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Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/mefra/19314>
DOI: 10.4000/14r7t
ISSN: 1724-2134

Publisher

École française de Rome

Printed version

Date of publication: August 1, 2025
Number of pages: 23-37
ISBN: 978-2-7283-1842-1
ISSN: 0223-5102

Provided by ECOLE FRANCAISE D'ATHENES



Electronic reference

Lorenzo Calvelli and Sabrina Pesce, "Writing and religious traditions in Roman *Venetia*", *Mélanges de l'École française de Rome - Antiquité* [Online], 137-1 | 2025, Online since 24 September 2025, connection on 26 September 2025. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/mefra/19314> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/14r7t>



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Writing and religious traditions in Roman *Venetia*

Connections and changes in two sanctuaries at *Ateste* and *Lagole*

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This article explores the complex and multifaceted relationship between writing and religious traditions in ancient Roman Venetia, with particular attention to two prominent cult sites: the Reitia sanctuary at Este (ancient Ateste) and the alpine sanctuary at Lagole di Calalzo di Cadore. Through a close analysis of the extant epigraphic record, the study identifies patterns of continuity and transformation that shaped the historical trajectories of these sanctuaries as Roman influence progressively took hold in the region. The primary aim is to reconstruct the timing and dynamics of the linguistic, religious and social processes of acculturation that informed the integration of both centres into the Roman world.

epigraphic cultures, Roman sanctuaries, *Venetia*, *Ateste*, *Lagole*

Cet article explore la relation complexe et multiforme entre l'écriture et les traditions religieuses dans l'ancienne Vénétie romaine, en accordant une attention particulière à deux sites de culte importants : le sanctuaire de la Reitia à Este (ancien Ateste) et le sanctuaire alpin de Lagole di Calalzo di Cadore. Grâce à une analyse minutieuse des documents épigraphiques existants, l'étude identifie les modèles de continuité et de transformation qui ont façonné les trajectoires historiques de ces sanctuaires au fur et à mesure que l'influence romaine s'est progressivement imposée dans la région. L'objectif principal est de reconstruire le calendrier et la dynamique des processus d'acculturation linguistique, religieuse et sociale qui ont contribué à l'intégration des deux centres dans le monde romain.

cultures épigraphiques, sanctuaires romains, *Venetia*, *Ateste*, *Lagole*

THE SAINAT-VE PROJECT

This article is one of the outcomes of the “SaInAT-Ve. Sacred Inscriptions from the Ancient Territory of *Venetia*” research project,¹ which investigated the relationship between writing and religious traditions in the region historically inhabited by the Veneti and later incorporated into the Roman world, referred to by Livy as the *Venetorum angulus*.² The project examined the role of inscribed objects in the integration of indigenous communities into the Roman political system, focusing on various aspects of the

religious domain, such as ritual devices, places of worship, devotional formulas and liturgical practices. By supplementing inscriptions with a broad range of sources – including literary, archaeological, numismatic and topographical evidence – an interdisciplinary team of scholars identified and examined sixteen places of worship (fig. 1), the locations of which are displayed on a digital map that integrates epigraphic and archaeological datasets into a georeferenced cartographic system.³ For Latin and bilingual inscriptions, the map also includes a direct link to the Epigraphic Database Roma (EDR), granting immediate access to their data and metadata.

¹ The project was generously supported by the Ca' Foscari University of Venice and ran from 2021 to 2024. For a more detailed description of its goals and outcomes, <https://projec.unive.it/projects/sainat-ve/home>. The main research results will be published in Calvelli – Cresci Marrone forthcoming.

² Liv. 5.33.9-10. For some concise overviews of sanctuaries and rituals in the ancient *Venetia* region, Lomas 2007, p. 25-30; Gambacurta 2013a; Tirelli 2013.

³ The map was created by Cecilia Moscardo and can be accessed at: https://umap.openstreetmap.fr/it/map/sainat-ve_914131#8/45.727/12.467.

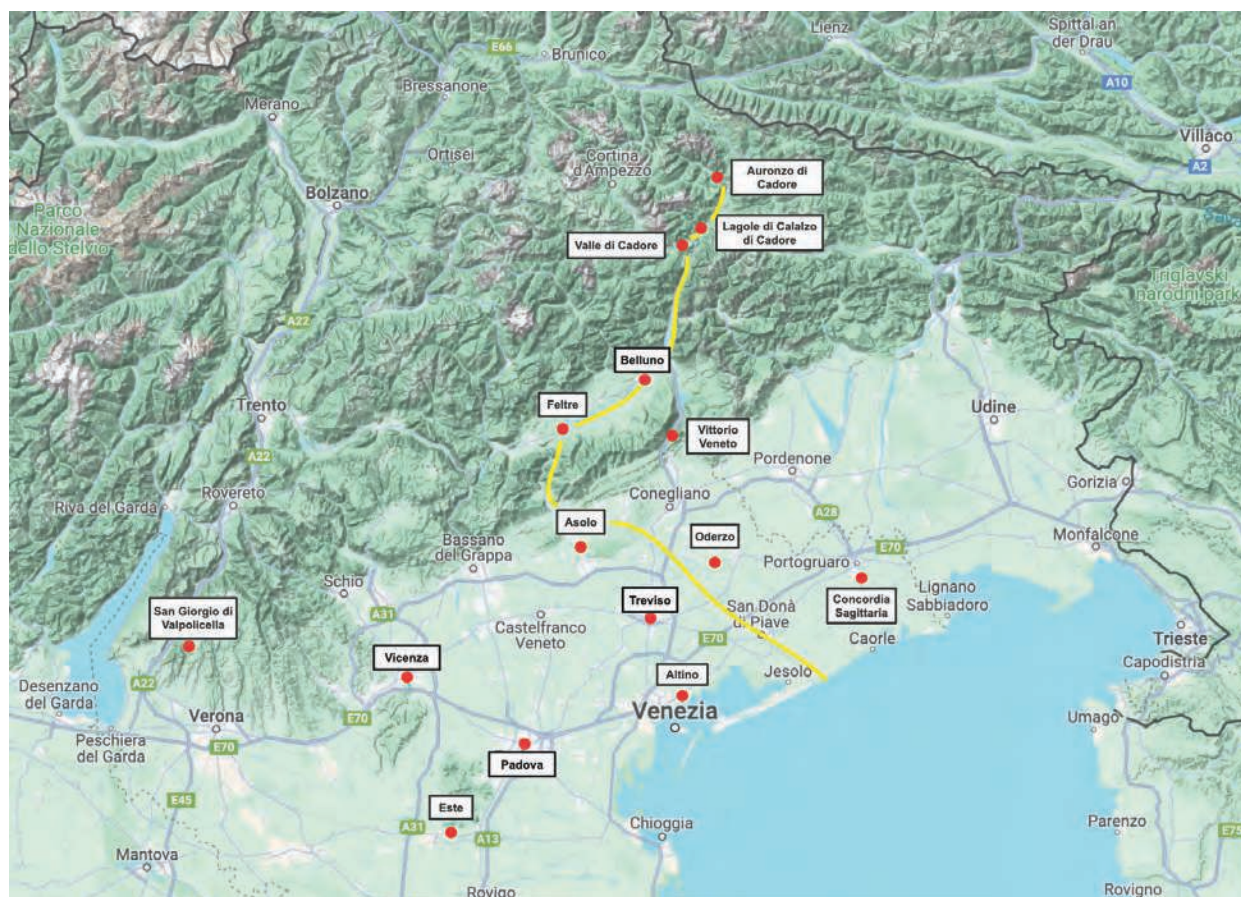


Fig. 1. Map of places of worship in the *Venetia* region examined by the research project ‘SalnAT-Ve. Sacred Inscriptions from the Ancient Territory of *Venetia*’. The course of the Piave River is highlighted in yellow.

To address the diverse challenges of the project, the team was organised into several specialist units, each aiming to reconstruct different religious landscapes through an interdisciplinary approach. The research followed the red thread of the relationship between writing and religious traditions, covering the period from the establishment of the Venetic culture to early imperial times. Particular attention was devoted to individual and collective performative practices, various forms of sacrifice and offerings, the periodic maintenance of sanctuaries and the significance of the circulation of metals and coinage within their spaces. Inscribed objects were placed at the core of the investigation, as they more clearly reflect historical and cultural transformations, offering valuable insights into how individuals and communities engaged with

the divine.⁴ In this regard, ‘sacred inscriptions’ were approached from a variety of perspectives: in addition to the study of onomastic, formulaic and linguistic aspects, particular attention was also given to the analysis of writing techniques and the significance of the objects that bear the texts.

From an epistemological perspective, within the specific context of the ‘sacred’ – a key element in understanding the functioning of any civilization – and with full consideration of the diversity, typology and extent of the available documentary sources, the project explored the concept of ‘connection’ (*branchement*) and challenged the traditional notion of separate ethnicities by examining how

⁴ On the role of writing in Greek and Roman sanctuaries, Pirenne-Delforge – Scheid 2023.

ancient communities constructed their identities through shared practices and cultural reference points.⁵ Grounded in this theoretical framework, the project aimed to trace the phases and dynamics of interaction between the Veneti and the Romans within a context defined by continuous change. The relationship between indigenous groups and the Roman world was explored through a dynamic lens, emphasizing characteristics such as receptivity and the circulation of practices and ideas. The use of static categories such as Romanization and self-Romanization was avoided, in favour of more flexible concepts such as transition and discontinuity.

This fluidity is clearly detectable in the epigraphic evidence from ancient sanctuaries, which reveals both continuity and interruption in the adoption of Roman customs, with no indication of a linear progression. In this regard, it was demonstrated that Michel Lejeune's framework – which outlined a shift from inscriptions in the Venetic alphabet and language to inscriptions in the Venetic language using the Latin alphabet, ultimately leading to inscriptions in Latin – cannot be applied rigidly.⁶ Indeed, the transitional phase was characterised by an osmotic process, encompassing both linguistic and graphic interference and coexistence, alongside periods of standardization and occasional returns to previous practices, as shown by some of the burial artefacts discovered at the Montebelluna necropolis.⁷ Ultimately, sanctuaries were examined as meeting places, where writing played a pivotal role by enabling communication among humans and with the divine, by shaping sacred spaces and ritual actions, by consecrating and preserving memory, and, most significantly, as the very settings in which writing was taught and transmitted as a cultural practice.

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SACRED OBJECTS FROM ROMAN VENETIA BEARING WRITTEN TEXTS

In pre-Roman times, local sanctuaries in the *Venetia* region corresponded to places distinguished by specific natural features, situated on the margins or beyond urban centres and often linked to them by

processional routes. Typically, Venetic sanctuaries were territorially defined areas, lacking architectural structures and organised into sections assigned to distinct ritual or functional purposes.⁸ This absence of material definition also characterised the representation of the divine, as supernatural entities were never visually depicted, whether in statues or votive objects.⁹

As recent scholarship has demonstrated, the incorporation of the land of the Veneti into the political, economic and cultural sphere of Rome was a gradual and non-coercive process of acculturation.¹⁰ This peaceful yet complex transformation unfolded at different times across the distinct local areas of the region. The transition to the Roman world was also accompanied by a process of monumentalization of sacred spaces. In *Venetia* proper, this development is partly attested through surviving architectural decoration, but remains poorly documented from an archaeological perspective, as only a very limited number of Roman sanctuarial contexts in the region have been stratigraphically investigated. Nevertheless, closely related cases – such as the *Capitolium* of Verona – strongly suggest that the main model for the new monumental temples in the cities of Roman *Venetia* was the Capitol in Rome, whose proportions were faithfully reproduced on a reduced scale in the Veronese example.¹¹

Within this broader context, epigraphic evidence written in Latin gradually emerged across a variety of media. In general, the shift from the pre-Roman to the Roman period coincided with a decline in the use of inscribed metal objects and a growing preference for stone monuments, such as bases and, above all, altars (*arae*). This transition signalled the adoption of Roman religious customs, as the majority of these monuments was associated with the practice of the *votum*, a formal contract between an individual or a community and a divine entity, which followed a clearly structured ritual sequence. The first stage, the *voti sponsio*, involved

⁸ Gambacurta 2013b, p. 106.

⁹ For an overview of cults in pre-Roman *Venetia*, Gambacurta 2013b. For the epigraphic record, Marinetti 2014.

¹⁰ On the integration of the *Venetia* region into the Roman world, Buchi 2002; for a focus on epigraphy, with particular reference to the role of the Etruscan model, Benelli 1999. On the contested processes of 'Romanization' and 'self-Romanization', Bandelli 2024, p. 15-19. See also Calvelli – Cresci 2025.

¹¹ On the *Capitolium* at Verona, Cavalieri Manasse – Portulano 2008.

⁵ On *branchement*, Amselle 2015. For contacts among different religious systems in the ancient world, Scheid 2007.

⁶ Lejeune 1978.

⁷ Cresci Marrone – Marinetti 2014; Casagrande *et al.* 2023, p. 152-155. See also Cresci Marrone – Marinetti 2012.

identifying both the deity addressed and the object of the promise. The *nuncupatio voti*, a solemn verbal declaration pronounced aloud and before proper witnesses in a specific sacred space, always involved a clearly articulated condition under which the vow would be rendered null. The *votum* was fulfilled (*voti solutio*) only if, within the designated time frame, the deity had met the terms of the contract. In that case, the devotee – *voti damnatus/a* – was bound to fulfil the promise by transferring ownership of the offering to the god, an act confirmed by the increasingly common epigraphic formula *v(otum) s(olvit) l(ibens) m(erito)*.¹² In contrast, expressions such as *donum dedit, dedit, fecit* and *posuit* refer to voluntary dedications and, while also attested, occur more rarely in Roman times.

Stone monuments appear to have become increasingly widespread in places of worship in the central and coastal areas of the region. In contrast, sanctuaries along the Piave River – such as those at Auronzo di Cadore, Lagole di Calalzo, Valle di Cadore and Ceneda – continued to favour metal objects rooted in pre-Roman traditions, including bronze sheets shaped like bull hides and statuettes.¹³ In addition to inscribed artefacts, it is important to note that archaeological finds from sanctuaries also include similar votive items without inscriptions. For instance, uninscribed altars have been recovered from a cult site dedicated to multiple deities at Canevere, north-west of *Altinum*.¹⁴ While the absence of inscriptions is not always easily explained, it is possible that some of these objects originally bore painted texts that have not survived.¹⁵ In other cases, however, it is more plausible that the artefacts were simply left unfinished, which may indicate the presence of stone workshops near certain sanctuaries, where altars were produced and awaited inscription.

Within the broad geographical scope examined by the SaInAT-Ve Project, the focus of the central sections of this article will be on two of the most significant places of worship in the *Venetia* region: the sanctuary of Reitia at Este (ancient *Ateste*) and that of Lagole di Calalzo in the Cadore valley. These sites

are notable not only for the exceptional quality and remarkable quantity of their epigraphic evidence, but also for being characterised by centuries of continuous devotional activity and by the distinctive hallmark of sacred inscriptions being predominantly engraved on various types of bronze objects. This feature reflects the ritual significance attributed to the act of learning to write at *Ateste*, as documented by the Venetic and bilingual alphabetic tablets, and to the use of curative thermal waters at Lagole, where artefacts such as ritual ladles (*simpula*) and bowls (*trullae*), presumably employed in rites involving the pouring and drawing of liquids, were inscribed with texts in Venetic, Venetic-Latin and Latin. Bronze objects devoid of inscriptions are also frequently found at both Este and Lagole, including decorated sheets, *simpula*, votive bronzes¹⁶, and, at Este in particular, writing styli – bronze replicas of tools used for writing. Of the several hundred bronze styli recorded, only 25 are inscribed, all in the Venetic language and alphabet.¹⁷

Unlike other contexts in the region, *Ateste* and Lagole offer valuable evidence spanning a considerable temporal range – from the late 2nd century BCE to the 1st century CE – encompassing the transitional period in which Venetic and Roman cultures merged through an osmotic process of linguistic, cultural and religious assimilation. From a devotional perspective, both sites show a gradual replacement of a local indigenous divine entity by a Roman deity, with the transition marked by a phase of coexisting cults, as reflected in the epigraphic record.¹⁸ This phenomenon confirms a key feature of ancient polytheisms: the profound permeability of their religious systems and the activation of strategies not only of translation but also of re-signification, resulting in the creation of new cult figures and the integration of divine entities into expanded pantheons.

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¹² Cresci Marrone 2016.

¹³ For a detailed analysis of the typologies of inscribed objects uncovered at places of worship in the *Venetia* region, Calvelli *et al.* forthcoming.

¹⁴ Cresci Marrone 2024, p. 101-103.

¹⁵ Buonopane 2001, p. 349-351.

¹⁶ For a catalogue of the bronze finds from Lagole, see the relevant sections in Fogolari-Gambacurta 2001. The finds from the Reitia sanctuary at Este are published in the series *Il santuario di Reitia a Este*. For a broader overview of ancient *Ateste* and its sanctuaries, Ruta Serafini 2002.

¹⁷ For a comprehensive catalogue of the styli from *Ateste*, Dämmer 2023; for a detailed analysis of the inscribed examples, Marinetti 2024, p. 16-17, 114-125. For a broader survey of inscribed Roman styli and other writing implements, Willi 2022.

¹⁸ Fogolari 2001, p. 371-372.

THE SANCTUARY OF REITIA AT ATESTE

A particularly revealing example of this transitional process is offered by the bronze votive alphabetical tablets from the sanctuary of the goddess Reitia at *Ateste*, located at the Baratella site.¹⁹ The documentary evidence from this context is closely linked to the teaching of writing, highlighting the ritual importance of this practice within the sacred sphere.²⁰ In addition to writing styli – inscribed exclusively in Venetic and never in Latin – numerous bronze tablets have been recovered, including two bilingual examples. These objects, often bearing dedicatory inscriptions, were crafted specifically as votive offerings in the form of miniature replicas of the wax tablets employed for teaching writing.²¹

From a material perspective, the alphabetical tablets are rectangular in shape, typically measuring between 15 and 22 cm in width and between 10 and 16 cm in height. The outer frame may be accentuated by mouldings or rows of embossed dots, while the inner surface is sometimes divided by horizontal lines or decorative elements that separate the inscribed sections.²² Particularly noteworthy are the

examples initially catalogued by Giovanni Battista Pellegrini and Aldo Luigi Prodocimi as Es 27, Es 28 and Es 29, and more recently re-examined by Anna Marinetti, in which elements of both continuity and discontinuity coexist.²³

Es 27 displays the typical structure of votive writing tablets composed in the Venetic language and alphabet (fig. 2).²⁴ The outer margins are marked by raised dots, while the internal surface features a dual layout. The text is arranged from bottom to top: the lower section (lines 1-5) is organised by a grid, while the upper section (lines 6-11) is divided into rows by parallel lines. The word *vdan* (‘abecedarium’) is accompanied by the donor’s name (*Voltiomnos*), the verb (*donasto*) and the theonym in the dative case (*Sainatei Reitiae*).²⁵ On line 8, the artefact features a votive inscription in the Latin language and alphabet. The text is engraved in continuous script from left to right and, although partly damaged, can plausibly be reconstructed as [*Voltiomnos?*] *dedit libens merito*.²⁶

The voluntary nature of the act, conveyed by the Latin formula *libens merito*, first attested in Latium in the early 3rd century BCE,²⁷ is mirrored in the

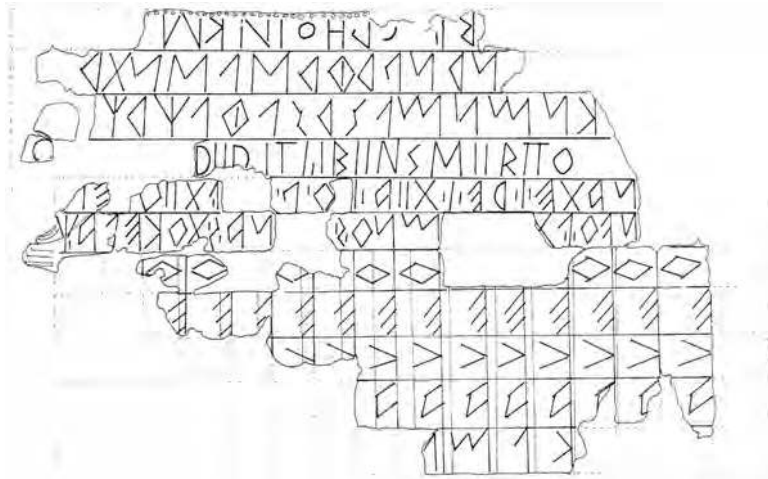


Fig. 2. Este, Museo Nazionale Atestino, inv. 16002. Alphabetical tablet Es 27. Drawing from Marinetti 2024, p. 106.

¹⁹ For an overview of the principal studies on the inscriptions from the Reitia sanctuary, Marinetti 2024, p. 11-12. See also McDonald 2019; McDonald 2021.

²⁰ On writing practices at the sanctuary of Reitia in *Ateste*, Marinetti 2024, esp. p. 23-26.

²¹ A total of 60 tablets have been uncovered at *Ateste*, although only few of them are preserved intact (Marinetti 2024, p. 13).

²² Marinetti 2024, p. 13.

²³ Pellegrini – Prodocimi 1967, p. 113-118, n. Es 27, Es 28, Es 29; Marinetti 2024, p. 106-109, 112-113, n. 52, 53, 54, 58.

²⁴ For a complete edition of the tablet, Marinetti 2024, p. 106-107, n. 52.

²⁵ The Venetic text, inscribed in lines 6 and 7 of the tablet, reads as follows: [*vda*]n Volt[io(n)]mnos [*do*]nasto Kelag[s Šai]natei Reitiae op [vo]ltio [l]en[o], i.e. “*Voltiomnos Kelags(?)* willingly donated the abecedarium to *Sainate Reitia*”.

²⁶ EDR187935 (S. Pesce).

²⁷ Panciera 1989-1990, p. 910.

Venetic phrase *op voltio leno*. The proposed symmetry between the Venetic and the Latin inscriptions suggests the presence of the anthroponym *Voltiomnos* also in the Latin text, likely inscribed (from bottom to top) on a now-missing left vertical line. This hypothesis is further supported by additional evidence, including the fragmentary sequence [---]T̄ĪO[---] and a probable letter O, visible on two separate fragments from the same section of this bronze tablet.²⁸ The presence of a bilingual text not only documents the introduction of Latin language and script into the Venetic tradition, but also demonstrates their incorporation into the sacred sphere, specifically in the context of private dedications. This evidence supports the view that the adoption of Roman linguistic and cultural elements occurred through a voluntary process, rather than as the result of imposed assimilation.

Es 28 (fig. 3) and Es 29 (fig. 4), although not resembling other traditional Venetic writing tablets, share several characteristic features.²⁹ Their classic shape – originally including a now-lost semicircular handle – is decorated along the edges with embossed dot patterns, yet neither preserves the conventional alphabetic exercise. Es 28, written in the Venetic alphabet, bears only the votive text. Es 29, inscribed in the Latin alphabet, contains both a Latin alphabetical sequence and a Venetic dedicatory formula. In contrast to Es 27, which features the typical grid used for teaching purposes to organize syllables into which Venetic words were commonly segmented, Es 28 and Es 29 are marked by seven embossed horizontal bands, serving as writing guidelines that divide the surface into six fields.³⁰

Although written in the Venetic language and alphabet, the text of Es 28 explicitly states the family relationship between the dedicator and the dedicatee through the expression in the dative case *fratere[i] Voltiomnoi*, indicating that the donor was the brother of *Voltiomnos*, who may correspond to the individual mentioned in Es 27.³¹ This element is foreign

to the Venetic writing tradition, in which kinship terms are rarely used and almost never appear in association with proper names, with the exception of instances influenced by the integration into the Roman world.³² In Es 29, the bottom line features a sequence of letters in the Latin alphabet, written from left to right. On line 4, the dedication (*meo donasto*, i.e. '[s/he] gave me') is engraved without word separation, in the Venetic language but written in the Latin alphabet. Phenomena of Venetic interference, both in terms of palaeography and writing practices, are evident not only in the use of continuous script, but also in the shape of certain letters (such as the diamond-shaped O, the N with short second and third strokes, and the A with a short oblique crossbar). Moreover, after the fourth letter, the text – initially written from left to right – is reversed in direction, as if the tablet had been turned upside down, and continues from right to left. The characteristics of the relief bands and these graphic peculiarities clearly suggest that the scribe, despite attempting to adapt to Roman epigraphic conventions, was more accustomed to the Venetic script.

In conclusion, the three tablets from the sanctuary of the goddess Reitia at *Ateste* illustrate how the transition from one writing system to another was neither mechanical nor immediate. The adoption of external writing practices and graphic paradigms, albeit not entirely dissimilar to local ones, was gradual and nonlinear. Thus, the tablet Es 29 and, to an even greater extent, Es 27, are eloquent witnesses to a cultural transformation that absorbed Roman influence within a local tradition firmly anchored in a distinct and enduring epigraphic culture. From a chronological perspective, a definitive classification of these bronze tablets remains elusive. Nevertheless, the material evidence, combined with a careful cross-examination of graphic, linguistic and technological features, suggests that the production phases of Es 28 and Es 29 – likely contemporary with one another – reflect a process of dissolution in the tradition of alphabetic tablets and should be placed in the 1st century BCE. An earlier chronology seems plausible for Es 27, which likely belongs to the mid- or late 2nd century BCE, if not slightly later.³³

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²⁸ Marinetti 2024, p. 106–107. Additional Latin letters, written from right to left and belonging to a writing exercise, are also engraved on line 11, which is the topmost line. Another fragment possibly belonging to the same tablet, preserving traces of two further lines from the same Latin alphabetic exercise, is published in Marinetti 2024, p. 108, n. 53.

²⁹ Respectively, Marinetti 2024, p. 112–113, n. 58 and p. 108–109, n. 54.

³⁰ Marinetti 2024, p. 13–14.

³¹ The text reads as follows: a) *meo Lemetor fratere[i] donasto Boios*. b) [?] ? *Voltiomnoi*, i.e. "Lemetor Boios dedicated me to his brother Voltiomnos."

³² Marinetti – Rigobianco 2025.

³³ Cf. Marinetti 2024, p. 14.



Fig. 3. Este, Museo Nazionale Atestino, inv. 16008. Alphabetical tablet Es 28. Drawing from Marinetti 2024, p. 112.

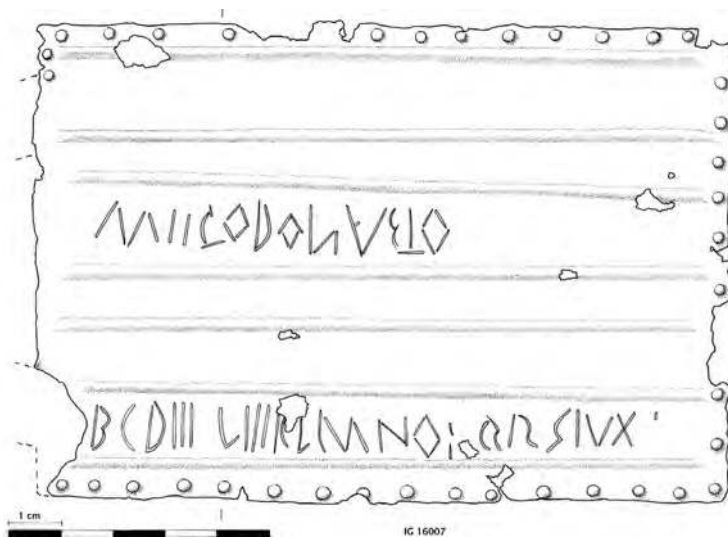


Fig. 4. Este, Museo Nazionale Atestino, inv. 16007. Alphabetical tablet Es 29. Drawing from Marinetti 2024, p. 108.

THE SANCTUARY OF *TRUMUSIATE/APOLLO*
AT LAGOLE DI CALALZO DI CADORE

The phenomenon of graphic, linguistic and formulaic interaction between distinct writing systems was not confined to *Ateste*. Another significant example is attested at the alpine sanctuary of Lagole di Calalzo di Cadore. In use from the 6th century BCE until the early imperial period, Lagole represents a distinctive cult site, where the healing

properties of the sulphurous waters emerging from underground springs are reflected in the nature of the votive deposits, which include numerous bronze vessels employed in ritual practices. Notably, after use, the handles of these objects were broken, deactivated and subsequently offered to the local deity *Trumusiati-/Tribusiati-* in the Venetic period and to Apollo in the Roman era, attesting to a sustained ritual tradition that adapted over time to shifting religious and cultural frameworks.

A complete catalogue of the finds from the sanctuary – currently held at the Museo Archeologico Cadorino (MARC) in Pieve di Cadore – was published in 2001 by Giulia Fogolari and Giovanna Gambacurta, and remains a key reference work.³⁴ More recently, a systematic analysis of the Latin inscriptions – now fully catalogued in EDR as part of the SaInAT-Ve project – has been undertaken. Of a total of 95 inscribed items, 26 are written in Latin. Five of these contain onomastic elements of Venetic origin, while one features a combination of Latin and Venetic language and graphemes.³⁵ A selection of significant case studies sheds light on the ritual and socio-cultural dynamics at Lagole, and contributes to a broader comparative framework with other contexts.

Two inscriptions that immediately attract attention are incised with a pointed instrument on both sides of the handles of two *simpula* – metal ladles used to draw water in rituals associated with the healing properties of the springs (figs. 5a-b and 6a-b).³⁶ They read as follows:

*Volksomnos Enniceios // v(otum) s(olvit) l(ibens) m(erito) Trum(usiate).*³⁷

*C(aius?) Eniconeio Cattonico{v} // Trumsiate v(otum) s(olvit) l(ibens) m(erito).*³⁸

In both cases, the name of the dedicator is Venetic (with the nominative ending *-os* rather than *-us* in the first example), but is written in the Latin alphabet. In the case of *Eniconeio Cattonico*, the possible presence of a *praenomen* – probably to be read as *Caius* – could represent an attempt to adapt indigenous onomastics to the Roman naming system and suggests a date in the transitional period, possibly following the process of municipalization that took place in the 40s and 30s BCE. The dedication, addressed to *Trumusiate*, the local deity worshipped at Lagole during the Venetic period (later replaced by Apollo), reflects the Roman practice of *votum*, featuring the widely attested formula *v(otum) s(olvit) l(ibens) m(erito)*.

³⁴ Fogolari – Gambacurta 2001.

³⁵ Fantin forthcoming.

³⁶ For a catalogue of the *simpula* from Lagole, Gambacurta 2001. On *Trumusiate*, Marinetti 2001, p. 66-71; see also Gambacurta 2019, p. 81-82.

³⁷ EDR186950 (S. Pesce).

³⁸ EDR187923 (S. Pesce).



Fig. 5a-b. Pieve di Cadore, Museo Archeologico Cadorino, inv. 378. Front and back of the handle of a *simpulum* bearing the inscription of *Volksomnos Enniceios*. Photo: S. Pesce (reproduced by kind permission of the Ministry of Culture – Soprintendenza archeologia, belle arti e paesaggio per l'area metropolitana di Venezia e le province di Belluno, Padova e Treviso – Reproduction forbidden).



Fig. 6a-b. Pieve di Cadore, Museo Archeologico Cadorino, inv. 48752. Front and back of the handle of a *simpulum* bearing the inscription of *C(aius?) Eniconeio Cattonico*. Photo: S. Pesce (reproduced by kind permission of the Ministry of Culture – Soprintendenza archeologia, belle arti e paesaggio per l'area metropolitana di Venezia e le province di Belluno, Padova e Treviso – Reproduction forbidden).

Another inscription is likewise incised on both sides of the handle of a *simpulum*:

*Futus Fovonicu[s] Trumusia=//[t]e donom.*³⁹

The text conveys the name of the donor, *Futus Fovonicus*, combining a local Venetic onomastic stem with the Latin ending *-us*. It also features the indigenous theonym (*Trumusiate*) along with the term *donom*, which refers to the customary practice of voluntary offering, already well attested in the Venetic world.

A bone awl apparently features an anthroponym inscribed in Venetic characters (*Arϕos*), together with a votive formula in Latin, albeit presented in an unusual manner (fig. 7):

*Arϕos vo(tum) s(olvit) me(rito).*⁴⁰

The variant VOSME – possibly to be expanded as *vo(tum) s(olvit) me(rito)*, in place of the more canonical *v(otum) s(olvit) l(ibens) m(erito)* – may reflect the writer’s limited familiarity with Latin epigraphic conventions, suggesting a degree of cultural and graphic interference. In this respect, the atypical formulation could be interpreted as the result of an interlinguistic adaptation process, in which Venetic models were restructured according to Latin patterns that had not yet been fully internalised. A recent alternative reading of the inscription has



Fig. 7. Pieve di Cadore, Museo Archeologico Cadorino, inv. 5788. Bone awl bearing the inscription of *Arϕos*. Photo: S. Pesce (reproduced by kind permission of the Ministry of Culture – Soprintendenza archeologia, belle arti e paesaggio per l’area metropolitana di Venezia e le province di Belluno, Padova e Treviso – Reproduction forbidden).

been proposed by María José Estarán Tolosa, who excluded it from the *corpus* of bilingual texts and argued that the coexistence of both a mixed and a digraphic inscription is unlikely.⁴¹

Regarding the writing techniques, two distinct methods for inscribing texts have been identified at Lagole: one in which the letters were scratched into the surface with a sharp instrument and another involving the use of dot-punched letters. A group of carefully dot-punched inscriptions appears on the handles and basins of numerous *simpula*, as well as on two *trullae*. Some of these inscriptions bear the donor’s name, as in those that record the names of *Titus* and *Tiberius Barbius*,⁴² while others feature only the name of the Roman god Apollo, either written in full or, more commonly, in the abbreviated form *Ap(ollini)* in the dative case.⁴³

In addition to inscriptions mentioned above, there are also more complete dedications, such as the one offered by *T(itus) Volusius Ti(beri) f(ilius) Firmus*, engraved on the handle of a *trulla*, the only specimen recovered intact (fig. 8a-b).⁴⁴ In this case, the process of acculturation into the Roman world appears to have been fully achieved. The onomastic structure (which also includes the patronymic), the theonym (Apollo) and the votive formula conform entirely to Roman social and religious conventions. Yet, on the surface of the basin of the same *trulla*, a second inscription was incised with a pointed instrument, this time featuring the local name *Covos Sabinaius*.⁴⁵ This individual – presumably a secondary dedicator – adopted the Latin alphabet and the Latin nominative ending *-us* in one of the anthroponyms, while simultaneously preserving his Venetic name and the indigenous onomastic structure, composed of two elements.

³⁹ EDR188799 (S. Pesce).

⁴⁰ EDR187925 (S. Pesce).

⁴¹ Estarán Tolosa 2016, p. 219-220.

⁴² EDR186865 (S. Pesce) and EDR186866 (S. Pesce), incised with a pointed instrument on the handles of two *simpula*, and EDR098337 (S. Pesce), engraved on the base of a votive statuette.

⁴³ See, for example, the inscription *Apollini*, incised on the handle of a *simpulum* (EDR186874, S. Pesce), and the abbreviation *Ap(ollini)*, engraved using the dot-punch technique on the basin of another *simpulum* (EDR186875, S. Pesce).

⁴⁴ EDR098336 (S. Pesce): *T(itus) Volusius Ti(beri) f(ilius) / Firmus Ap(ollini) v(otum) s(olvit) l(ibens) m(erito)*.

⁴⁵ EDR187600 (S. Pesce).



Fig. 8a-b. Pieve di Cadore, Museo Archeologico Cadorino, inv. 319. Basin and handle of a *trulla* bearing the inscription of *Titus Volusius Firmus*. Photo: S. Pesce (reproduced by kind permission of the Ministry of Culture – Soprintendenza archeologia, belle arti e paesaggio per l'area metropolitana di Venezia e le province di Belluno, Padova e Treviso – Reproduction forbidden).

Another noteworthy object is a statuette base depicting a male figure (fig. 9), plausibly to be identified with the god Apollo, shown in the act of making an offering. Engraved in dot-punched script on two sides, the inscription includes the donor's name (*Tiberius Barbius Tertius*), the theonym Apollo in the dative case (*Apollini*) and the customary abbreviated votive formula indicating the fulfilment of a vow: *v(otum) s(olvit) l(ibens) m(erito)*.⁴⁶ Once again, all these elements are firmly embedded within Roman tradition.

⁴⁶ EDR098337 (S. Pesce).

From a chronological perspective, the combined evidence of onomastics, linguistic features, divine names and writing techniques helps to establish a broad temporal framework for the inscriptions from Lagole. While Venetic texts are exclusively incised by scratching on metal surfaces, Latin inscriptions adopt both this technique and the dot-punched lettering, which likely corresponds to a later phase, when Roman cultural forms had become more firmly embedded at the local level. However, a precise historical attribution of the material is not possible, owing to the absence of stratigraphic data and the inherently non-linear nature of the transition from the Venetic to the Roman cultural sphere.



Fig. 9. Pieve di Cadore, Museo Archeologico Cadorino, inv. 48699. Base of statuette of Apollo bearing the inscription of *Tiberius Barbius Tertius*. 3D scan produced by the Warwick Manufacturing Group (WVG), University of Warwick (reproduced with the kind permission of the Ministry of Culture – Soprintendenza archeologia, belle arti e paesaggio per l’area metropolitana di Venezia e le province di Belluno, Padova e Treviso – Reproduction forbidden).

A significant element that may allow for a more precise dating of certain finds – while also offering valuable insights into the production and circulation of votive objects – is the presence of factory stamps. In particular, two *trullae* handles bear stamps associated with the workshop of the *Cipii*, a family known to have operated in Campania since the Augustan period.⁴⁷ The first stamp, found on a handle that also bears a dot-punched inscription, presents a full onomastic formula in the genitive case: *P(ubli) Cipi Polibi* (fig. 10)⁴⁸. The second, on an uninscribed handle, features only the *cognomen* *Polib(i)*. *Publius Cipi Polybius*, active between 40 and 70 CE, was among the most prominent artisans of the *Cipii* workshop. Items from his production are well attested across the western provinces, particularly in the Rhine-Danube regions and northern Europe, where they circulated widely. Although the *Cipii* were specialised in a wide range of objects, *Polybius* was particularly known for the manufacture of *trullae*, especially those with a disc-shaped base and a central round hole.⁴⁹ The presence of bronze vessels bearing *Polybius*’s stamp at Lagole underscores the role of the site as a cultic hub, functioning as a point of convergence for individuals and groups active along transalpine routes. These movements – whether prompted by religious devotion, commercial exchange or military activity – further highlight the site’s integration into broader networks of interaction during the early imperial period.⁵⁰

Stamps provide valuable information not only for dating the finds but also from a wider cultural-historical perspective. The fact that certain objects, such as the *trullae*, originated from distant production regions highlights the importance of Lagole and raises a series of compelling questions regarding the nature of the votive practices performed at the Alpine sanctuary: Were all votive objects transported to Lagole from elsewhere and inscribed on the spot before being offered to the god? Or did some arrive already inscribed, while

⁴⁷ Gambacurta-Brustia 2001, p. 248. For an in-depth study of the *Cipii* workshop and its bronze production, Massari – Castoldi 1985.

⁴⁸ The *trulla* bearing the stamp (EDR188832, S. Pesce) also carries the inscription (EDR186867, S. Pesce): *L(ucius) T̄e(---) Gra(tus) Ap(ollini) v(otum) s(olvit) l(ibens) m(erito)*. // *[L(ucius) T̄e(---) G]ratus / [Apollin]i v(otum) s(olvit) l(ibens) m(erito)*.

⁴⁹ Massari – Castoldi 1985, p. 21-22.

⁵⁰ Fogolari 2001, p. 371.

others, such as *simpula*, were produced locally, perhaps in a small workshop operating in the vicinity of the sanctuary, as has been suggested?⁵¹ Who wrote the inscriptions? The dedicator, the craftsman (*offinator*), or both, depending on their respective levels of literacy? Can the act of writing a votive dedication be regarded as part of a ritual practice?

To address some of these research questions, a 3D scanning campaign was undertaken on a selection of inscribed artefacts from the sanctuary of Lagole. The primary objective was to generate high-resolution digital models capable of recording both the physical morphology of the objects and the epigraphic traces with the highest possible precision. By applying advanced imaging and surface analysis techniques, the project retrieved details that may not be detectable through standard autoptic inspection. The resulting dataset offers a robust foundation for further palaeographic and typological analyses, opening new avenues of inquiry.⁵²

(SP)



Fig. 10. Pieve di Cadore, Museo Archeologico Cadorino, inv. 2269. Handle of a *trulla* bearing the stamp *P(ubli) Cipi Polibi*. Photo: S. Pesce (reproduced with the kind permission of the Ministry of Culture – Soprintendenza archeologia, belle arti e paesaggio per l'area metropolitana di Venezia e le province di Belluno, Padova e Treviso – Reproduction forbidden).

⁵¹ Fogolari 2001, p. 373; Gambacurta 2019, p. 81.

⁵² The campaign was carried out thanks to a fruitful collaboration between Ca' Foscari University of Venice, the Warwick Manufacturing Group (WMG) at the University of Warwick, the Soprintendenza Archeologia, Belle Arti e Paesaggio per l'area metropolitana di Venezia e le province di Belluno, Padova e Treviso and the Magnifica Comunità di Cadore. The 3D models are openly accessible and can be explored via the digital map developed as part of the SaInAT-Ve Project: https://umap.openstreetmap.fr/it/map/sainat-ve_914131#8/45.727/12.467.

CLOSING PERSPECTIVES

The evidence discussed in this study sheds critical light on the ways in which local sanctuaries in the *Venetia* region negotiated the transition from the pre-Roman to the Roman world. While the broader context of ancient Italy is characterised by significant gaps in the documentation – with finds often sporadic or too limited to delineate the stages of cultural transformation – the evidence from *Venetia* proves relatively favourable,⁵³ particularly in the cases of *Ateste* and Lagole. The incorporation of local sanctuaries into the Roman world involved both continuity and change, unfolding in distinct ways at each site. Epigraphic evidence enables the reconstruction of key aspects of this transitional process through the analysis of language, writing traditions, onomastic structures, ritual practices and formulaic expressions, offering valuable insights into the different phases of cultural exchange between the Venetic and Roman spheres.

Sacred inscriptions offer a uniquely revealing perspective on cultural transformations. Rooted in the private sphere, they allowed individuals and groups – whether as dedicators or recipients – greater freedom of expression than was typically afforded in official contexts. While they may obscure certain institutional dynamics of the acculturation processes, they offer critical insight into how local communities lived through and responded to broader sociocultural phenomena. Through their study, it is possible to trace the gradual redefinition of collective identities, from the plurality of Venetic cultic traditions and ritual practices to full integration into the Roman world.

The sanctuary of the goddess Reitia at *Ateste* stands out as unparalleled in ancient Italy for its exceptional connection between literacy and religious practices. The inscribed bronze tablets associated with the site were explicitly conceived as miniature replicas of perishable teaching tools, subsequently offered as votive gifts. This merging of didactic function and devotional purpose suggests that the sanctuary served not only as a place of worship but also as a local centre of literacy training, where writing was both learned and sacralised, at least from the 4th to the 1st centuries BCE.⁵⁴

⁵³ Benelli 1999.

⁵⁴ Marinetti 2024, p. 13-44, esp. 23-26.

Two of the most recent examples of these objects are the bilingual tablets Es 27 and Es 29, which attest to the early influence of Roman culture on the linguistic and graphic practices of *Ateste*. In particular, Es 27 presents a Latin alphabetic exercise combined with a bilingual dedication featuring Venetic onomastic elements, while Es 29 displays a Latin alphabetical sequence accompanied by a votive text in the Venetic language, albeit written in Latin. Both documents illustrate how Roman epigraphic practices were gradually integrated into the Venetic tradition through an assimilative process that began with specific graphic features and ultimately led to the more complex appropriation of Latin alphabetic forms and epigraphic formulae.

At Lagole, the systematic use of Latin in sacred epigraphy seems to have begun later than at *Ateste*, gradually integrating into a context still marked by Venetic tradition. Traces of epichoric elements remain visible in inscriptions from the early imperial period, confirming that, although the integration into the Roman sphere was advancing, certain indigenous features endured. The early stages of the transition are reflected in a series of inscriptions engraved on *simpula*, such as the one dedicated by *Futus Fovonicus*, whose name – although written in the Latin alphabet and marked by a nominative ending in *-us* – still retains a Venetic stem. Other examples include the dedications by *Volsomnos Enniceios* and *C(aius?) Eniconeio Cattonico*, which combine the distinctly Roman abbreviated votive formula *v(otum) s(olvit) l(ibens) m(erito)* with Venetic personal names and a dedication to the local deity *Trumusiate*, whose original name is preserved.

A later phase may be identified in inscriptions that increasingly reflect the Roman linguistic and onomastic system. This is exemplified, among others, by the *trulla* dedicated to Apollo by *Titus Volusius Firmus*, son of Tiberius. In this case, the process of Romanization appears to be fully accomplished, as the dedicator's name perfectly follows the Roman formula of *praenomen, nomen, patronymic* and *cognomen*. However, the persistence of pre-Roman cultural elements is still evident in the inscription scratched inside the same vessel, which bears the indigenous name *Covos Sabinaius*.

With regard to writing techniques, the observation that earlier inscriptions – still bearing Venetic names – are executed by scratching, whereas later ones are predominantly produced through dot-punching, is corroborated by evidence from other sites in the *Venetia* region. Recent studies

have shown that inscriptions dating from the transitional phase preceding full Roman integration reflect a twofold change in epigraphic practice: while they adopt the Latin language, Roman alphabet and Roman votive formulas, they frequently retain traditional object types, layout conventions and, in some cases, indigenous graphic elements. This suggests not a sudden rupture but a gradual and negotiated incorporation of Roman epigraphic culture into local religious and linguistic traditions.⁵⁵

While the first signs of cultural change at *Ateste* can be traced to an earlier stage, roughly dating to the mid to late 2nd century BCE, the site of Lagole appears to have preserved local epigraphic traditions for a far longer period, extending the transitional phase well into the early imperial era. This enduring conservatism was likely influenced by the site's Alpine location. In Roman times, mountain environments were typically shaped by a dual dynamic: on the one hand, the complexity of the terrain limited interaction with the outside world, encouraging the persistence of certain traditions; on the other, despite the orographic barrier, forms of cultural exchange still emerged, taking shape through gradual integration.⁵⁶ This scenario confirms that Alpine sanctuaries retained local epigraphic and linguistic features more tenaciously than those situated in the plain.

The transition from indigenous to Roman cultural forms did not follow a single path, but rather developed along divergent trajectories and unfolded over uneven timelines. In the sanctuaries of the *Venetia* region, contact and interaction fostered a convergence of traditions, whereby Roman religious and social elements were absorbed, adapted and reinterpreted by resident communities. Each cult site became a space in which the boundaries between Roman and indigenous practices were negotiated in different ways. The shift from one cultural framework to another was neither abrupt nor uniform: patterns of overlap and coexistence endured across an extended timeframe, at least from the mid-2nd century BCE to the second half of the 1st century CE, showing that local religious landscapes evolved gradually over time.

(LC, SP)

⁵⁵ Luciani forthcoming.

⁵⁶ Giorcelli Bersani 2005 and 2019, p. 139-190.

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