. Senior Scientist Jane Masségliá transformed the manuscripts into interactive ebooks, introducing intuitive

navigation and search functions, before making them freely available online in HTML5 format. Publishing these as e-books has several advantages: control of the look and layout, ability to update, embed videos and track use, and, most importantly, accessibility (for more on interactive ebooks, online publishing and the peer-review process, see the LatinNow blog <https://latinnow.eu/2021/06/14/introducing-latinnow-ebooks-and-annas-new-book/>).

Volume 1 describes the kinds of documents that are written in Latin cursive script and tabulates the main published collections and individual items of texts in cursive script from across the Roman world, ranging in provenance from northern England to Africa, Egypt and Syria. The types of cursive script, conventionally labelled Old Roman Cursive (1<sup>st</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> centuries) and New Roman Cursive (from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century) are illustrated, with layout of different kinds of documents, tables of letter forms and the most important abbreviations, signs and conventions. This makes important contributions to our knowledge of the origins and early history of Roman cursive as well as the long-standing debate among palaeographers about how and why the essential character of the scripts underwent obvious technical and stylistic changes in the course of the third century CE.



*Ceramic inkwell from Aquileia (Italy) with the inscription A(ulus) Quintius Sp(urii) f(ilius) Plebeius fecit ('Aulus Quintius Plebeius, son of Spurius, made this'), 1<sup>st</sup> century CE. Redrawn by A Willi after Gomezel 1994.*

A practice-based approach to the subject examines the evidence for the ways in which people may have learnt to read and write cursive in antiquity and the implications for the spread of literacy. For the modern reader, it provides a step-by-step guide to deciphering and interpreting Roman cursive texts, including video tutorials. Finally, it offers an exploration through text and video of the technologies of the digital age, including multispectral analysis and Reflectance Transformation Imaging, which have been pioneered at the Centre for the Study of Ancient Documents since the 1990s and have greatly improved the image-capturing techniques and the visibility of damaged documents written on wood, papyrus and various metals.

The second volume, Anna Willi's detailed study of Roman writing equipment, offers a comprehensive, lavishly illustrated and much-needed survey of the material resources for the production of everyday written documents in the Roman empire. Sections on the social aspects of writing, on writing techniques, and on the evidence that we can use to research such topics are followed by a comprehensive catalogue. Drawing on archaeological, literary, and iconographic evidence, it describes the surfaces of materials commonly used to take writing, instruments made for writing by incision and scratching or with ink pens, and relevant accessories such as inkwells and writing cases. In each case, important finds as well as research publications are included to assist more detailed study. The catalogue is supplemented by a collection of literary passages in Latin and translation, including the detailed description by Pliny the Elder of the process of making papyrus (*Natural History* 13.74–82), and by a glossary of the relevant terminology in seven languages.

The relationship between the incidence of archaeological finds of writing equipment

MANUAL OF ROMAN EVERYDAY WRITING  
VOLUME 1

## SCRIPTS AND TEXTS



ALEX MULLEN & ALAN BOWMAN

MANUAL OF ROMAN EVERYDAY WRITING  
VOLUME 2

## WRITING EQUIPMENT

ANNA WILLI





Minerva-shaped spatula handle from Highworth, Swindon (UK), 100–250 CE. PAS-ID WILT-9ECD01. © Salisbury and South Wiltshire Museum, CC-BY-4.0.

and the origins of the documents which it was used to produce is not straightforward because discoveries of writing equipment rarely occur in contexts directly associated with finds of documents. Issues with identification and interpretation of the objects and biases in both archaeological survival and excavation and publication practices make analyses complicated. Nevertheless it is possible to use this evidence to cast light on the nature and the spread of literacy in the Roman world. Although writing is generally associated with

individuals of status and prestige, reinforced by the depiction of writing equipment on reliefs and funerary monuments, finds in contexts related to trade and commerce and in urban and military sites as well as villas and centres of production such as the potteries at La Graufesenque in south-western Gaul strongly suggest that functional literacy played a much more important role in the lives of the non-elite population than has hitherto been appreciated on the basis of the literary and epigraphic evidence alone.

In conjunction, these generously illustrated e-books provide for researchers, students and non-experts an accessible and comprehensive approach to the resources for study and analysis of Latin cursive documents and writing tools in the Roman west, as well as a detailed guide to the technical skills needed to understand, decipher and interpret the evidence for a crucially important aspect of ancient society.

Read the volumes online:

Alex Mullen and Alan Bowman (2021), *Manual of Roman Everyday Writing, Vol. 1: Scripts and Texts*, LatinNow ePubs, Nottingham: [bit.ly/MREW1](https://bit.ly/MREW1) (available from October 2021)

Anna Willi (2021), *Manual of Roman Everyday Writing, Vol. 2: Writing Equipment*, LatinNow ePubs, Nottingham: [bit.ly/MREW2](https://bit.ly/MREW2) (available now)

## Writing with trees: Pliny's topiary epigraphy

Anna Willi

In his 2010 article 'Writing on Trees', Peter Kruschwitz highlighted an aspect of Greek and Roman epigraphy that is easily overlooked: people in antiquity carved letters into tree bark, just as they do today. No examples of such inscriptions survive, but interest in what fringe epigraphy can reveal about different facets of life in antiquity, such as literacy, is growing. Perishable writing such as the stamps on bread from Herculaneum, famously preserved by the eruption of Vesuvius (e.g. CIL X 8058.18, stamped by Celer, slave of Q. Granius Verus), and toy letters made of

ivory and wood used in education (Quint. *Inst.* 1.1.26; Hier. *Epist.* 107.4.2) made the Roman world 'a fundamentally lettered one'.

Imagine taking a walk through the idyllic grounds of an Italian villa. An open area stretches in front of you, enclosed by plane trees, whose trunks are covered in ivy. At the far end, cypress trees tower over the roses growing below. As you approach them on a curved path you pass by series of shrubs, and some of them... form letters!

Pliny describes the gardens at his Tuscan villa one of his letters:

*"Between the grass lawns here and there are box shrubs clipped into innumerable shapes, some being letters which spell the name of the owner or the gardener; small obelisks (sc. of box) alternate with fruit trees, and then suddenly in the midst of this formal ornamental scene,*

*there is an imitation of rural nature. The open space in the middle is set off by low plane trees planted on each side; farther off are acanthuses with their flexible glossy leaves, then more box figures and names."*

(Plin. *Epist.* 5.6.35–36)

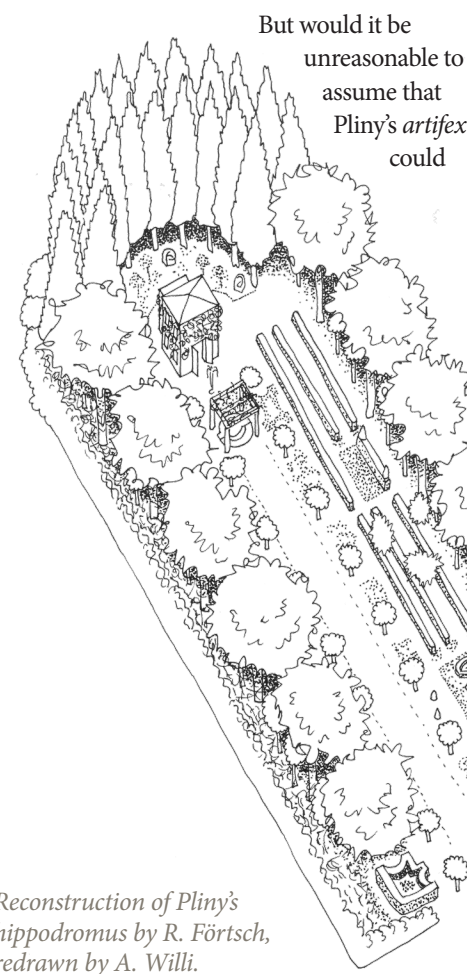
The part of his garden that Pliny describes here is the *hippodromus*, a walking area that was built to resemble the *circus*, a large, elongated open space with a semi-circular end. It was surrounded by tall trees, and inside it parallel paths divided the space into rectangular patches that were planted with smaller trees and box shrubs.

Scholars of Roman garden design regularly point out this passage in one of Pliny's 'villa-letters' as an instance of the highly regarded *ars topiaria*, but it has only rarely been recognised as an instance of epigraphy. To the best my knowledge, this is the only



known reference to writing with trees; no other authors mention it, and no garden paintings show it. According to Pliny's uncle, Pliny the Elder, topiary was invented under Augustus and was used on densely growing evergreen shrubs and trees such as box and cypress (Plin. *NH* 12.13; 16.70+76). He describes how far the *ars topiaria* could be taken, depicting even intricate images such as hunting scenes and entire fleets (Plin. *NH* 16.139–140), but to cut box trees into letters seems to have been unusual.

The gardeners practising topiary were called *topiarii*, and Pliny the Younger considered them to be part of the standard workforce on an estate (*Epist.* 3.19.3). Their tasks also included landscaping more generally and it is clear that they were highly skilled and specialised; Pliny calls his gardener 'artifex', artist or craftsman. Unfortunately, we know nothing about the gardener or *topiarius* on Pliny's Tuscan estate; he may have been a slave, but on large estates highly skilled free workers were also hired for specific tasks.



Reconstruction of Pliny's hippodromus by R. Förtsch, redrawn by A. Willi.

read and write? Could it have been his idea to include writing in Pliny's garden sculpture? The box tree letters were said to spell out the *artifex'* name as well as Pliny's. Numerous artists' names have been preserved on sculpture and mosaics, for example, and in some respect Pliny's *topiarius* is doing just that; he is signing his work, the landscape in the *hippodromus* and the other, topiary figures surrounding the names.

But not only was the name of the *topiarius* displayed in Pliny's garden, his leafy monument may have been just that: monumental. To my knowledge, the largest known preserved letters are the recesses for *litterae aureae* of pavement inscriptions on *fora*, e.g. in Segobriga (32 cm, AE 2001, 1246) or in Philippi (62 cm, C. Brélaz, *Corpus des inscriptions grecques et latines de Philippos II.1*, Athens 2014, no. 66). In lapidary inscriptions, Pliny is most commonly mentioned with his full name C. Plinius Caecilius Secundus, this is if we leave out filiation and *tribus*. The gardener's name may have been shorter but it is also possible that the names were abbreviated; on *tegulae* Pliny's name is found as C. P. C. S (CIL XI 6689, 43.171). But even if we imagine these four letters at a modest height of 30 cm and in relief, we would be looking at 'inscriptions' of 1–1.5 m length. If the shrubs represented individual letters and were spaced out, then we could be looking at several metres per name.

We know of cases in which honorary stone monuments were apparently set up on private estates, including one inscription dedicated to Pliny himself (probably with an equestrian statue), which was found near Como (CIL V 5667). The gardens of the Roman elite were a status symbol, featuring many references to wealth and intellect, and they were accessible to the audience that mattered: the self-representation within them was aimed at other members of the elite. Pliny mentions his topiary inscriptions in passing and quickly moves on to continue his tour through the beautiful estate, but it is interesting that he singles out the letters and names amongst the *figurae* referred to in this passage.

While Pliny's estate and its gardens were a place for self-representation, so were Pliny's letters, which he published himself. The letter about the Tuscan estate is addressed to L. Domitius Apollinaris, a Roman senator and a patron of the poet Martial, who apparently considered the *Tusci* to be an unhealthy place for Pliny to visit in summer. Pliny's letter in response describes all the relaxing and uplifting features of his place, bringing the status symbol – and the topiary inscriptions – onto paper, to Rome and into his less perishable written legacy.

*Further reading*

R. Förtsch, *Archäologischer Kommentar zu den Villenbriefen des jüngeren Plinius*, Mainz 1993.

R. Gibson, *Man of High Empire. The Life of Pliny the Younger*, Oxford 2020.

P. Kruschwitz, *Writing On Trees: Restoring a Lost Facet of the Graeco-Roman Epigraphic Habit*, ZPE 173, 2010, 45–62.

P. Kruschwitz, *Inhabiting a lettered world: exploring the fringes of Roman writing habits*, BICS 59.1, 2016, 26–41.

A. Marzano, *Roman Gardens, Military Conquests, and Elite Self-representation*, in: K. Coleman and P. Derron (eds): *Le jardin dans l'antiquité*, Vandoeuvres 2014, 195–244.

K. von Stackelberg, *The Roman Garden. Space, sense, and society*, London 2009.

Anna Willi is research fellow on the LatinNow project. She is the author of *Irrigation in Roman Western Europe* (2021) and of the *Manual of Roman Everyday Writing: Vol. 2 Writing Equipment*.

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