Etruscan Inscriptions on Ivory Objects Recovered from the Orientalizing Period Residence at Poggio Civitate (Murlo)

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1. INTRODUCTION

Over 130 fragments of plaques, pendants, figurines and furniture inlays carved from bone, horn, and ivory have been recovered from the debris of the OC1/Residence (formerly, the Lower Building) at the Etruscan site of Poggio Civitate (Murlo). Seven of these pieces — fragments of carved plaques — preserve segments of Etruscan inscriptions incised on their flat and smoothed reverse sides. The fire that consumed the OC1/Residence and the rest of the building complex damaged these pieces. They were burned black by flames. Construction of the Archaic Period Building, part of whose foundation was erected over the remains of the OC1/Residence, sealed up the artifacts and they remained undisturbed until excavation.

Ceramic evidence recovered from the OC1/Residence suggests that the destruction of the buildings belonging to the Orientalizing phase of the site is to be placed within a chronological window of approximately forty years, ca. 620/580 BCE. The inscribed ivory plaques discussed here can be dated no later than ca. 580 BCE.

The remains of pieces of bone, horn, and ivory in various states of production have also been recovered from a refuse area located north of the eastern end of the OC2/Workshop (formerly, the Southeast Building), all of which suggests that craftsmen at Poggio Civitate were producing objects in these materials at the time of the conflagration. It is reasonable to conclude that the pieces with inscriptions recovered from the OC1/Residence were carved at the site and that the inscriptions on these fragments were incised locally, an important fact because it guarantees literacy on the part of (a few) inhabitants no later than ca. 580 BCE.
2. INSCRIPTIONS

The inscribed plaques were broken into pieces during the destruction of the OC1/Residence. Only fragments survive and so the inscriptions are incomplete. Six of the seven inscriptions in the inventory were inspected at the Antiquarium di Poggio Civitate at Murlo in June of 2004 and again in June of 2005. They are described in sections §2.1–§2.6.

The inscriptions on four of the plaques are of sufficient length to permit us to gather information about epigraphic category, features of paleography, and the morphology of words. In two cases the surviving inscriptions are but two letters long. These inscriptions are too short to permit us to extract much useful information apart from details about the shape of the letters.


The surviving portion of the plaque, which was broken on all sides, was pieced together from two fragments. The plaque is in the form of the head of a female in left profile (Fig. 1). The eye is impressively large and has the shape of an almond. Two rows of tresses designed with rectangles fall down over the ear toward the shoulders.

On the left side of the rear of the plaque is a short section an inscription written in sinistroverse direction (Fig. 2). Two letters are visible, as are the bottom portions of two additional letters. The letters are approximately 6 mm in height and are spaced at a distance of a little over 1 mm. The first two letters are mi. Following iota is the bottom of the oblique bar of a sigma. This letter is followed by a small portion of a vertical bar, which could be part of a iota, a pi, or a tau. The surviving portion of the inscription reads: mišx[ - - - ]. This sequence of letters may be divided into two constituents: mi śx[ - - - ]. mi is the nominative of the first person pronoun.

The inscription has the structure of an iscrizione parlante of the proprietary type (see also §2.2). In this type of text the artifact, speaking in the first person, declares the name of its owner. The first person pronoun was followed by a name in the genitive case or, less commonly, in the nominative/accusative case. Since the inscription is on
a plaque in the form of the head of a female, it is tempting to restore šx[- - -] as a feminine personal name. Spuria seems a reasonable choice in this context, and it is a name attested on an inscription of the late 7th century. The initial part of the inscription can be restored as follows: mi šp[urIA- - -] ‘I (belong) to Spuria . . .’. Unfortunately, we do not have the family name of this person, although, to judge from inscriptions §2.3 and §2.4, we suspect that it too was inscribed on the plaque.

The shape of the letter mu is worthy of note. Its form is roughly ™; the vertical bar descends well below the oblique bars. The letter was not very carefully incised.

2.2 Fragment of a plaque of a lion’s head. Burnt ivory. Catalogue no. 1971-500; Piano del Tesoro, Rectangle 7. Six letters of an inscription are visible on the rear side of the plaque (Fig. 3 (obverse) and Fig. 4 (reverse)). The letters, approximately 4–6 mm in height and spaced 1–2 mm apart, were carefully incised in sinistral direction in an arc running from the snout of the head down along its neck. The surviving portion of the inscription reads as follows: miavil[- - -]. The inscription is to be segmented as mi avil[], a division that yields a first person pronoun, mi, in the nominative case, and part of a common Etruscan personal name Avile, which in this syntactic context may be restored in its entirety as avil[ēo], the genitive singular form of Avile. Once again, we do not have the family name of this person.

This inscription also has the form of a proprietary text of the iscrizione parlante type, specifying the name of the person to whom the plaque belongs, but written from the point of view of the plaque, i.e., ‘I (belong to) Avile . . .’. Several paleographic features stand out. The letter mu has the form ™. The vertical bar descends below the oblique bars, but the oblique bars are over half the length.
of the vertical. Compare this form of *mu* to that in §2.1. The lower oblique bar of the letter *wau* is attached near the bottom of the vertical, rather than in the middle as is customary for the archaic version of this character. The letter *alpha* has a crossbar that slopes downward in the direction of writing and joins the left bar near the bottom. *Lambda* is the smallest letter in the inscription; it stands at just over 4 mm in height.


The fragment, which conservators have reconstructed from three small pieces, is the bottom portion of a small ornamental plaque representing a female figure (Fig.

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*figure 5 – Obverse of a plaque in the form of a female figure. Burnt ivory. Catalogue no. 1971-636; Piano del Tesoro, Rectangle 7.*

*figure 6 – Reverse of a plaque in the form of a female figure. Burnt ivory. Catalogue no. 1971-636; Piano del Tesoro, Rectangle 7.*
5. The inscription was incised on the reverse of the figurine in sinistroke direction (Fig. 6). The inscription runs down the left side (of the reverse of the plaque), pivots along the bottom, and then continues up the right side. Eleven letters, approximately 5–6 mm in height, are visible. Breaks in the ivory have damaged the first and last letters, but both can be securely read as alphbas. The inscription may be transcribed as follows: ]å¶vheiøalñå[ .

The most plausible word-break is placed between sade and wau. Sade stands for the sound /s/, which in this case is a genitive singular inflectional ending. The inscription is best interpreted as a proprietary text, similar in form to that described in §2.1 and §2.2.

The surviving portion of the inscription preserves the last two letters of the personal name, that is to say -øs, and the stem form of the family name, vheiøalñå-. The inflected form of the family name in our inscription depends on whether the personal name referred to a man or a woman. Since this text was inscribed on an object depicting the figure of a female, it is possible—though certainly not necessary—that it was among the personal effects of a woman. We may suppose then that the name on the back of the plaque was that of a woman. The likelihood that the name ended in an alpha means that we can make a reasonable guess about the shape of its stem because the inventory of first names was relatively limited. During the archaic period common first names ending in -a as attested in the inscripational record are ramuøa and veleliå. An Etruscan woman’s family name would have been marked with the sign for feminine gender, namely -i. This stem would have been followed by the genitive case suffix, which for feminine family names ended in the vowel -a at this early period. We may then restore the family name in our inscription as vheiøalñå[ia]/feysalnai/. After adding the 1st personal pronoun, the inscription may be reconstructed in its entirety as either [mi ramuø]øvheiøalñå[ia] ‘belong to Ramutha Feysalnai’ or [mi veleliåøvheiøalñå[ia] ‘belong to Velelia Feysalnai’, its precise form depending on the personal name that is selected.

vheiøalñå- is heretofore unattested in the inventory of Etruscan family names. Formally, it is derived from a personal name with the shape vheiøal- /feysal/ or vheiøale- /feysale/.

This inscription yields three noteworthy features of paleography. The crossbars on the alphbas descend in the direction of writing. For alpha no. 2 the crossbar joins at the very bottom of the left stroke; for alpha no. 1, the crossbar meets the left bar at the bottom but does not touch it. The form of wau in this inscription has the same distinctive form as that found in 1971-500, but in this case the lower oblique bar is connected at very bottom of the vertical. The letter heta has the form Ε; the verticals extend beyond the horizontal at both the bottom and the top.

In terms of orthography, it is important to mention that the sound /f/ was spelled by means of the digraph ]β[, -vb-. This was the standard spelling for the sound /f/ in an inscription dating to ca. 580 BCE or earlier.


The inscription was incised in sinistroke direction on the reverse of the plaque, which appears to have the form of a crouching animal (Fig. 7). Unfortunately, the breaks in the ivory are such that only three letters, namely ]ila[, are visible in toto. They are about 5 mm in height and are
spaced about 1 mm apart. They were incised at the left edge of the surviving portion of the plaque (Fig. 8). Another letter is visible after the *alpha*, but only a vertical bar and a short piece of an oblique bar that joins at the top of the vertical have survived. This letter could be *nu, pi*, or *sade*.

The bottom strokes of six letters are visible at the beginning of the surviving segment of the inscription. The second letter (reading from the right), of which two oblique strokes are visible, is a three-bar *sigma*. Moving three strokes to the left is what appears to be the lower portion of a vertical bar followed by an oblique bar that could belong to a *kappa* or perhaps a *pi*. It is impossible to determine other letterforms because one can see only the bottom segments of the bars of these letters. The transcription is: ]x̂xxxxxi1ax[.

Despite the difficulties determining letterforms, this inscription probably belongs to the same type of text as the others in our catalogue and therefore is a personal name. The length of the inscription suggests that we have two constituents, but it is difficult to determine where a word-break might be located.

If the final letters of the inscription belong to a family name, then it may be best to read the last letter as a *nu*. This would permit the reconstruction of a family name ending in -ila[an[a].
Unfortunately, the inventory of family names with the sequence –ilan[a- as part of their structure is relatively small and none of those names match up with the possible forms of the surviving letters in our inscription.

This inscription shares a paleographic feature with §2.3. The middle bar of the letter *alpha* descends in the direction of writing but the crossbar does not join at the bottom of the left oblique bar. Two inscriptions, §2.3 and §2.4, have this distinctive paleographical feature and it is tempting to think that the same ‘hand’ may have incised them both.

2.5 Fragment of a plaque of a crouching animal. Burnt ivory. *Catalogue no. 1971-685; Piano del Tesoro, Rectangle 7.*

The surviving portion of the plaque is the lower torso of a crouching animal (Fig. 9). The reverse preserves two letters, an *alpha* and the final bars of a *nu, Ṽa* (Fig. 10). They were incised in sinistroverse direction. There is ample space on the plaque for additional letters following the *alpha*, so this fragment may preserve the end of the inscription.

The *alpha* is approximately 6 mm in height. The middle bar descends in the direction of
writing and merges with the left oblique near the bottom. The rightmost bar of nu is missing because the ivory is broken off at this point. The oblique bars are about 4 mm long. Another break in the ivory runs through both letters.

To judge from the sequence of letters, the inscription is the final portion of a family name built with the suffix –na (see §2.3 and §2.4). If this is so, then the name was not inflected in the genitive case as has been reconstructed for names on other ivories, but was written in its stem form (= nominative/accusative case).


The ivory, which is burnt and broken on two sides, preserves an ornamental base, possibly the midsection of a reclining animal (Fig. 11). On the reverse there are two letters incised in sinistronverse direction, ]ia[ (Fig. 12). Alpha was written toward the base of the plaque and there is space following without writing so it is possible that this piece preserves the final letters of a name, perhaps at the end of the inscription.

The iota is 5 mm high. The very bottom portion of the bar is missing because the ivory is broken at this point. The alpha is approximately 6 mm in height. The middle bar of the alpha descends in the direction of writing and joins the leftmost oblique near the bottom.

If we assume that ]ia is the final portion of a first name, several interpretations come to mind: (1) a masculine personal name inflected in the genitive singular, e.g., [aranθ]ia or [larθ]ia; (2) a feminine family name, e.g., [hirminθ]ia, also inflected in the genitive singular (see §2.3); (3) a feminine personal name inflected in the genitive singular, e.g., [larθu]ia. If ]ia stands at the end of the inscription then (2) is the best option. If, on the other hand, we assume that ]ia[ is followed by other letters, then it makes sense to interpret them as part of the final syllables of a first name, e.g., [velel]ia[σ], or a family name, e.g., [spur]ia[naσ].

3. NOTES ON ALPHABET, ORTHOGRAPHY AND LITERACY

The inventory of texts and of letterforms is too small to permit conclusions about alphabet and orthography. A preliminary assessment of this dossier is offered in the hope that it may stimulate further investigation.

3.1 The use of the letter sade M to represent the genitive ending /s/ proves that the alphabet
employed at Poggio Civitate belonged to the so-called ‘northern’ type. A digraph, Ŧ 1, spelled the sound /f/. The inscriptions were written in sinistral direction, without punctuation.

3.2 Two paleographic features distinguish these inscriptions. The first is the form of the letter ωαυ, which is consistently written with the lower oblique bar attached very near the bottom of the vertical bar. A second paleographic characteristic of these inscriptions is the form of the letter alpha, which is distinguished by having a crossbar that descends sharply toward the bottom of the left bar (in the direction of writing). In two instances (see §2.3 and §2.4) the crossbar meets but does not join the left oblique bar.

3.3 Cristofani, in Cristofani and Phillips 1971, suggested that the alphabet and orthographic system employed at Chiusi must have been the source for that used at Poggio Civitate. But at Poggio Civitate there is no unusual paleographic feature nor is there any unusual orthographic practice in the inventory of inscriptions from the 7th century BCE that would permit us to confirm Chiusi as the source of the alphabet, however likely that may be for other reasons. The only thing that can be said with certainty is this: the orthographic system employed in the inscriptions from Poggio Civitate is one characteristic of the ‘northern’ alphabetic tradition, and we know this based on the fact that the letter sade, rather than sigma, was used to represent the sound /s/.

3.4 The precise function of texts on precious objects of this sort is not always immediately clear. It is possible that the ornaments discussed here were tesserae hospitales, tokens entitling the bearer to a hospitable reception when traveling. But even if the plaques are correctly identified as tesserae, compelling questions remain: Why were the tesserae found among the debris of the OC1/Residence? Were they made as tokens of identification for those who lived at the site? Or were they made for guests who were invited to attend banquets or other functions hosted by the site’s aristocratic inhabitants? And if so, why? Intriguing questions indeed, but they cannot be answered.

3.5 The inscriptions incised on the ivory fragments from Poggio Civitate offer a good starting point for rethinking ideas about the spread of the alphabet and writing in northern Etruria during the 7th century BCE. Regardless of one’s view of the degree to which the residents at Poggio Civitate were literate, the probability remains that the plaques discussed in this paper were manufactured at the site and their fragments were recovered from the remains of a building that is generally believed to be a residence. It seems more than reasonable to think that members of the Etruscan elite who inhabited this site were responsible for having the inscriptions incised on these plaques.

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ABBREVIATIONS

AT = Ager Tarquiniensis
Cl = Clusium
Cr = Caere
ET = Rix et al. 1991
ETP = Wallace, Mimno, Shamgochian & Patterson 2004-present
Vs = Volsinii

NOTES

1. Nielsen (1983: 335-337) refers specifically to fragments that have been catalogued in the excavation’s database, but in the same passage he notes that many more pieces were recovered.

2. For reference to the buildings of the Orientalizing Period at Poggio Civitate I follow the terminology developed in Nielsen and Tuck 2001.

3. For a thoughtful summary of the issues and problems surrounding the chronology of the Orientalizing and Archaic phases at Poggio Civitate and the interpretation of the function of the buildings, see de Grummond 1997.


5. For an overview of the OC1/Residence and the artifacts discovered there see Phillips 1993: 51-78. Nielsen 1998 is an informative discussion of the evidence for identifying the structure formerly known as the Southeast building as a workshop (OC2/Workshop).
9. We refer not only to the ability to read and write names, but also to a familiarity with a particular type of formulaic text, namely the proprietary text, which had widespread currency throughout Italy in the 7th century BCE. Etruscans residing at Poggio Civitate could read and write texts of this type.
10. Unfortunately, this is the typical state of affairs for inscriptions recovered at Poggio Civitate.
11. Catalogue no. 1971-687 could not be located and inspected. As a result, I do not include it in this discussion.
12. The following epigraphic symbols are employed in this paper: a single square bracket indicates that there is a break in the inscription; square brackets [ ] indicate characters that have been restored or which can no longer been read; the underdot indicates characters that are damaged and/or are no longer legible. The sign x indicates that a portion of a letter is visible, but it is impossible to determine which letter. The Greek letter ο is used to transliterate the letter *tsade* and the letter s to transliterate three-bar *sigma*. When s represents a palatal fricative sound /s/, a diacritic ’ is placed above the letter, e.g., ṡ = /ʃ/. Words written in the Etruscan alphabet are printed in bold-faced type.
14. Three-bar *sigma* spelled the palatal sibilant /ʃ/ at Poggio Civitate, so the name ṡp[uria]α would be pronounced as /ʃpurias/. See §3.1 and footnote 22.
15. See section §3.1 for a note on the importance of the use of the letter *sade* to represent the dental sibilant /s/.
16. This inscription has been featured in several publications, but without discussion of epigraphic details. See Cristofani 1975: 9, 16 footnote 11; Cristofani 1977: 194, no. 6; de Simone 1989: 37, no. 6; and Phillips 1993: 78 (with photographs). In *Etruskische Texte* (Rix 1991) the inscription is catalogued as AS 2.1.
17. Etruscan phonotactic constraints do not permit word-initial /sf/. This rules out a word-break between *alpha* and *sade*.
18. If the name on the *tessera* refers to a male, then the number of possible first names is limited by the fact that the stem must end -α. This is not a very common ending for masculine first names. *Spuriaza*, *larθuza*, *piana*, and *pisna* (cited in the stem form) are among the possibilities. The genitive form of the family name would be *vheiαl na[σ]*.
19. Other first names referring to females are possible, e.g., *spuria*, *squria*, *titela*, *avila*, *ramaite la*, and *raquνə a* (cited in the stem form).
20. The family name could also maintain the masculine form and end in *α*, in which case the text would read [mi θamuθ]αο *vheiαl na[σ]*. This restoration would require an interpretation along the following lines: ‘I belong to Ramutha, (a member) of the
Feysalna family. Inscriptions of this type are not common, but they are attested frequently enough to make it a viable reconstruction. See, for example, ET Vs 1.94 ramaθa esχunas, ET AT 2.1 mi velelias havasianas, and ET Cr 2.107 ramaθas mi tutinas.

21. Archaic Etruscan personal names ending in –le syncopate the final –e before addition of the family name suffix –na. Compare the personal name ušele (ET Vs 1.98), from which the family name ušeln[as] (ET Vs 1.74) (< *ušele-na-s) is derived. For discussion of this phonological process, see Rix 1984: 217.

22. In the alphabet of northern Etruria three-bar sigma was used to represent the palatal sibilant and the letter sadē was used for the dental. In central and southern Etruscan alphabets, apart from those used at Caere and Veii, the situation was the reverse. For regional differences in Etruscan alphabets see Cristofani 1972 and 1978.

23. Cristofani (1977) discusses the epigraphic features of inscriptions from the area of Chiusi. His table of letterforms shows the distinctive wau found on 1971-500, but the form of the alpha, more specifically, the medial crossbar, as our photograph 2.1 shows, was not accurately drawn.

24. This conclusion was based on an examination of a small number of inscriptions from the site, plus letterforms incised on terracotta pan and cover tiles. The criterion deemed to be crucial for establishing a connection between Chiusi and Poggio Civitate was the direction of writing. At Poggio Civitate there is one inscription (catalogue no. 1966-121) and a few letterforms on pottery and roof tiles written in dextroverse direction. This unusual orientation is found also for ET Cl 2.7, an archaic inscription from Chiusi that dates to the 6th century BCE. Unfortunately, this orthographic feature tells us little about the possible origins of writing at Poggio Civitate. The inscription with dextroverse writing (catalogue no. 1966-121) cited by Cristofani is dated to the second phase of the site, between ca. 580 and 525 BCE, whereas inscriptions from the first phase, ca. 650-620/580 BCE, including those discussed in this paper, were written in sinistroverse direction. The fact that Poggio Civitate and Chiusi each have one 6th century inscription written in dextroverse direction is interesting, but ultimately unrevealing.

25. For a short discussion of inscriptions on luxury artifacts see Cristofani 1984.


27. The number of inscriptions that can be ascribed to northern Etruscan communities in the 7th century BCE is relatively small. For example, for Chiusi, which is generally considered a politically and economically powerful community in the 2nd half of the 7th century, only six inscriptions can be assigned to this time-period (Rix 1991: Cl 2.1 = 2.2, 2.3, 2.4, 3.1, 3.2; ETP 41).

28. The craftsmen who carved the ivory and bone artifacts incised the inscriptions for their patrons based on models that had been composed on perishable materials.
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