



Fig. 1. *The Baker and His Wife*, a painting from Pompeii. The woman holds a stylus and writing-tablet, and her husband holds a scroll. First century CE. Museo Nazionale, Naples.

THE SCRIPT OF ANCIENT ITALY

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The Greeks began to colonize Italy in the early eighth century BCE. A group of Chalcidians (citizens of Chalcis in Euboea) settled on the island of Ischia, then known as Pithecusses, and in around 750, they founded Cumae, the first Greek city in Italy. A fragment of iron ore from the island of Elba, found in archaeological excavations on Ischia, reveals the reason for the Greek wanderings. They were looking for metals—iron and copper—which were in short supply in their own land but which Etruria possessed in abundance, mainly in what was called “the mining district,” the island of Elba and the mainland coast facing it. By settling in Campania, on the fringes of the Etruscan world, they were able to trade with the Tuscan aristocrats who controlled the wealth. Yet there was no true colonization as such: the Greeks established trading-posts in Tuscany, but they did not found cities or subjugate the native inhabitants as they would later do in southern Italy or Sicily. When confronted with the Greeks, the Etruscan world safeguarded its cohesion and strengthened its own national identity. This was a strictly commercial arrangement, and these barbarians were not about to let themselves be dominated by the sophisticated Hellenes.

Yet the Etruscans were attracted by the trappings of the civilization that these newcomers brought with them. From the eighth century BCE, the tombs of the Tuscan aristocrats, and later those of the wealthy in neighboring provinces such as Latium, were laden with riches that must have been obtained in exchange for the local metal. There were Greek vases, some geometrically patterned, others in the oriental style; there were huge bronze cauldrons, like those described by Homer; and there were silver vessels, and gold and ivory jewelry, some of it from Cyprus or the Syrian coast. All this is evidence from beyond the grave of the luxurious lifestyle of the native aristocracy. Their lives were modeled on the

innovations from beyond the sea. They even began to banquet in a reclining position, like the Greeks, and to drink wine, a practice hitherto unknown.

The novelties also included writing. The first Etruscan inscriptions appeared ca 700 BCE, almost simultaneously in the two great southern metropolises of Tarquinia and Caere. They were written in the script of the Greeks of Chalcis who lived in close proximity with the Etruscans. The Tuscans made a few minor modifications to adapt the alphabet to their own language. For instance, *gamma*, the third letter of the Greek alphabet, a voiced occlusive /g/, became our letter C, an unvoiced occlusive /k/, because Etruscan did not contain the phoneme /g/. The Greek alphabet, as amended by the ancient Tuscans, would later be transmitted to the other peoples of the Italian peninsula. This explains how our modern, Latin-based script contains a C in place of the *gamma* of the original Greek script. The Etruscans occupied a dominant place in Italy at the time, and it is from them that writing spread to the other nations, especially the Latins.

During the earliest stages of the history of writing in Italy, a knowledge of reading and writing was a clear sign of prestige. Several of the excavated tombs of the wealthy in Tuscany contained writing instruments inscribed with alphabets. This shows the occupant to have been “literate” in the true sense of the word: he knew his letters in a society that still contained very few people who knew how to read, and thus was able to claim a superior culture. For instance, a princely tomb dating from 650 BCE in Marsiliana d’Albegna contained a tablet with an alphabet written along its upper edge (Fig. 2)—early evidence of what would remain one of the commonest writing materials in the Roman world, a wax-coated tablet on which letters were engraved with a stylus. But this tablet is a luxury item made of ivory and decorated with a lion in oriental style. Writing is thus



Fig. 2. Writing-tablet from Marsiliana d'Albegna, engraved with an alphabet, ca 650 BCE. Inv. no v. 93480, Museo Archeologico, Florence.

associated with the luxurious and exotic lifestyle of the Italian aristocracy.

Waxed tablets were not the only surface on which writing was inscribed. A tomb in Caere of roughly the same era produced a little bottle in *bucchero* (the luxury ceramic of the Etruscans), inscribed with an alphabet and syllabic exercises of the *ba be bi bu, ca ce ci cu* type (Fig. 3). It served as an inkwell, an accessory for another of the materials used for writing at that time in Italy, the "linen books" mentioned by Latin authors. These books were made from fabric that was written on with a brush and then folded. The inkwell shown here is noteworthy since it uses shapes for M and N that have not been found elsewhere. The aristocrat wanted to be accompanied to the grave by the object that attested to his outstanding achievements and singled him out not only for his mastery of writing—something that was still exceptional at the period—but also for the fact that the shapes of his letters were unique to himself.

Thus, when writing was first introduced, it played the role of affirming social prestige, and this is confirmed by the existence of pseudo-inscriptions by people who pretended that they could read and write—an easy thing to do in a society that was so largely illiterate (Fig. 4). In fact, writing was to some extent monopolized by the nobility. The script did not present any major difficulty. It was alphabetic and thus contained a limited number of signs, so it did not require a lengthy apprenticeship. Consequently, it did not result in the creation of a specialist cast of scribes. The aristocracy used writing for its own purposes. A great many of the oldest inscriptions, dating from the seventh century BCE, accompany the magnificent gifts which these aristocrats presented to one another, in the style of the



Fig. 3. *Bucchero* inkwell from Caere (Cerveteri), found near the tomb of Regolini-Galassi, inscribed with an alphabet and syllabic exercises. Late seventh century BCE. Inv. no. 20349, Museo Gregoriano Etrusco, Vatican Museums.

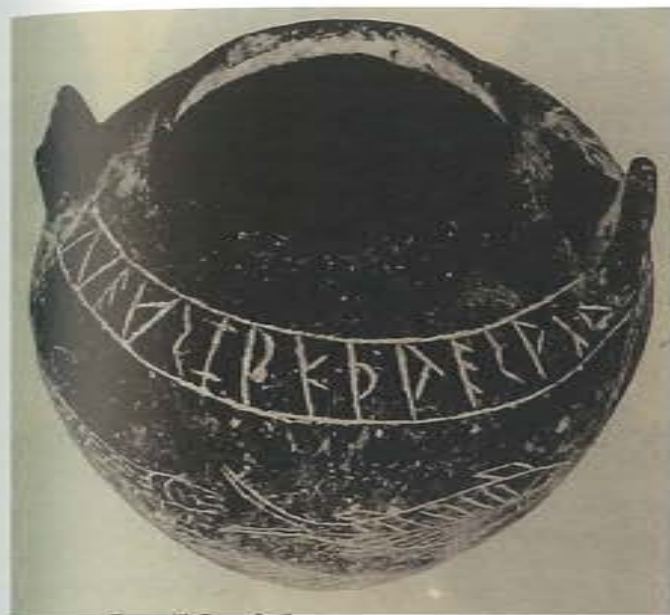


Fig. 4. Impasto vase with pseudo-inscription found at Tarquinia. First half of seventh century BCE. Inv. no. 732, Museo Nazionale, Tarquinia.

heroes of the Homeric epic. Such an inscription would commemorate the giver and the recipient and constituted an important element in these aristocratic exchanges of presents. Sometimes writing was inscribed on the luxury item itself, as in the case of the golden fibula now in the Louvre Museum in Paris (Fig. 5). The goldsmith produced the inscription with the same delicate granulation technique that he used for the decoration.

Inscriptions commemorating aristocratic gifts and the alphabets that accompanied princes to their graves disappeared after the sixth century BCE. This was hardly surprising, since a knowledge of reading and writing could not remain the prerogative of a narrow, socially dominant sector of the population for ever. Vases covered in writing have been found in quite modest tombs, and the craftsmen signed the goods that they made. The nobility could no

longer claim to be exceptional in their literacy or signal their social standing in this way. Furthermore, there is evidence that writing was taught outside the sphere of the families of the nobility and that it became part of the fabric that was used to build up the city. One of the earliest tangible manifestations of this affirmation of the city, over and above the family groups who lived in it, was the construction of temples, an activity that appears to have begun in the sixth century. These temples, with their outbuildings and associated personnel, produced veritable schools of scribes—if only to enable the faithful to leave votive offerings inscribed with their names.

One such "writing studio" existed in the sixth century BCE at Veii, attached to the temple of Portonaccio. This is where the famous terracotta *acroteria* (statues that stand beside the pediment) representing Heracles and Cerynia's doe were produced. A northern variation on Etruscan script, dating from the fourth to third centuries BCE, was found in the province of Veneto, and it is one of the best

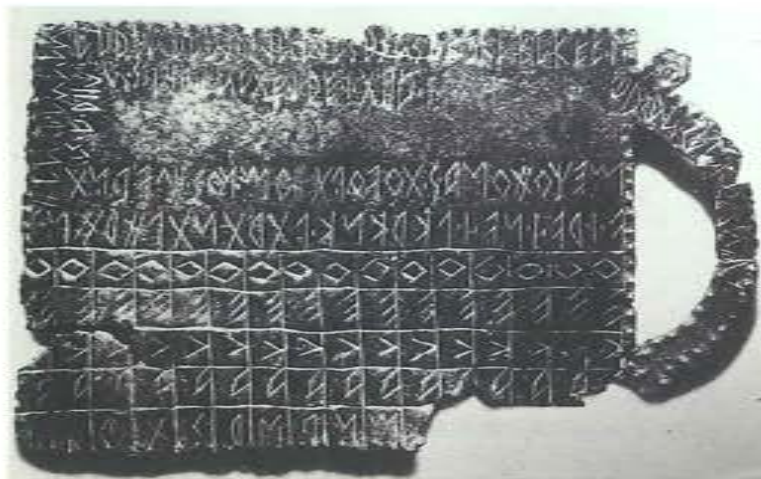


Fig. 6. Bronze plaque imitating a writing-tablet and bearing a dedication, an alphabet, and writing exercises, originating from the sanctuary of the goddess Reitia at Este. Fourth to third century BCE. Inv. no. 16000, Museo Nazionale Atestino, Este, Italy.



Fig. 5. Gold fibula from Chiusi, 625–600 BCE. Inv. no. Cp 282/Bj 816, Musée du Louvre, Paris.

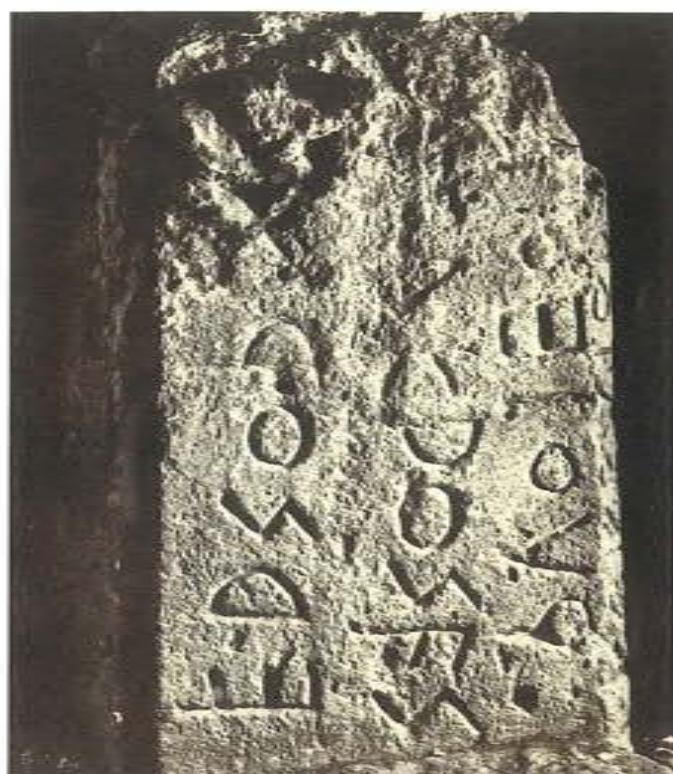


Fig. 7. Inscription on the *lapis niger* (black stone) in the Roman Forum, mid-sixth century BCE. Foro Romano, Rome.

examples. The excavations at the sanctuary of the goddess Reitia, in Este, yielded dozens of votive offerings involving writing, in the form of reproductions of tablets and styluses (Fig. 6). The divinity (who was the local equivalent of the Greek and Roman goddesses of wisdom and the arts Athena and Minerva), was the patroness not only of writing but also of the study of writing. The tablets are covered with alphabets and writing exercises, evidence of the role the community attached to this sanctuary and its priests in the teaching of the young Venetians. It is even conjectured that the English verb "to write" derives from the same root that gave the name Reitia.

There is nothing as eloquent in Portonaccio, but it has been noted at least that the votive offerings made in a local workshop use a special form of writing, involving a system of punctuation and a sibilant sign in the form of a cross. This is proof of its uniqueness. Yet unlike the alphabet found in the aristocratic tomb in Caere (which dates from the previous century), these offerings are not from the nobility. The entire citizenry considered the sanctuary as collectively theirs, and through it they expressed their community's individuality. These special features are generally found only in inscriptions discovered at Veii, whereas other cities had their own distinctive characteristics. For example, in Caere, the two



Fig. 8. Bronze tables from Gubbio, second century BCE. Palazzo Comunale, Gubbio, Umbria.

sibilants in the language were often distinguished by placing an S next to three dashes and a sigma next to four dashes, a peculiarity unique to this city.

From this time on, the forms of writing of which we are aware passed from the privileged prerogative of the aristocracy into general use by the citizenry. It was the city's means of expression and was at the service of its people. A statistic from Roman history may provide the best illustration. One of the stages that marked the slow progress of the Roman plebeians toward winning equal rights with the patricians, who tended to monopolize (if not abuse) political power, occurred in 450, with the display of the Law of the Twelve Tables. It is so-called because it was presented and offered for public perusal on the bronze tables displayed in the Forum. The citizen was thus protected from arbitrary rulings by judges and given the



opportunity of seeing whether those judges were applying the law. Of course, the public display of a regulation is not a democratic process in itself. One of the oldest inscriptions discovered buried in the ground in Rome dates back to the sixth century BCE. It is the so-called *lapis niger* (black stone), which takes its name from the black pavement that had covered it since the end of the republican era. As far as can be judged, it simply fixes ceremonial rites associated with the ancient altar beside which it was discovered (Fig. 7). But the way in which the writing is used, and perhaps also the form of the stone, which is shaped like a tombstone or milestone, reinforces the impression of an edict set in stone, of a law fixed by a king—the *rex*, whose name appears in the text.

Note that in this case, the inscription does not appear to have been created for the purpose of being read. It is



Fig. 9. Detail of the triumphal Arch of Titus in the Roman Forum, showing an inscription dating from shortly after 81 CE. Foro Romano, Rome.

arranged vertically, the lines running in alternate directions in the *boustrophedon* system where the end of a line is continued below it on the same side, reversing the direction of reading. The wording covers all four sides of the stone, and this would have made it even more difficult, if not impossible, to read. What counts most in the end is the presence of lettering, regardless of the content of the message it is supposed to convey. It is what the letters symbolize that matters.

The Twelve Tables changed the very meaning of writing. They themselves have disappeared, but one can get an idea of them through documents from the impressive series of seven large bronze tables, dating back to the second and first centuries BCE, which were found in the Umbrian city of Gubbio (Fig. 8). They are written in the local language and use the local writing style (only the two most recent are in

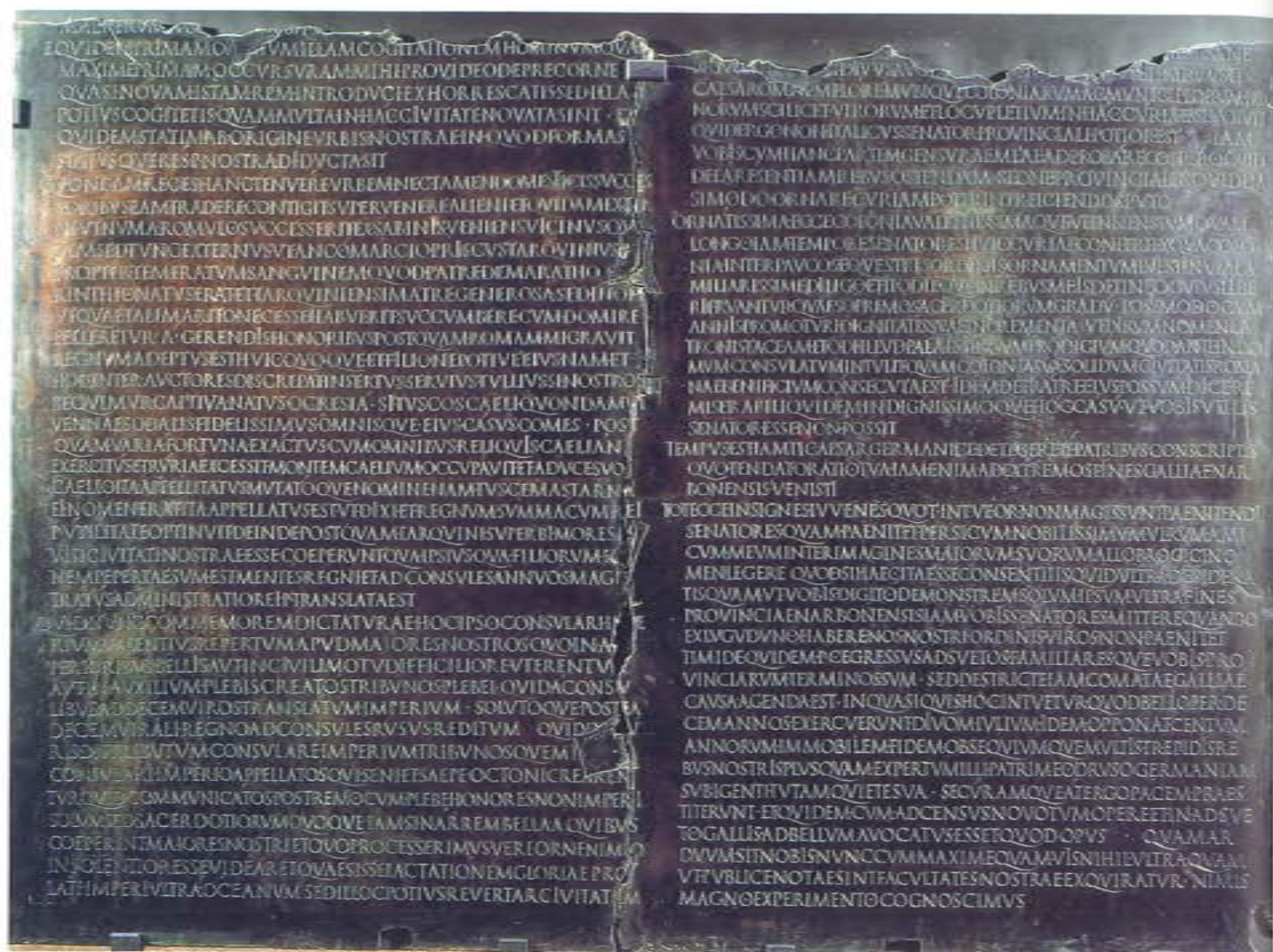


Fig. 10. Claudian table from Lyon, dating from shortly after 48 ce. Inv. no. Br 2, Musée de la Civilisation Gallo-romaine, Lyon.

Latin script). They contain religious precepts, laying down the ritual order for ceremonies held in the city. Legibility was imperative from now on. This sort of text was designed to be read, responding to the express wish of the people to have the law made public.

It would be simplistic, however, to link the use of writing merely to the publicity that it gives a text and to the process of democratization. The Latin inscriptions on many of the monuments in Rome date from the imperial period and are clear celebrations of the emperor. They are destined to perpetuate his glory and thus set him apart from the common mortal, giving him a godlike status, at least after his death. Thus, the inscription over the Arch of Titus in the Forum in Rome, built after the emperor's death in 81 ce, proclaims to the world, in handsome, carefully ordered capital letters, "the divine Titus, son of the divine Vespasian" (Fig. 9).

It is remarkable that this celebration of a ruler who was henceforth to preside over the destiny of the empire should be responsible for the misappropriation of republican forms of written proclamation. Much has been made here of the sovereignty of the Roman people who insisted on the public display of official texts on a bronze table. At first glance, the famous "Claudian Table of Lyon," found on Fourvière hill near the place where the delegates would assemble from the various cities of Gaul, seems to conform to this model (Fig. 10). The imposing bronze plaque commemorates the decision taken by the Senate, under the emperor Claudius in 48 ce, to open its ranks to the notables of this province. But it is no longer stamped with the seal of senatorial approval, the assembly's imprimatur in republican times. What has instead been engraved for posterity is the ruler's discourse, which

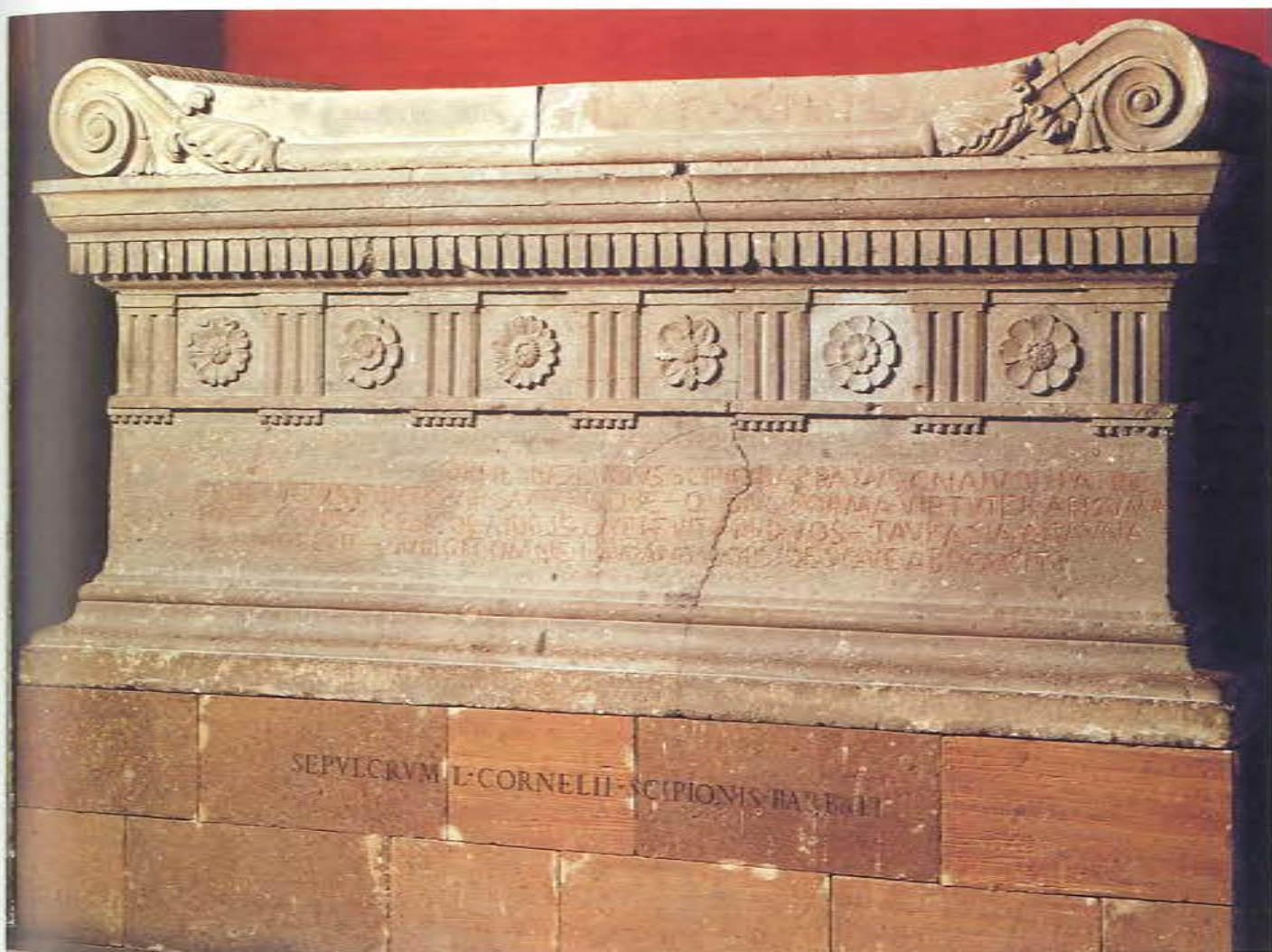


Fig. 11. Sarcophagus of Lucius Cornelius Scipio Barbatus, consul from 298 BCE.
Inscription dating from the mid-third century BCE. Vatican Museums, Rome.

preceded the decision. The discourse is recorded by Tacitus; the ruler used it to persuade the appointed city fathers, somewhat reluctantly, to recruit from further afield. The traditional medium on which republican laws had been written was thus adapted for use by the new form of power.

The break with republicanism was not as great as it might seem. The Roman republic, like its Italian counterparts, remained very undemocratic despite gradual plebeian encroachments. Its rulers were recruited almost exclusively from the narrow circle of leading families, whether they had originally been patrician or plebeian. Even under the Republic, one of the basic functions of writing, at least in its public applications, was to celebrate the glory of great men, and thus generally to honor the members of families who shared glory and high office.

Polybius, writing in the second century BCE, emphasized the importance of funeral services which were the occasion for listing the great achievements of the deceased and, by association, those of his ancestors. Epitaphs engraved on tombstones fulfilled the same function more permanently. The tomb of the Scipio family found on the Appian Way contained imposing sarcophagi that bore paeans of praise to each of the deceased. Lucius Cornelius Scipio Barbatus, who was consul in 298 BCE, is described in saturnine verses as "a brave and wise man whose nobility was equal to his courage, who was your consul, praetor, and city father, who captured the cities of Taurasia and Cisauna in Samnium, subjected the whole of Lucania, and brought back hostages" (Fig. 11). Note that this is addressed to the *populus Romanus*, who was invited to read these lines and marvel at the exploits of his noble scion.



Fig. 12. Latin inscription by Paulus Emilius on a plinth of King Perseus at Delphi, erected in front of the Temple of Apollo, 167 BCE.

Yet in the aristocratic republic that was Rome, the affirmation of the *res publica* went hand-in-hand with that of great men. One notable example is the inscription that Paulus Emilius, who overcame Perseus, king of Macedonia, at the Battle of Pydna in 168 BCE, had engraved on the plinth that the king had erected in the Hellenic sanctuary of Delphi. It proudly celebrates this appropriation of the monument of a conquered king: "Paulus Emilius, Imperator, has taken [this plinth] from King Perseus and from the Macedonians" (Fig. 12). The inscription is written in Latin in large, square characters in a location where the only language spoken was Greek. The letters appear to crush the

Greek text that also appears on the stone, written in smaller letters. It is the very symbol of Rome's seizure of the Hellenic world, which was finalized with this victory.

Many of the inscriptions left by the Romans have a public, political nature, but these people did not spend all their lives in the public sphere—what they called the *negotium*. There was also its opposite: *otium*, or leisure. It was to this sphere that culture belonged, where writing was put to a very different use. Of course, much less is known about this personal aspect of literacy. Unlike the great official, or at least commemorative, inscriptions (such as epitaphs), that were designed to last and were therefore inscribed on stone or metal, this other writing was written on perishable materials which, with a few exceptions, have not survived. The fate of Herculaneum and Pompeii, buried under ash and lava when Vesuvius erupted in 79 CE, has provided a glimpse of the amount of material that must have disappeared. It is only in this region that parchment documents have been recovered. Skins prepared using a technique developed in Hellenistic Pergamon, as well as papyrus imported from Egypt, supplanted the ancient "linen books" and the wax-coated tablets as writing surfaces. The tablets were the commonest writing materials and were used for the myriad needs of everyday life, at work or in private, by anyone who could write. For cultural and literary purposes, though, parchment was mostly used.

Much has been written about literacy in the Roman world, and in the absence of any possibility of producing even approximate statistics, one can only offer impressions. It would seem, however, that the Romans were less illiterate than has long been thought. Many of them, boys and girls,



Fig. 13. Sarcophagus of Marcus Cornelius Statius, as schoolmaster and student, second century CE. Musée du Louvre, Paris.

attended elementary school run by a *magister ludi* (headmaster), whose main function was to teach letters—reading and writing—hence his other name of *litterator* (Fig. 13). He was a craftsman who was a permanent resident of the city, sometimes assisted by the civic authorities or by the emperor. The *magister* dispensed knowledge that no longer had to be sought in the temples, as had previously been the case. Those who could went on to attend high school or *grammaticus*, where they were taught literature. Even higher education was available from the *rhetor*. At the very least, everyone had a basic knowledge of writing and some notion of how it opened up a whole field of knowledge.

It is therefore not surprising that so many funerary images consist of a representation of the deceased surrounded by writing implements. Already in Etruscan funerary monuments (generally dating back to the second century BCE) it is not unusual for the effigy that lies on the top—reclining on its side in the banqueting position—to be holding a writing-tablet (Fig. 14) or a parchment scroll (Fig. 15) instead of the customary banqueting paraphernalia of chalice and paten. This was supposed to spell out how cultivated the deceased was. The sarcophagus of Laris Pulenas (in Tarquinia) features a long inscription recalling the fact that he was a diviner and wrote treatises on Tuscan religious knowledge. Significantly, it is recorded on the noble and literary material of parchment rather than the wax tablet that was used for more mundane purposes. Among Romans, this same desire to depict the deceased (or a living person) as a *litteratus*—“lettered” in the widest sense but also in its original meaning of “able to read”—produced similar representations. Here again, Pompeii has some interesting examples. For instance, a couple chose to decorate the wall of their house with their portraits, the wife holding a double tablet in her left hand and bringing a stylus to her lips with her right hand, while the man clutches a parchment scroll in his left hand, a sign of his appreciation of the literature written on this medium (Fig. 1). Did they have plenty of time for such intellectual pursuits? It is unlikely. They were both bakers, and their tablets, like those of the banker, Jucundius, which were found intact in the ruined city, were mainly used for keeping accounts rather than for recording their musings. But perhaps in their eyes, knowing how to read and write placed them in the same cultural community as Cicero or Pliny the Younger who never traveled without their writing instruments. This is a far cry from the situation that existed around 700 BCE, when only a few aristocrats were able to dazzle their illiterate friends with their knowledge of writing. Yet even at this late stage, the ability to read and write was still the best way of achieving social status.



Fig. 14. Alabaster cinerarium of Setre Cneuna with a figure holding a double writing-tablet, ca 100 BCE. Inv. no. 334, Museo Guarnacci, Volterra.



Fig. 15. Sarcophagus of Laris Pulenas holding an open parchment scroll containing his epitaph. Late third century BCE. Inv. no. 9804, Museo Nazionale, Tarquinia.