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A NEW INSCRIPTION



GENTLEMEN OF CORTONA¹

Angelo Bottini

Readers of *Etruscan Studies* no doubt already know of the important Etruscan epigraphic discovery recently published: a slab of bronze about 50 cm. long and a little more than 28 cm. wide, inscribed on both faces, and referred to, rather academically, by its Latin *nomen*, the *Tabula Cortonensis*. It is now on public display at the Archaeological Museum of Florence.

The *Tabula* is one of the most important Etruscan inscriptions because it is one of a very few extant texts of some length. In addition to the information to be gleaned from its content, it promises to advance our knowledge of the vocabulary and structure of a language about which research has been limited by circumstances of preservation. It is not unlikely that the *Tabula Cortonensis* could cause us to modify many current interpretations.

Like other epigraphic documents, the *Tabula* is not the product of a regular excavation. Seven of the eight fragments into which it was broken were consigned to the Soprintendenza Archeologica della Toscana in 1992 by a man who said that he found them by chance—this claim was confirmed after a legal battle—in an opening on the slopes of the hill of Cortona, together with a small cache of parts of bronze objects. A careful investigation of the site brought to light no other artifacts or walled structures. Even if this is indeed the actual find-spot, it is unlikely that the *Tabula* was originally set up here; the tablet was probably removed from its original location, which also accounts for the apparently deliberate destruction of the object.

The situation allows for many diverse interpretations. It is possible that, in the breaking up of and moving of the tablet, the eighth fragment was lost. This piece, which contained the left half

of the last seven lines of the longer text, deprives us only of a series of names. Onomastic and linguistic peculiarities confirm that the *Tabula* relates to Cortona, and that it was a document of an official nature. Its appearance, the use of bronze, and the forms of the letters suggest that the inscription was made by the laborious method of casting and not by cold incision. The document must have been drawn up between the third and second centuries B.C., and contains two texts. A rather brief one, eight lines long, occupies only part of one side. The other, four times as long, is inscribed on the other side, which is barely large enough to hold it, in that a particular sign, not used at the beginning, marks the word separations. According to Francesco Nicosia, currently with the Ministero per i Beni e le Attività Culturali (at the time of the discovery, in 1992, he was archaeological superintendent of Tuscany), and Luciano Agostiniani, linguist at the University of Perugia, the shorter text, in which one can detect a dating formula based on reference to magistrates in office, should not be considered as a continuation of the other. It should be understood as an autonomous document, written by a hand that seems to be the same as that who compiled the first part of the longer text of 32 lines; the latter portion was finished by another scribe.

The longer text, in which both single numbers expressed in letters and a cipher in specific numerical notation appear, seems to be a contract, perhaps a document of sale, drawn up under the control of the principal urban magistrate, who is mentioned by name. A group of guarantors has been recognized in the longest of three lists of names (the last is almost completely missing) of varying lengths that occupy different lines.

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NOTE

1. Editor's Note: This article has been translated and reprinted from "Gentiluomini di Cortona," *Archeo* XV, 8 (August 1999) 6–7. Because it predates the publication of the Cortona Tablet by Agostiniani and Nicosia reviewed below, some of the tenses have been changed.
The *Tabula Cortonensis* continues to attract scholarly attention. The initial publication by Agostiniani and Nicosia had different explanations of the method used to manufacture the slab, and of the order of the texts, from those given above. Recent publications include Carlo de Simone, in *Annali della Scuola Superiore di Pisa. Classe di Lettere e Filosofia*, ser. 4,3 (1988); and Emilio Peruzz, in *La Parola del Passato* 318 (2001) 203-210, with important observations on the text.