14.4: The Inscriptions

The Content of the Inscriptions

I do not propose to discuss the content of the inscriptions in any detail here, since they are not the focus of my study. However, it is worth noting that they represent the aspect of the tombstones that demonstrates the greatest similarity, transcending the major differences of language (Etruscan or Venetic) and of form of monument (stele, cippus or ciottolone). Because they are formulaic in nature and characteristically short, often two or three words only and very rarely more than six, they are frequently translated with confidence. However, in fact neither language is fully understood and there is much debate among linguists about both syntax and lexicon. Nonetheless we can see that most inscriptions include a one- or two-part name, assumed to be that of the owner of the tomb being marked; in the Etruscan inscriptions the name appears in what is taken to be the genitive case, while the Venetic ones are in what is taken to be the dative. Both male and female names appear. While many of the inscriptions consist of the name alone, others take the form of so-called ‘talking inscriptions’, beginning in the Etruscan examples with ‘mi’, in the Venetic with ‘ego’. In a small number of cases, in both Etruscan and Venetic, a term is used that is interpreted as relating to either an office held by the deceased, or to a status or class. In Etruscan the term is ‘zilath’, usually interpreted as a magistracy; in Venetic the term is ‘ekupetaris’ (and variants), sometimes interpreted as referring to membership of an equestrian class or, more specifically, as meaning a charioteer. In some of the Etruscan examples the term ‘suthi’ appears and is interpreted as meaning ‘grave’.

Examples of Etruscan inscriptions (transcribed and translated) are:

- pesnas kathles salchis of Pesna Kathle (Bologna stele 47)
- mi suth i thanchvilus titlalus I (am) the grave of Thanchvil, (daughter) of Titlalu (Bologna stele 105)
- [------]as’ levels zilacnuk[e] [I am the grave of ????? ????]as’, son of Leve, who was zilath (Bologna stele 25,
Examples of Venetic inscriptions (transcribed and translated) are:

- hostihavos toupeio to Tihavos Toupeio (Padua ciottolone Pa7)
- ego voltiomnoi iuvantioi I am toVoltiomnos Iuvantios (Este cippus Es4)
- aletei veignoi karamniioi ekupetaris ego I am to Aletes Veignos Karamniios, the ekupetaris (Padua stele Pa2)

### Arrangement of the Inscriptions

In contrast to the content of the inscriptions, which are repetitively similar, their arrangement on the tombstones demonstrates marked differences. In this section I shall describe the main variants and indicate the implications for the reader (I shall turn to the writer later). I assume here that the reader would have encountered the stone in its fixed position on or by the tomb and would have had to move his or her eyes, head, or body, to read the inscription.

#### Inscriptions in Horizontal Lines on a Flat Surface

Inscriptions in horizontal lines occur on the majority of the Bologna stelae, inscribed in Etruscan, where they are characteristically placed in bands running between the zones of decoration (Figures 2–3). This is the variant that most resembles modern tombstones, in that it requires the reader to stand in front of the monument, involving movement only of the eyes, or perhaps slight movements of the head (though from right to left, in contrast to the direction of modern western writing). What is different from most modern tombstones, however, is the subservient relationship of the writing to the decoration: in most of the Bologna stelae the inscriptions are not very large, with a maximum letter height of c.8.0 or 9.0 cm, and the figured scenes dominate the visual impression.

#### Inscriptions in Horizontal Lines Around the Circumference of the Stone

Different versions of horizontal inscriptions occur on the two Rubiera cippi, written in Etruscan (Figure 4a-b). They resemble the Bologna stelae in that the inscriptions are located in horizontal bands separating zones decorated with figured scenes. However, unlike the Bologna stelae, the monuments are cylindrical in shape and both the decorative friezes and the inscriptions run right round the stones. To read the inscriptions fully, the reader would have to walk round the stones in a clockwise direction (since the direction of writing is again right to left).

Very different in form from these cippi are the ciottoloni from Padua, inscribed in Venetic (Figures 10–11), but they also, in most cases, have inscriptions running round the circumference of the stone, as does the unique Cartura stone (Figure 12). They are mostly written from right to left, but a few run left to right. Although these stones are not large (none exceeds 50 cm in their longest dimension), they would nonetheless have required the reader to walk round them to read the full inscription. Moreover, if they were placed directly on the ground surface — and we have no evidence on this one way or the other — an adult reader would also have had to bend or kneel to read them.

Inscriptions written around the circumference of a stone can pose an additional problem for the reader, in those cases where there is no gap in the text — which is to identify where the beginning is. The formulaic nature of the inscriptions means that this can usually be assessed plausibly — possibly more easily by the original reader than the modern...
linguist — but it would nonetheless have to be sought and would not have been obvious at first sight.

Inscriptions in Straight Lines Around the Sides of a Figured Panel

Inscriptions around the sides of a figured panel occur on the stelae from Padua, Monselice and Altino (Figures 5–7), all but one inscribed in Venetic, one in Latin. The Venetic examples run right to left, the Latin one left to right. Of those where the inscription can be read or reconstructed reasonably completely, two run along the top only, three run around two sides, two along three sides, two along four sides, while one — the example from Altino with an empty panel where the figured scene normally occurs — consists of six lines arranged in a spiral fashion (Figure 7). The one- and two-line inscriptions begin at the top, in the Venetic examples starting in the top right-hand corner, in the Latin example in the left-hand corner; the three- and four-line inscriptions all begin on the right side starting in the bottom right-hand corner. The six-line inscription also begins in the bottom right-hand corner and is arranged in a spiral fashion, with line 5 wrapping round inside line 1 and line 6 wrapping around inside line 2 along the top of the stone. All the inscriptions are written as if inscribed on a continuous baseline, with the letters aligned with their tops towards the edge of the stone and the bottoms facing inwards. In the case of the four- and six-line inscriptions, this means that the bottom (fourth) line is upside down in comparison to the top (second) line.

For the reader, these inscriptions require considerably more movement of the head than horizontal inscriptions do. (S)he must first lean to the right to read line 1, straighten up to read line 2 across the top, then lean to the left to read line 3. To read line 4, where present, the reader must be able to read upside down writing (or stand on his or her head).

A single example of the Bologna stelae, inscribed in Etruscan, presents a variant of this type. The fragmentary stele 137 seems to have had a three-sided inscription around the top of the stone, running right to left as usual, but in this case the corners are rounded, so the inscription is curved at both ends.

Inscriptions in Vertical Lines

Inscriptions in vertical lines occur on the cippi from Este, inscribed in Venetic (Figures 8–9). The necessity to place the inscriptions vertically is created by the choice of small obelisk-shaped monuments as tombstones: the narrow widths would not accommodate more than three or four letters on a line, which would be impractical for the length of inscriptions required. Even exploited lengthways, the inscriptions mostly require two lines and in two cases, three. In two further cases, the inscription occupies two adjacent faces of the stone, creating one further three-line (Es137) and one four-line inscription (Es8). One other stone (Es9), with inscriptions on two faces is normally treated as bearing two separate two-line inscriptions. The multi-line inscriptions are all written boustrophedon, usually but not always starting at the top of the stone in the left-hand top corner, with the second line running upwards and the third, where present, down again. Two different arrangements occur. Some inscriptions are written as sitting on separate baselines, so that the letters are all the same way up and the first line reads right to left and the second left to right. Others, however, are written as on a continuous baseline, so that the letters of the second line are upside down in relation to those on the first. These two different arrangements impose different movements on the reader: for the first type (s)he has to alternate movements of the head to the left, then right, while for the second type the whole body has to be repositioned to read the second line and then again for the third line, where present. It is worth pointing out that reading inscriptions arranged vertically, while perfectly possible, is never particularly easy. In the case of the Este cippi, which rarely stand more than half a metre high above ground level, adult readers would have had to bend down, or even kneel, as well as move their
heads from left to right. In the case of the three cippi that are inscribed on two adjacent sides, the reader would also have to move bodily to read the second side.

Inscriptions in Elaborate Arrangements

Two of the ciottoloni have inscriptions in more elaborate arrangements. One (Figure 11) has an inscription written left to right in a figure-of-eight configuration. This is also the only ciottolone to have any decoration: an abstract key symbol on what was presumably the upper surface of the stone. The other (Pa27) which was found in the same area, has a three-line inscription arranged right to left in an overall horseshoe shape; it starts with the middle line, then moves on to the bottom line and then on to the top line. It is written as on a continuous baseline, which in this case results in the letters of the bottom line (line 2) being upside down in relation to those of the upper two lines (lines 1 and 3). Reading these inscriptions would involve walking round the stone, bending and head and eye movements.