A Study in Stone

RD Milns Antiquities Museum
We are instinctively drawn to empathise with the stories of the men and women featured in this exhibition, to mourn with Felix’s nurse or the parents of the young Vitalinis. But we must be careful to remember that the inscriptions and their accompanying images are largely presentation pieces, designed to portray individuals in the best possible light, as the men and women they hoped to be, or would have become, had they lived longer. Did Epagathus and Naevia Chrysis, buried in the same cemetery in Sicily, really both lead ‘good and blameless’ lives? It is tempting to detect the hand of a weary stone cutter at work here, carelessly etching out one tombstone after another for the deceased, paying them all the same formulaic tribute.

This does not mean that such epitaphs do not constitute important evidence for life in the ancient world, merely that we have to be aware of their problems when we read them. Formulaic phrasing can reveal much about social and cultural attitudes and expectations, as demonstrated by the striking Dodwell Stele from the Piraeus Necropolis, which was erected in commemoration of a Greek woman called Theophile. She is praised for her ‘virtue’ and ‘modesty’, qualities that appear on countless other epitaphs in honour of deceased women throughout the ancient world. But this does not diminish the power and significance of Theophile’s monument, since it reveals the social expectations placed on women in the Greek world; they were meant to be paragons of virtue.

As with our canonical literary sources, inscriptions do not provide us with all the answers. But they do allow us to approach the ancient world from a different perspective and to pose new and exciting questions. Many Roman epitaphs addressed themselves to passers-by with an invitation: *Viator, resiste et lege...* (‘Traveller, stop and read...’). I hope all visitors to A Study in Stone will take the same opportunity, since these memorials of the past want to be read. If Tiberius Claudius Amianthus spent his days tasting Nero’s food or clearing up his bedroom, it’s the least he deserves.

Dr Caillan Davenport
INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the exhibition ‘A Study in Stone: The History of Epigraphy’. The staff of the RD Milns Antiquities Museum have put together an exhibition that will give you a fascinating insight into the history of Latin and Greek epigraphy. Like many of the artefacts in our collection, Latin and Greek inscriptions often have interesting collecting histories, making it possible for us to trace how they travelled from their original locations in Greece or Italy to, for example, the RD Milns Antiquities Museum at the University of Queensland, The Classics Museum at the Australian National University and the Museum of Antiquities at the University of New England. We are particularly fortunate to be able to share the stories of four Latin memorial inscriptions from Rome. Three of these were found by the Italian antiquarian and antiquities dealer Francesco Ficoroni between 1721-1733 in the vicinity of the Via Appia and Via Latina in Rome. They later became part of the Lowther Castle Lapidarium, established by The Right Honourable, William Lowther, the 2nd Earl of Lonsdale between 1848-1868, before eventually being sold to the Australian university museums mentioned above.

But how did men such as William Lowther become interested in collecting Greek and Latin inscriptions, a practice which enabled the Corpus Inscriptionum Graecarum and Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum to be compiled? (These corpora are still used by students and academics today.) Lowther was able to purchase ancient inscriptions from friends who were collectors, often individuals who had taken ‘The Grand Tour.’ A Study in Stone also introduces its viewers to ‘The Grand Tour’, a practice which began in the 16th century and continued for the next 300 or so years. A typical Grand Tourist was a young man from England or Europe with a thorough grounding in Greek and Latin, an interest in art, and enough money to travel at leisure. It became fashionable for these young aristocrats to visit, for example, Paris, Venice and Florence. However, the ‘must see’ city was Rome. Many Grand Tourists were eager to acquire objets d’art for their private collections comprising, not only pieces of Greco-Roman sculpture, but also Latin and Greek inscriptions.

Many artists also flourished under the patronage of aristocratic Grand Tourists,
and we invite you to admire the ‘Via Appia Imaginaria’, ‘Piramide di Caio Cestio’ and ‘Sepolcro di Cecilia Metella’ by Giovanni Battista Piranesi, one of the greatest printmakers of the 18th century who sold his works to Grand Tourists wanting to take home memories of the architecture of Rome.

As Dr Davenport foreshadowed in his Foreword, there is much more exciting material to explore in this exhibition as we also learn about the lives of the people honoured on the memorial inscriptions from the cemeteries of Rome and Athens.

I would like to thank The Nicholson Museum (University of Sydney), The Classics Museum (Australian National University) and the Museum of Antiquities (University of New England) for loaning us their inscriptions for the duration of the exhibition, and also the Fryer Library at the University of Queensland for the loan of the fabulous books helping to tell the story ‘A Study in Stone: The History of Epigraphy’.

Dr Janette McWilliam

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A Note on Roman Names

The following information provides an explanation of some of the terms and conventions used in the catalogue entries below.

In the Imperial period, freeborn Romans commonly had three names (tribunomina), the praenomen, nomen and cognomen. The praenomen, was usually abbreviated on funerary inscriptions. For example, A. (Aulus); C. (Gaius); M. (Marcus); Q. (Quintus). The nomen gentilicium or family name designated a person’s gens (clan).

In the Imperial period, women were often designated by the feminine form of their father’s nomen plus the feminine form of his cognomen, sometimes in the diminutive. From the Augustan period, the names of women from prominent families reflected important family connections. For example, Julia, daughter of Augustus, was married to Marcus Vipsanius Agrippa. Her two daughters would normally have been named Vipsania; instead one was called Julia and the other Agrippina.

Freedmen and women (ex-slaves) took their praenomen and nomen from their former masters, and usually added their own name as a cognomen. Cicero’s slave Tiro, once manumitted (freed) by Cicero, thus became Marcus Tullius Tiro.

Slaves had only one name, either their original name (common for Greek slaves), or they were given a name indicative of their country of origin, character or appearance by their new master.

Freeborn Romans often listed their filiation on inscriptions to indicate that they were freeborn. The praenomen of their father was normally inserted between the nomen and cognomen. For example, L. MARIVS L. F. VITALIS, ‘Lucius Marius Vitalis, son of Lucius.’

Sometimes men and women who had been manumitted used pseudo-filiation to designate their freed status. L. libertus/liberta, was put in place of F. for filius/filia, son/daughter. For example, FAVONIA M. L. BRUNDISINA ‘Favonia Brundisina, freedwoman of Marcus.’