

2008

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Recommended Citation

Wallace, Rex E. (2008) "Etruscan Inscriptions on Ivory Objects Recovered from the Orientalizing Period Residence at Poggio Civitate (Murlo)," *Etruscan Studies*: Vol. 11 , Article 4.

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

BY REX WALLACE

1. INTRODUCTION

Over 130 fragments of plaques, pendants, figurines and furniture inlays carved from bone, horn, and ivory¹ have been recovered from the debris of the OC1/Residence (formerly, the Lower Building)² at the Etruscan site of Poggio Civitate (Murlo).³ Seven of these pieces — fragments of carved plaques — preserve segments of Etruscan inscriptions incised on their flat and smoothed reverse sides.⁴ The fire that consumed the OC1/Residence and the rest of the building complex damaged these pieces.⁵ 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.⁶

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.⁷ 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),⁸ 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.⁹

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.¹⁰ 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 2005.¹¹ 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.

2.1 *Fragment of a plaque of a female head. Burnt ivory. Catalogue no. 1971-206; Piano del Tesoro, Rectangle 7.*

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: *mi*śx[- -].¹² 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



figure 1 – Obverse of a plaque in the form of a female head. Burnt ivory. Catalogue no. 1971-206; Piano del Tesoro, Rectangle 7.

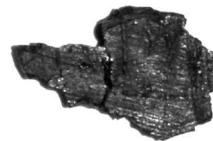


figure 2 – Reverse of a plaque in the form of a female head. Burnt ivory. Catalogue no. 1971-206; Piano del Tesoro, Rectangle 7.

a plaque in the form of the head of a female, it is tempting to restore $\acute{s}x[- -]$ 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.¹³ The initial part of the inscription can be restored as follows: $mi \acute{s}p[ur]ia\sigma - -]$ ‘I (belong) to *Spuria* . . .’.¹⁴ 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 \mathfrak{M} ; 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.*¹⁵



figure 3 – Obverse of a plaque in the form of a lion’s head. Burnt ivory. Catalogue no. 1971-500; Piano del Tesoro, Rectangle 7.



figure 4 – Reverse of a plaque in the form 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 sinistroverse 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 $mi \text{ } avil[$, 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 $avil[e\sigma]$, the genitive singular form of *Avile*.¹⁶ 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 \mathfrak{M} . The vertical bar descends below the oblique bars, but the oblique bars are over half the length



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

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.

2.3 Fragment of a plaque of a female figure. Burnt ivory. Catalogue no. 1971-636; Piano del Tesoro, Rectangle 7.

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

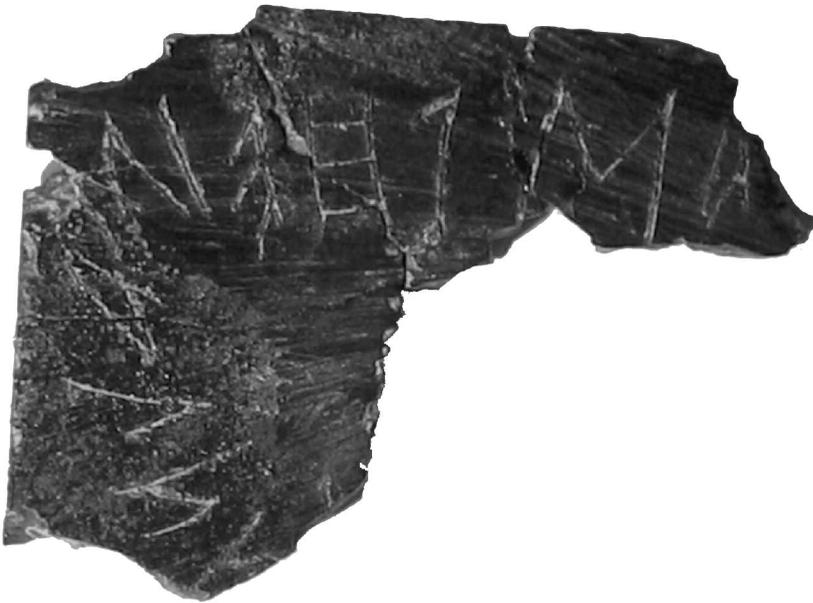


figure 6 – Reverse of a plaque in the form of a female figure. Burnt ivory. Catalogue no. 1971-636; Piano del Tesoro, Rectangle 7.

5). The inscription was incised on the reverse of the figurine in sinistroverse 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 *alphas*. The inscription may be transcribed as follows:]ασvheiσalnα[.

The most plausible word-break is placed between *sade* and *wau*.¹⁷ *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 -ασ, and the stem form of the family name, vheiσalnα-. 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.¹⁸ 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 inscriptional record are ramuθα and velelia.¹⁹ 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 vheiσalnα[ia]/feysalnaya/.²⁰

After adding the 1st personal pronoun, the inscription may be reconstructed in its entirety as either [mi ramuθ]ασ vheiσalnα[ia] ‘I belong to *Ramutha Feysalnai*’ or [mi veleli]ασ vheiσalnα[ia] ‘I belong to *Velelia Feysalnai*’, its precise form depending on the personal name that is selected.

vheiσalna- is heretofore unattested in the inventory of Etruscan family names. Formally, it is derived from a personal name with the shape vheiσal- /feysal/ or vheiσale-/feysale/.²¹

This inscription yields three noteworthy features of paleography. The crossbars on the *alphas* 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 *beta* has the form β; the verticals extend beyond the horizontals 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 βλ, vb-. This was the standard spelling for the sound /f/ in an inscription dating to ca. 580 BCE or earlier.

2.4 *Fragment of a plaque of an animal. Burnt ivory. Catalogue no. 1971-684; Piano del Tesoro, Rectangle 7.*

The inscription was incised in sinistroverse 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



figure 7 – Obverse of a plaque in the form of an animal. Burnt ivory. Catalogue no. 1971-684; Piano del Tesoro, Rectangle 7.



figure 8 – Reverse of a plaque in the form of an animal. Burnt ivory. Catalogue no. 1971-684; Piano del Tesoro, Rectangle 7.

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:] xśxxxxilax [.

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 -ilḅ[ασ].



figure 9 – Obverse of a plaque of an animal. Burnt ivory. Catalogue no. 1971-685; Piano del Tesoro, Rectangle 7.



figure 10 – Reverse of a plaque of an animal. Burnt ivory. Catalogue no. 1971-685; Piano del Tesoro, Rectangle 7.

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*,]ηα (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



figure 11 – Obverse of a plaque of a reclining animal. Burnt ivory. Catalogue no. 1971-686; Piano del Tesoro, Rectangle 7.



figure 12 – Reverse of a plaque of a reclining animal. Burnt ivory. Catalogue no. 1971-686; Piano del Tesoro, Rectangle 7.

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).

2.6 Fragment of a plaque of a reclining animal. Burnt ivory. Catalogue no. 1971-686; Piano del Tesoro, Rectangle 7.

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 sinistroverso 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., [hirmina]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., [śpur]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.²² A digraph, **𐌁𐌆**, spelled the sound /f/. The inscriptions were written in sinistroverse direction, without punctuation.

3.2 Two paleographic features distinguish these inscriptions.²³ The first is the form of the letter *wau*, 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.²⁴ 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.²⁵ It is possible that the ornaments discussed here were *tesserae hospitales*, tokens entitling the bearer to a hospitable reception when traveling.²⁶ 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.²⁷ 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.²⁸

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**Acknowledgements: I thank the co-director of excavations at Poggio Civitate, Professor Anthony Tuck, for the invitation to visit the site during the summer 2004 and 2005 excavation seasons in order to conduct research on the inscriptions. He and his staff were unfailingly hospitable and gave me unfettered access to all of the facilities. I also thank Erik Nielsen for discussing with me the manufacture of bone, horn, and ivory artifacts, in particular those found at Poggio Civitate. Larissa Bonfante, Eleanor Roach, Bill Regier, and Anthony Tuck read drafts of the paper and suggested improvements. Two anonymous reviewers evaluated this research for the American Philosophical Society in the fall of 2005. I am indebted to them for their comments. The usual disclaimer applies: If there are errors in the text, they are my responsibility. Finally, I gratefully acknowledge the work of Hope Greene. She took beautiful photographs of the artifacts discussed in this paper at the Antiquarium di Poggio Civitate on June 18, 2004 under less than optimal conditions. Research for this project was supported by grants from the American Philosophical Society and the Marion and Jasper Whiting Foundation.*

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.
4. Three inscribed plaques (catalogue nos. 1971-500, 1971-684, and 1971-685) are now on display in the *Antiquarium di Poggio Civitate* at Murlo; four (catalogue nos. 1971-206, 1971-636, 1971-686, and 1971-687) are in the *Antiquarium's* storeroom.
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).

6. Neilsen 1983: 335.
7. See Berkin 2003: 116-119, Neilson 1987: 116-119, and Philips 1989: 17-18 for discussion of the chronology of the Orientalizing phase of the site.
8. Neilsen 1983: 345 and Neilsen 1995: 20.
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 be 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 σ is used to transliterate the letter *tsade* and the letter s to transliterate three-bar *sigma*. When s represents a palatal fricative sound /š/, a diacritic ´ is placed above the letter, e.g., ś = /š/. Words written in the Etruscan alphabet are printed in bold-faced type.
13. The name *Spuria* appears in an archaic inscription discussed by Bonfante and Wallace (2001: 209-210).
14. Three-bar *sigma* spelled the palatal sibilant /š/ at Poggio Civitate, so the name śp[uriaσ] would be pronounced as /špurias/. 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 -a. 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 vheiσalnā[σ].
19. Other first names referring to females are possible, e.g., spuria, squria, titela, avila, ramaitela, and raqunθa (cited in the stem form).
20. The family name could also maintain the masculine form and end in σ, in which case the text would read [mi ramuθ]āσ vheiσalnā[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 ramuθa 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 *sade* 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.
26. See Goggioli 2002: 45-47. Facchetti 2000: 137, 139-140, and Messineo 1983: 3-4 are short discussions of *tesserae hospitales* in the Etruscan corpus. Briquel (2006: 5) reports on an Etruscan *tessera* recovered from a tomb at Gouraya in modern Algeria.
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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