14.5: Discussion

What emerges most obviously from this survey is the variety found both in the types of monument and in the arrangement of the inscriptions. As we have seen, the inscriptions are not presented in a ‘user-friendly’ manner, at least from a modern perspective, often requiring the reader to walk, bend and move the head and eyes in ways unfamiliar to us today. The arrangement of the inscription seems to be constrained by the nature of the monument: the size and shape of the stone and the placing of the decoration, where present. It seems reasonable to deduce that the primary choice made was of the stone, with the inscription being a secondary consideration. This argument is supported by the fact that uninscribed versions of all the main monument types are attested and, except in the case of the Paduan stelae, the uninscribed versions dominate numerically. While the inscription may have offered ‘added value’, to use another contemporary term, it was clearly not an essential component of the tombstone.

Having concentrated on the role of the reader so far, it is time to consider that of the writer, a term I use here to refer to the stone mason who carved the inscription (leaving aside the issue of who commissioned it or who composed it, whether the same person or a third party). We have no archaeological information about the production of the stones, but I make the assumption that they were produced in workshops, which would have had equipment that allowed the stones (few of which are outstandingly large or heavy) to be moved to facilitate the writing process, i.e. to be turned round or over. Thus the writer would have been able to write horizontally at all times, whatever the position or direction of the line in the final monument. Whether this was in fact the case could perhaps be elucidated by detailed study of the surfaces of the stones using a technique such as RTI (Reflection Transformation Imaging: see Earl et al. 2011; Piquette forthcoming; see also Piquette and Whitehouse, Figure 1, this volume), which could show up tool marks, and indicate direction, angle and depth of carving; however, no such work has been undertaken on the Italian monuments and this remains a project for the future. Most of the stones used for the monuments — limestone, sandstone and trachyte — are relatively soft and easy to carve, the exception being the porphyry of the ciottoloni, which is a hard volcanic rock. The inscriptions are generally carved competently, with well-formed letters of more or less equal size, constrained by bands designed to contain them. These bands are created between zones of decoration (in the Bologna and Rubiera stelae) or
around the edge of a figured panel (in the Paduan stelae), or by the incision of straight lines (in the case of the Este cippi); even the more elaborate ciottoloni have such incised lines. There are no obvious mistakes of composition and the inscriptions in Venetic include punctuation marks, in the elaborate system developed for that script. None of the inscriptions mark word divisions (Venetic punctuation separates syllables) and no attempt is made to make word divisions coincide with edges or corners of stones: the continuous text carries on regardless.

Whether the stone masons composed the inscriptions themselves or copied from templates composed by others, it seems likely that they would have become competent at reading these short and simple texts. Whether this was also true of the readers is far less clear. To explore further what reading entailed at this time, we may try to outline the ‘visitor experience’ in an Iron Age cemetery in northern Italy. ‘Visitor experience’ is another contemporary concept, but I mean it here not in the sense in which it is used by museum and cultural heritage specialists, but in terms of the original visitor experience of those who encountered the monuments at the time they were erected or not long after. This inherently hypothetical exercise is made even more tentative by the lack of detailed archaeological contextual information available; nonetheless it is worth undertaking as it serves to focus on one key concern of the current volume — that is the material practices involved in the consumption of writing. The only assumptions I make are that the monuments were standing in the open on or near the tombs, which were usually arranged in cemeteries, and that visibility was not impeded by the presence of buildings or, for that matter, shrubs or trees (which, of course, we do not know).

The monuments are relatively small. While the largest of the Bologna stelae may have been 207 cm tall when complete, this was exceptional: most of the stones were under 150 cm tall, many less than 100 cm, and some no more than 50 cm — a range not unlike that to be found in a traditional English churchyard. When standing, particularly in groups in a cemetery, they would probably have been visible from a few hundred metres away, but would not have appeared very impressive at this distance. As one approached, the stones would have appeared larger and the presence of decoration would have become apparent, though details of scenes would not have been clear until one was quite close to the monument. What about the inscriptions themselves? The heights of the letters ranges from c.3 to 8 or 9 cm. To help us visualise this, it is worth noting that the larger size is close to that of UK car number plates, which the British driving test requires drivers to be able to read at a distance of 20.5 m (Driving Standards Agency 2013) — and quite a lot larger than found on most tombstones today. Script with letters 3 cm high, much more comparable to that of modern tombstones, can be read at about half that distance in average daylight. Whether these distances would have applied in the case of the Iron Age tombstones is unclear. It is one thing to read black letters standing out against a white or yellow background, quite another to make out letters inscribed in stone. There is some evidence that some of the inscriptions may have been painted or infilled with coloured matter, but we do not know how widespread this practice was or how long such colour would have survived on stone surfaces or in incisions or carved depressions in stones left out in the open. In practice the inscriptions would probably have been read from a position quite close to the stone, much as we read tombstones in a churchyard today, a quite intimate experience. Where the Iron Age experience would have differed from the modern one is in the bodily engagement involved. Whereas we would tend to stand, or perhaps sit or kneel, in a stationary position in front of the gravestone, the Iron Age visitor would have been prepared to walk round the monument, to bend and to twist their head from side to side and back again, or perhaps to undertake more difficult bodily contortions, if they wished to read the inscription in its entirety. Since bodies vary in size and agility, these movements would have been easier for some than others. The young and able-bodied could have accomplished them reasonably easily, whereas the old, arthritic or pregnant would have encountered greater difficulty. Interestingly, the people who would have been able to read them most easily (from a corporeal point of view) were children: not only would they have been more agile generally, but they would not have had to stoop to read them.
The question that arises is whether Iron Age people did indeed undertake this bodily engagement, or whether it sufficed to know that the inscription was present, that the tombstone had been completed in this way. This leads onto the question of who the expected reader was. Calculations of the proportion of literate people in ancient cultures are difficult to make (see Harris 1989 for classic discussion of this subject, while Stoddart and Whitley 1988 and Cornell 1991 offer divergent opinions on ancient Italy), but it is always assumed that the figures were very low and there is no reason to believe that northern Italy in the Iron Age was any exception. So, the number of people who could have read the inscriptions was probably small, although they would presumably have been concentrated in the elite families that erected the more elaborate tombstones and had greater access to education. We need to ask also whether the inscriptions were intended exclusively for the time they were erected and for the people who commissioned them, presumably the family of the deceased, or whether they were also intended for posterity and for viewing by strangers, as we know was the case with many Roman funerary inscriptions (see, for example Carroll 2009). In the absence of explicit references in the inscriptions themselves, which sometimes occur in the Roman examples, there is no way we can answer this question, but it does affect our conclusion about the intended readability of the inscriptions. For the family and friends of the deceased, and anybody else present at the funeral, the identity of the deceased was known and would not have had to be read from the stone, as would be the case for passing strangers or future visitors. While it is reasonable to imagine that the erection of a tombstone would always have had connotations of long-term survival and preservation of the memory of the deceased, this may not have involved any specific attempt to produce readable inscriptions for the future. The overall impression we gain is that the writers were concerned with producing texts containing the correct information and had little concern for their readability, either short- or long-term.

On the other hand, this impression may arise from unwarranted presentist assumptions about the nature of reading. In an examination of the materiality of writing in 1st-millennium bc Italy (Whitehouse 2008), I have looked at examples from a wide range of monuments and smaller artefacts found in several different areas of Italy. I have found that the characteristics described here in connection with the north Italian tombstones occur in many other cases too, not only on stelae, but also on portable artefacts such as pottery vessels, clay loomweights, bronze vessels, plaques and figurines, and jewellery items such as rings and fibulae made of precious metals (see also Perego, this volume). We find inscriptions running in many ways other than in straight lines: in loops, circles or spirals, for instance, or, three-dimensionally, continuously round the neck, body or base of a pottery or metal vessel or up the side of a figurine and across its shoulders (see Cessford, this volume, who also describes artefacts with writing arranged in several different ways, albeit from more recent contexts in the UK). To read such inscriptions requires a bodily engagement that is unfamiliar to us as modern readers, though in the case of the portable artefacts it would probably have involved turning the object in the hands rather than more dynamic movement of the eyes, head or body, as it would in the case of the stelae and other fixed monuments. In any case reading in the Iron Age would have been not just a cerebral but also a physical experience, in a way that is unfamiliar to us today.

So — what can we conclude in relation to the Iron Age tombstones? On the one hand, the writers seem not to have been concerned primarily with producing readable texts, but with including the necessary information (mainly the name, and sometimes the status, of the deceased) in the available space. This information may have been perceived as necessary as much for the world of the dead (the deceased individual, familial ancestors and divine beings) as for the world of the living. On the other hand, in the world of the living, among visitors to the cemetery, though not many people would have been able to read the inscriptions, those that could would have expected to engage with the monuments in a corporeal way and would not have found it strange to bend, twist and walk round them in order to read what was written on them. By taking a material practice approach, we can understand better both the production and the consumption of...
the written texts in terms of the human body, the capacities and limitations of its motor skills and the functioning of its senses. We can appreciate the effects that the differences between human bodies might have — whether arising from size, age, condition or specific ability/infirmity — and understand how they might have affected the processes of ‘reading’ and ‘writing’. We have already noted how ‘reading’, in the corporeal sense described here, might have been easier for children with their more agile movements, better eyesight and viewpoints closer to the ground; by contrast ‘writing’ in the same sense might have required the more developed motor skills and physical strength of healthy adults. These corporeal abilities might have had little connection to the cerebral skills required to understand the linguistic content of inscriptions (‘reading’ and ‘writing’ as these terms are more usually understood); however they were certainly relevant to the ways in which the tombstones were produced and consumed and therefore to the way they functioned in society.