

Etruscan Literacy in its Social Context

*edited by
Ruth D. Whitehouse*

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VOLUME 18
ACCORDIA SPECIALIST STUDIES ON ITALY
(Series Editors: Ruth D. Whitehouse)
ACCORDIA RESEARCH INSTITUTE, UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

Published by
Accordia Research Institute
University of London
c/o Institute of Archaeology
Gordon Square
London WC1H 0PY

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record of this book is available from the British Library

Computer typeset by the Accordia Research Institute

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Published 2020

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Cover: layout & design © Accordia Research Institute

Image: Crocefisso del Tufo cemetery at Orvieto, inscription over tomb entrance; photograph by Ruth Whitehouse

ISBN 978 1 873415 37 5

Printed and bound in Great Britain

This book is dedicated to the memory of John Wilkins (27.4.1935 – 8.3.2017)
scholar of language, literacy and society of ancient Italy

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Preface and Acknowledgements

The conference from which this volume arises was held at the Institute of Classical Studies (School of Advanced Studies), University of London in September 2010. Its aim was expressed in its name, preserved in the title of this volume: *Etruscan Literacy in its Social Context*. The conference itself took its name from a research project organised by myself and John Wilkins with Kathryn Lomas as Research Fellow and funded by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council. This project, which ran from 2005 to 2009, was restricted to the earlier period of Etruscan writing (8th to 5th centuries BC). The aim of the conference was to draw on the interests and expertise of the larger Etruscology community to explore the social context of Etruscan writing on a broad chronological, geographical, and thematic basis.

The current publication, intended to follow soon after the conference, has been sadly delayed by the illness and then death of John Wilkins, to whom the volume is dedicated.

In the last year the scholarly community has also lost Larissa Bonfante, doyenne of Anglophone Etruscan studies and a good friend to *Accordia*. It is a melancholy privilege to include what may be her last published paper in this volume.

My debt to John is immeasurable, in intellectual as well as personal terms. He introduced me, previously exclusively a prehistorian, to an exploration of ancient societies illuminated by the study of their writing, however fragmentary its survival and difficult its interpretation. Our joint interest in exploring how writing functioned in ancient society was behind two successive research projects and the conference published in this volume.

I would like to thank Kathryn Lomas for her major contribution to the organisation of the conference and for all her hard work on the *Etruscan Literacy* Project. I am also grateful to Mike Edwards, former director of the Institute of Classical Studies, for hosting the conference at the ICS.

I wish to record my gratitude to the contributors to the volume, who have responded to the delay in publication with patience and tolerance and whose understanding has helped me through a difficult process.

Ruth D. Whitehouse
London
January 2020

ABBREVIATIONS

Castellina 2011	Gran-Aymerich, J. & Domínguez-Arranz, A. (eds) 2011. <i>La Castellina a sud di Civitavecchia, origini ed eredità. Origines protohistoriques et évolution d'un habitat étrusque.</i> L'Erma di Bretschneider, Rome
CIE	<i>Corpus Inscriptionum Etruscarum</i>
CII	<i>Corpus Inscriptionum Italicarum</i>
CSE	<i>Corpus Speculorum Etruscorum</i>
ES	Gerhard, E., Klugmann, A. & Koerte G. 1840–1897. <i>Etruskische Spiegel, I–V.</i> Reimer, Berlin
ET	Rix H. (ed.) 1991. <i>Etruskische Texte. Editio minor.</i> Gunter Narr, Tübingen
Etrusker in Berlin 2010	<i>Etruskische Kunst in der Berliner Antikensammlung. Eine Einführung.</i> Schnell & Steiner, Regensburg
Gli Etruschi 2015	<i>Gli Etruschi maestri di scrittura. Società e cultura nell'Italia antica.</i> Silvana editoriale, Cinisello Balsamo
Italia 2005	Colonna G., 2005. <i>Italia ante Romanum imperium. Scritti di antichità etrusche, italiche e romane (1958-1998)</i> Istituti editoriali e poligrafici internazionali, Pisa
LIMC	<i>Lexicon Iconographicum Mitologiae Classicae</i>
Rasenna 1986	Pallottino, M. et al. (eds) 1986. <i>Rasenna: storia e civiltà degli Etruschi.</i> Scheiwiller, Milan
Rediscovering Pompeii	Franchi Dell'Orto, L., & Varone, A.,(eds) 1990. <i>Rediscovering Pompeii Exhibition Catalogue (New York 12 July – 15 September 1990).</i> L' Erma di Bretschneider, Rome
REE	<i>Rivista di epigrafia etrusca</i> (in <i>Studi Etruschi</i>)
SE	<i>Studi Etruschi</i>
ST	Rix H. 2002. <i>Sabellische Texte. Die Texte des Oskischen, Umbrischen und Südpikenischen.</i> Winter, Heidelberg
TLE ²	Pallottino, M. 1968. <i>Testimonia linguae Etruscae.</i> 2nd ed. La Nuova Italia, Florence

The International Etruscan *Sigla* Project

An Introduction

Giovanna Bagnasco Gianni & Nancy T. de Grummond

The papers in this volume on Etruscan literacy and society are mostly concerned with verbal writing. In general, studies of classical antiquity are often focused upon the written word and works of literature. But there is a vast body of alternate traditions of writing or making marks involving non-verbal and non-literary messages, often neglected because the meanings are not clear and no connection with language and literature may be found. These are normally left to be studied, if at all, only by isolated specialists. Our study of Etruscan marks commonly referred to as *graffiti*, or better, *sigla*, attempts to bring this material from the periphery of Etruscan studies into a more central position in the study of communication in ancient Italy. By developing a methodology for the study of this phenomenon we hope to show that the marks had significance both for Etruscans who were literate and those who were not, and that a wide range of usages from the practical to the ritual have bearing on Etruscan society, religion and economy.¹

There are in existence thousands of examples of the Etruscan non-verbal writing typically referred to as *graffiti*, a term that turns out to be inadequate. *Graffiti* refers only to markings made by scratching, but it is clear that the marks may be incised, painted, punched, impressed or stamped. Technically the term *graffiti* can and often does include words. We recommend instead that the Latin word *siglum* (pl. *sigla*) should be used to refer to such markings.

The *siglum* may be defined as a type of symbol or character employed to communicate without using written words or necessarily indicating sounds; that is, the communication is basically non-verbal. The Etruscan examples, utilising one or more characters, occurred through most of the chronological span of the civilisation of the Etruscans, and were applied on objects of many different types. The *sigla* occur on a remarkable range of objects: pottery, weights, spindle whorls, *rocchetti*,² sarcophagi, burial urns, roof tiles, architectural terracottas, boundary stones, stone walls, lead missiles, bone and ivory plaques, and a wide variety of artefacts in bronze (axes, fibulas, helmets, knives, razors, sickles). The contexts include cemeteries, sanctuaries, ports, artisans' quarters and habitations, i.e. the full spectrum of the spheres of Etruscan society. The sites range widely in Italy, from the heartland of Etruria, to Etruscan expansion areas on the Bay of Naples and near Bologna and the Po Valley.

Many Etruscan sites have yielded such markings. Unfortunately they are normally poorly published, if at all, and are relegated to the background in Etruscan studies in favour of letters that form words and can therefore be studied from a linguistic perspective. In order to investigate the potential of communication in these markings, the International Etruscan Sigla Project (IESP) was formed by the two authors of this article, who had independently studied aspects of *sigla* and decided to join forces, as will be explained further below in Parts I and II (Bagnasco Gianni 1999; Bagnasco Gianni 2008; Bagnasco Gianni *et al.* 2015; de Grummond *et al.* 2000; Valtolina *et al.* 2012). The aims of the IESP include the creation of a website and a database of *sigla* that will recognise and group similar items by means of matching scanned images and other factors such as date, provenance, context, artefact type, artefact function, and location of the mark on the artefact. The international team from the US and Italy – archaeologists and computer scientists, professors and students – plans to meet and share research and to develop a common ground through implementation of an interactive system based on an integration of different sources of knowledge, including different databases of *sigla* (Valtolina *et al.* 2012). It is necessary first of all to organise the documentation and sort out all evidence that can be seen and discussed from different points of view. Of primary importance is the implementation of a common terminology, created step by step, providing to all who are eager to participate in the IESP the possibility of using terms that can be proposed and monitored over time.

Accordingly, this article presents the first fruits of projects conducted by the collaborators, in which we begin to develop methodologies for studying the *sigla*. As such it is divided into two major sections. The first section is concerned with presenting an overall survey of the available material and developing the basic signary. It introduces 12 individual non-verbal characters that are among the most common *sigla* as well as alphabetiform and numeriform examples. The second section shows a context-oriented methodology integrating different categories of data. According to this methodology a particular set of *sigla* may be interpreted according to their combinations with one another and sometimes also with inscriptions. The hypothesis is that these combinations display various aspects of division, orientation and symmetry that may reflect abstract calculations to satisfy ritual needs.

CIRCUMSCRIPTION OF THE MATERIAL

No systematic study of Etruscan *sigla* has been made and very few specialised studies have been done. As of now, the mass of evidence remains unexploited as a means of improving our understanding of the Etruscan people, their culture and their modes of communication. The biggest problem is that the *sigla* have not been published with sufficient information. In order to assess their meaning, every possible clue is needed.

The IESP seeks to offer a protocol that will allow for the development of a database in which for any given *siglum* we may gather exhaustive information. Of course there are the obvious categories of data such as the description of the artefact or monument on which it occurs, the site, the excavation context, the date. But there are many more details that need to be considered in order to develop generalisations and arguments. Was the *siglum* scratched or painted, or applied by some other technique? Was it done during or after manufacture? Where on the artefact does it occur, on the bottom, on the rim, on the handle, etc.? Is the *siglum* tidily applied as if by an experienced hand or is it awkwardly done? Are there other markings, whether another *siglum* or an inscription, associated with the specimen? For others to study it, the *siglum* should be well and fully illustrated, with photos that allow for study of the typology of the object as well as close ups of the *siglum*, and with line drawings that show the relation of the *siglum* to the object. Unless and until we have a significant body of specimens with this kind of thorough documentation we must proceed with great caution in making generalisations.

How many Etruscan *sigla* are there? Our team made an inventory of those published in two major authoritative sources, the *Corpus Inscriptionum Etruscarum* (CIE) and *Rivista di Epigrafia Etrusca* (REE) in *Studi Etruschi*. In so doing we took a very conservative stance on what we would include at the start. In addition to abstract characters and numeriform markings, we definitely include single letters inasmuch as they are not words (though it may be admitted that some single letters could be abbreviations and therefore if fuller knowledge were available could be resolved into verbal communication). Sometimes, however, the artefact may be broken and the context suggests the possibility that there may be other letters and thus a word. We omit these. In this count, we have also omitted hundreds of markings with two characters, which could be *sigla*, but may well be verbal instead (i.e. abbreviations), and in addition hundreds more that have three characters, for the same reason. We do include some *sigla* that occur *along with* verbal inscriptions, and in fact as we shall see these are considered particularly useful since the *sigla* are combined with other data. A very big problem is posed by the *sigla* that are used in contexts involving other cultures. The IESP is open to consideration of *sigla* from areas outside Etruria in order to increase documentation, make comparisons and better assess and contextualise Etruscan evidence. Further, as evidence of *sigla* from other cultures mounts, it becomes ever more likely that the markings were used internationally. But for the time being and for the first count of Etruscan *sigla* we have excluded examples in the CIE and REE that appear to be Greek or Faliscan. There is also the problem of *sigla* used in the other Italic cultures, for example, Golasecca in northern Italy, and these will have to be studied case by case and reckoned eventually. Since they have not been published in CIE and are normally separated out in *Studi Etruschi*, we did not include them in the tally. They will, however, eventually be integrated into our database.

With a very conservative count we came up with the number of c.1800 Etruscan *sigla* published in CIE and REE. This is the absolute minimum number in existence. Rex Wallace had already estimated that there were about 2000 *sigla* published. But if we should go to other journals with site reports, to museum and exhibition catalogues with Etruscan pottery, many more could be found, sometimes overlapping with CIE and REE, but certainly sometimes not. Giuseppe Sassatelli (1984) published 441 *sigla* from Bologna and area and these could certainly be added to the number. Wallace and Tuck recently made a count at Poggio Civitate of Murlo, of 420 prospective examples of *sigla* and these are now under study. De Grummond's own site of Cetamura del Chianti has a minimum of 150 (and the number grows in each excavation campaign) of which about half have been published in REE, but they have also been published elsewhere. Of course, many *sigla* have never been published. Many, perhaps most Etruscan sites have them. In short, we suspect that the number 1800 will eventually be at least doubled if we can manage to get documentation on most or all the *sigla* that have been excavated.

Creating a Signary

The *siglum* in its most recognisable form is an abstract character or diagram. As a primary task for understanding Etruscan *sigla*, we have identified 12 basic recurrent characters and have assigned relevant descriptive names for them in Latin. For most of them there is no consistent terminology from one language to another or even within a given language. The CIE itself does not use specific names for particular *sigla*, but rather utilises the generic term *nota* for most of them. Using particular Latin names will serve, as in the corpus of Etruscan inscriptions, to provide the first steps toward an internationally understood terminology. It is presented here in a generally alphabetical order, with complementary sample images for each *siglum*, chosen from several sites that have published *sigla* in the most detail. This list is by no means exhaustive; the signary remains quite open for new discoveries and decisions about terminology.



Fig. 1 *Ancora*. Fragment of impasto lid. Roselle, 2nd century BCE
(after CIE 12019)

:JANINW:ETIT:OQA
 WAPOTITE:PINIA
 TVAJ:MAIH V H E E
 HI



Fig. 2 *Ancora*. Terracotta funerary tile. Chiusi, date unknown
(after CIE 2864)



Fig. 3 *Bipennis*. Foot of an impasto cup. Roselle, Archaic (after CIE 11671)

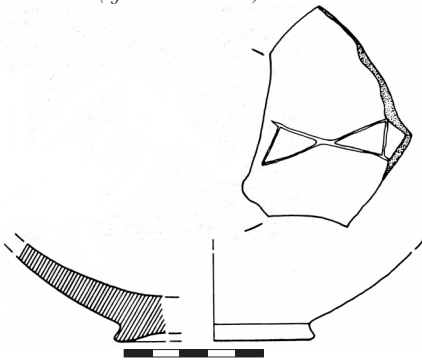


Fig. 4 *Bipennis*. Foot of a grey bucchero bowl. Marzabotto, late 6th-5th cent. BCE
(after Sassatelli 1984: fig. 118)



Fig. 5 *Craticula*. Cup of black Campanian bucchero. Nuceria, Tomb 159, date unknown
(after SE 53, 1985: 210)

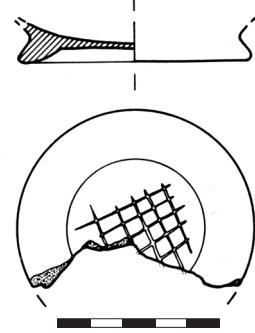


Fig. 6 *Craticula*. Foot of a grey bucchero bowl. Marzabotto, late 6th-5th cent. BCE
(after Sassatelli 1984: fig. 95)

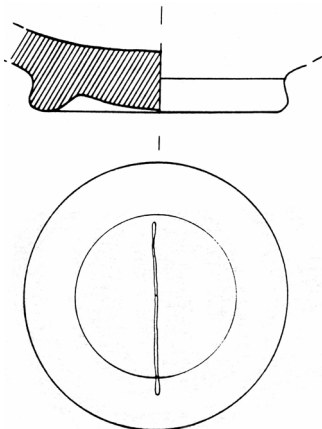


Fig. 7 *Forma dimidians*. Foot of a bowl, unpainted. Marzabotto
(after Sassatelli 1984: fig. 64)

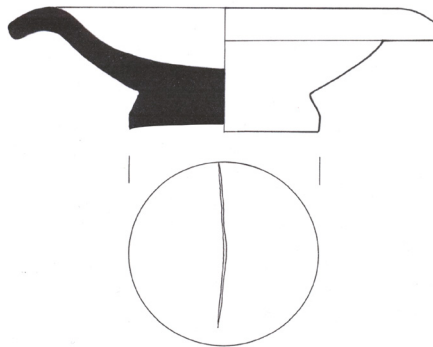


Fig. 8 *Forma dimidians*. Bucchero bowl. Cetamura del Chianti, c.550-450 BCE
(Cetamura archive)

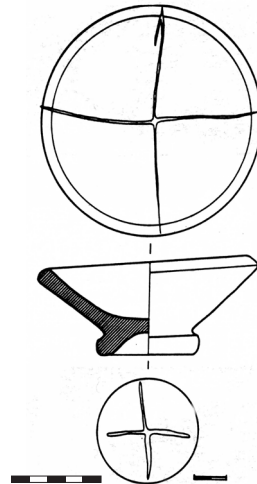


Fig. 9 *Forma quadrans* (two examples). Impasto lid/bowl. Marzabotto, (6th-5th cent. BCE
(after Sassatelli 1984: fig. 68)

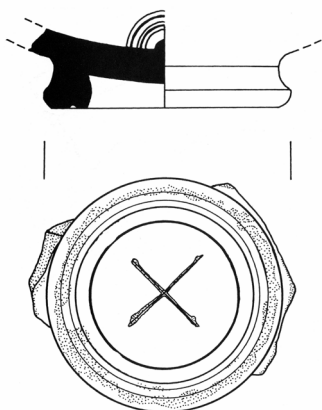


Fig. 10 *Forma quadrans*. Foot of a black-gloss vessel. Cetamura del Chianti, 3rd-2nd cent. BCE
(after de Grummond 2000: fig. 79)

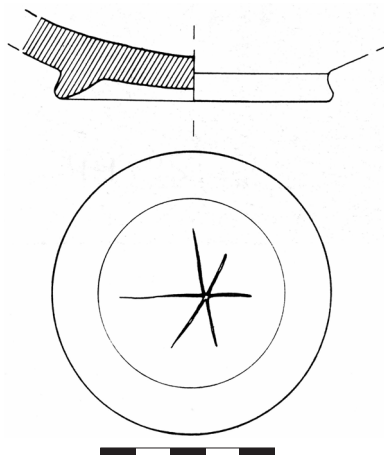


Fig. 11 *Forma sextans* Foot of an impasto bowl. Marzabotto, Late 6th-5th cent. BCE
(after Sassatelli 1984: fig. 35)

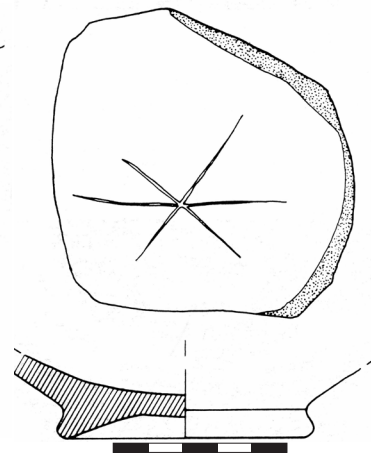
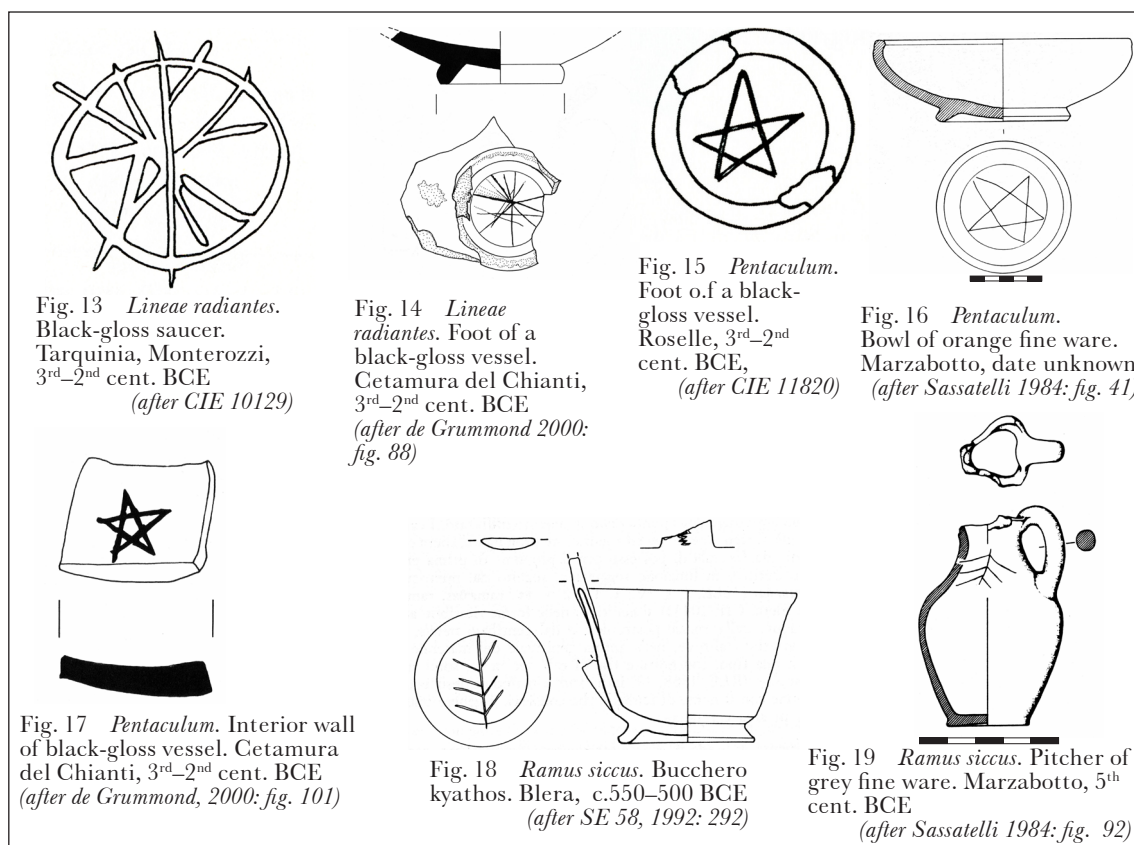


Fig. 12 *Forma sextans*. Foot of a bowl, unpainted. Marzabotto, 5th cent. BCE
(after Sassatelli 1984: fig. 38)



This basic signary is then followed by examples and conventions for letters (alphabetiform) and numbers (numeriform), again with illustrations. The entries are brief, and no attempt is made at this time to provide a discussion in depth or bibliographical references for any of the *sigla*, the main purpose here being principally to introduce the terms and graphic images. These are posted as appropriate on our website under development,³ where scholars will be invited to add to our database with the eventual goal of preparing authoritative publications on each *siglum* type.

Ancora – a mark shaped like an anchor, basically with an arrow at one end and a horizontal line at the other (Fig. 1). Examples from Chiusi also add a loop on either end of the anchor (Fig. 2).

Bipennis – a double axe or bitriangular sign. It is also referred to sometimes as a butterfly, an hourglass, or as a form of a sibilant letter in Etruscan (Figs 3-4).

Craticula – a grid or lattice work of multiple lines that are more or less orthogonal (Figs 5-6).

Forma dimidians – the ‘halving form’, a *siglum* that divides a field in half, especially recognisable when used on the circular foot or base of a vessel (Figs 7-8).

Forma quadrans – the ‘quartering form’, normally a vertical line intersected by a horizontal line, dividing the field up into 4 quarters, often referred to as a ‘cross-sign’. We believe this should be distinguished from the X-mark (see below). Here the angles are 90 degrees and create quadrants, whereas in the X-mark normally they are much larger, c.120 degrees and much smaller, c.60 degrees. Admittedly the two were evidently confused and sometimes used interchangeably by the Etruscans themselves, but we prefer to at least begin by looking at them as two different signs (Figs 9-10).

Forma sextans – This *siglum* divides the field into six parts. It is sometimes thought to be numerical, but at this point we prefer to consider other interpretations unless it is combined with words. Two examples from Marzabotto are interesting because they show how one particular *siglum* type can occur on the exterior of the base of a vessel or on the interior (Figs 11-12).

Lineae radiantes – Sometimes there are so many lines that one can no longer identify clearly the parts created by the lines. In the *lineae radiantes*, lines radiate out from a center point (Figs 13-14).

Pentaculum – a five pointed star, also sometimes referred to as a pentagram (Figs 15–17).

Ramus siccus – the ‘dry branch’ showing a limb or possibly a tree that has lost its foliage (Figs 18–19).

Swastika – a *forma quadrans* with lines added at each of the four termination points. Here instead of Latin we utilise the Sanskrit term widely used in Europe and America (Figs 20–21).

Tridens acutus – the trident shape with a pointed end. This is the preferred term at this point in our research, but the character is also frequently identified as the Etruscan letter for *khi*, and also sometimes looks like an arrow. It has also been conjectured to be the number 50 (Fig. 22).

Tridens quadratus – This kind of trident has a squared body, like the trident of Neptune (Fig. 23).

Next we turn away from the abstract characters we have been able to identify with Latin terms and work on the rather difficult case of letters. There are numerous single markings that share characteristics with the abstract signs, i.e. they are placed on similar artefacts often in isolation and seem to play a similar role. We refer to these as alphabetiform signs, recognising that they do indeed look like letters, but they may have some other usage. For nomenclature, we refer to these with the names of the letters of the Greek alphabet as terminology known internationally.

The *A* or *alpha* is the most common of these, and it can occur in a great variety of forms (Fig. 24).

The *E* or *epsilon* is also very popular (Fig. 25). Other examples are provided by a *mu* and a 4-stroke *sigma* (Figs 26–27).

Some of the marks may be numerical in appearance. They should be included as *sigla*, when they are markings on artefacts or monuments not accompanied by words and therefore not communicating verbally. Examples are provided by a III (three? Fig. 28) and an inverted V (five? Fig. 29) and an inverted sinistroversive VI (six; Fig. 29).

The X mark, which may be the numeral ten, is far and away the most popular marking that qualifies as a numeral. It is also sometimes interpreted as a sibilant (Fig. 30).

Sometimes two or more *sigla* are combined, for example featuring two of the character type of *siglum* in the signary, or of a character with an alphabetiform sign. Examples are provided by a *pentaculum* combined with the *ramus siccus* (Fig. 31) and a *forma quadrans* combined with other *sigla* (Figs 32–34). Some characters are shown in multiples, for example, what may be called the *tridens acutus duplex* (Fig. 35), and the *tridens acutus multiplex*. Part II of the paper provides other examples of this phenomenon.

SIGLA IN A CONTEXT-ORIENTED APPROACH

A context-oriented approach seems critical for assessing the social impact of *sigla* in Etruscan communities and society, as an eloquent – even if non-verbal – means of communication. As noted earlier, it is important to collect thorough documentation, which can then be utilised as follows:

- 1 Integration of data about the location of *sigla* on the artefact, their layout and reciprocal connections, and their archaeological context
- 2 Assessment of recurrences of *sigla* in their geographical range and chronology

This process is effective because it helps in finding conditions of similarity based on possible recurrent patterns of *sigla*. Given that single *sigla* are scarcely understood, even if we can deduce that they may be symbols (as in the case of the *sigla* in the signary), the situation is even more complicated when we deal with combinations of individual *sigla* or combinations of *sigla* with textual inscriptions or with recurrent decorative motifs. The patterns recognised may have been meant to communicate articulated concepts with a few



Fig. 20 *Swastika*. Foot of a fine impasto vessel, Roselle. 7th-6th cent. BCE (after CIE 11670)

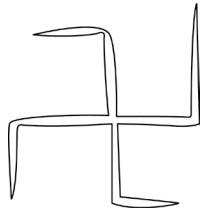


Fig. 21 *Swastika*. Bronze axe. Bologna, Benacci Caprara, Tomb 53, Villanovan (after Sassatelli 1984: figs 19-20, no. 174)

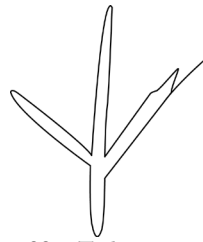


Fig. 22 *Tridens acutus*. Bronze axe. Bologna, San Francesco, Villanovan (after Sassatelli 1984: figs 11-12, no. 103)

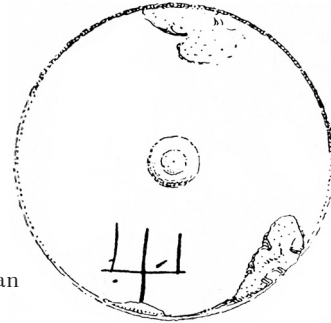


Fig. 23 *Tridens quadratus*. Foot of a black-gloss vessel. Populonia, date unknown (after SE 6, 1932: 473, fig. 8)

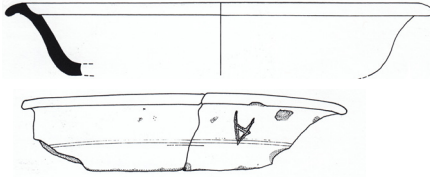


Fig. 24 Alphetiform *siglum: alpha*. Bowl of Volterran presigillata. Cetamura del Chianti, 3rd-2nd cent. BCE (after de Grummond 2000: fig. 91)



Fig. 25 Alphetiform *siglum: epsilon*. Black-gloss saucer. Tarquinia, Monterozzi, 3rd-2nd cent. BCE (after CIE 10118)

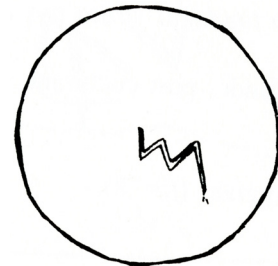


Fig. 26 Alphetiform *siglum: mu*. Impasto spindle whorl. Roselle, 7th cent. BCE (after CIE 11626)

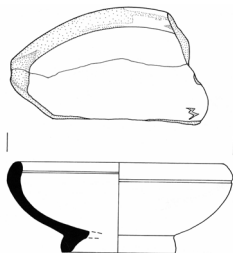


Fig. 27 Alphetiform *siglum: sigma*. Interior of black-gloss bowl. Cetamura del Chianti, 3rd-2nd cent. BCE (after de Grummond 2000: fig. 99)

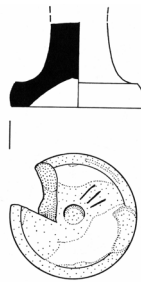


Fig. 28 Numeriform *siglum: three*. Stem of a black-gloss vessel. Cetamura del Chianti, 3rd-2nd cent. BCE (after de Grummond, 2000: fig. 76)



Fig. 29 Numeriform *sigla: five and six (?)*. Foot of black-gloss patera. Roselle, 2nd cent. BCE (after CIE 11664)

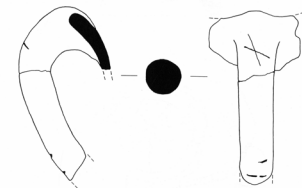


Fig. 30 Numeriform *siglum: ten*. Handle of pitcher or hydria. Cetamura, 3rd-2nd cent. BCE (after de Grummond, 2000: fig. 85)

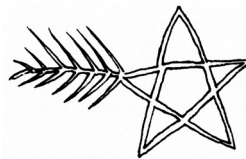


Fig. 31 Composite *sigla: pentaculum + ramus siccus*. Black-gloss bowl. Suessala, 5th cent. BCE (after CIE 8722)

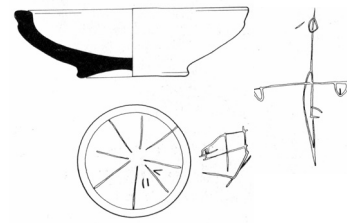


Fig. 32 Composite *sigla: forma quadrans* with loops; *lineae radiantes* with added markings; *forma quadrans* with added marking. Bucchero bowl. Fratte, c.550-525 BCE (after Greco & Pontrandolfo 1990: fig. 357)

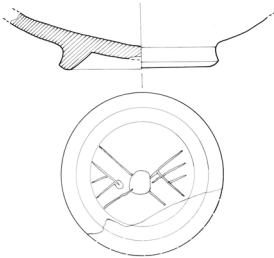


Fig. 33 Composite *sigla: forma quadrans + 2 digammas (?)*. Foot of a grey bucchero bowl. Cetamura del Chianti, 5th-4th cent. BCE (Cetamura archive)

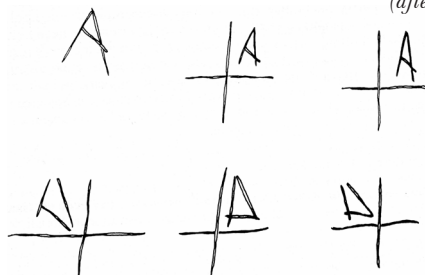


Fig. 34 Examples of *forma quadrans* with *alpha* in different quadrants. Impasto rocchetti. Casale del Fosso, Veii, Late 8th-early 7th cent. BCE (after Bagnasco Gianni 1996: fig. 23)



Fig. 35 *Tridens acutus duplex*. Foot of an impasto bowl. Gravisca, Shrine Alpha, Date unknown (after CIE 10247)

strokes. Groups of *sigla* could therefore turn out to be valuable archaeological indicators to verify the impact the markings had in either a wider or a more restricted context.

This approach led to significant results utilising a database with some 700 entries from 230 objects, in a project referred to as DIVORI because it identified the use of *sigla* in conventions of division, orientation and delimitation. The six categories identified for their recurring correspondences are detailed elsewhere but a selection from the results may be presented here as part of this introduction to the focal questions of the IESP (Bagnasco Gianni *et al.* 2015). Some of the groups showed a practice of marking in order to divide up a field on the supporting object into segments, as in the *sigla* now being called *forma dimidians*, *forma quadrans*, *forma sextans* and *lineae radiantis* (Figs 7–14). While these may at first sight seem to be simply geometric forms that decorate an object without any particular meaning, when they are studied in relation to the other *sigla* combined with them, it becomes clear that they have a particular significance. For example, the round base of a pot may have incised lines dividing the circular area in half or in quadrants and a *siglum* may be set in only one quadrant or there may be *sigla* in two or all four quadrants (Figs 32–34). Sometimes the additional *sigla* are inserted within the quadrants, while at other times they are placed on the outside. In both cases it seems likely that the marks are meant to indicate the location of something very particular, and thus have to do with showing orientation. The vases with the quadrants marked on the outside, dating especially to the Archaic and ‘Classical’ periods, were found particularly in tombs and sacred contexts, incised on cups or bowls, in a very wide geographical area of Etruria proper, Campania, and Etruria Padana, with a wide variety of combining signs. Those with the quadrants marked on the inside, showing a similar chronology, were more numerous in habitation areas, had more variety in the vase forms, and showed an even wider geographical distribution, including also the culture of Golasecca in the north. They featured a varied but different ‘vocabulary’ of combining signs.

One representative case is a group of vases of the Orientalising period from the area of Cerveteri, all from tombs, that show lines dividing a circle in half or in quadrants that appear in combination with alphabetiform *sigla* clearly related to such divisions (Bagnasco Gianni 2008). The latter signs might be interpreted according to an alphabetic reading as *epsilon*, *theta* or *eta*, but make very little sense as textual inscriptions, so that other explanations are required. We argue that they represent an attempt to record an act of dividing and marking specific fields for attention, as in the creation of a *templum*, a basic ritual known from the *Etrusca disciplina*. A comparable case is provided by a tumulus of the Late Orientalising period at Cerveteri, the Tumulo delle Ginestri (or delle Croci), where a single circle, divided into quadrants, appears in combination with a monumental inscription incised on the wall of a corridor running under the altar of the tomb (Bagnasco Gianni 2008). Remarkably, in one of the quadrants (upper left), a portion of the circular limit is missing. On the opposite side of the corridor is another example, again featuring a quadrant where part of the circle is missing (upper left) but also a quadrant where the circle is completely lacking (upper right). The specific meaning of these markings and those on the vases is not yet known and may never be, but they seem to show a similar system, most likely related to compass points. Yet another, and rather dramatic, example of the use of *sigla* forms is found in the famed Piacenza liver (Fig. 36). The fact that the outer rim is divided into 16 cells reflecting the Etruscan division of the heavens into 16 parts is well known. But the principles of DIVORI apply to other sections as well. Within the context of *sigla* marking, the cells may be interpreted as *lineae radiantis* (left lobe) and *craticulum* (right lobe) as well as *forma dimidians* for the underside, divided into sections for the moon and the sun. In this case actual words are placed within the scheme of division and orientation.

An idea of the way in which such diagrams may have functioned is vividly illustrated by the story of Olenus Calenus, the famous Etruscan seer who was called upon to interpret the meaning of a human head found on the Capitoline Hill in Rome during the reign of Tarquinius Superbus (Dionysius of Halicarnassus 4.60-61; Pliny, *NH* 28.15). When

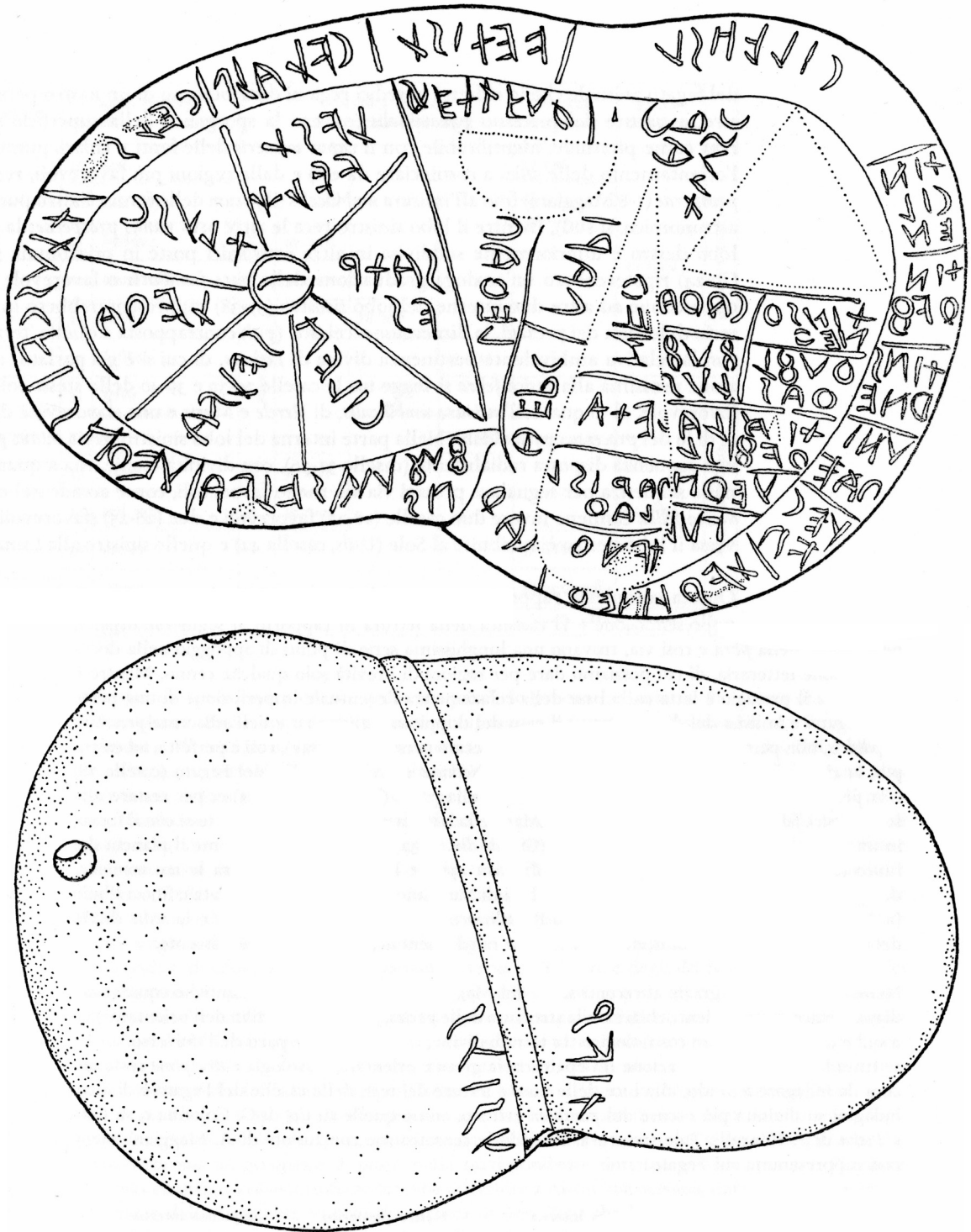


Fig. 36 Bronze model of a liver from Piacenza, 3rd-2nd century BCE: the two sides (after Torelli, 1986: 26)

the Romans came to consult him, he drew a circle upon the ground, along with straight lines that represented north, south, east and west, and proceeded to point to places on the partitioned drawing to determine where the head was found. Similar rituals may have been practised by Etruscans who marked surfaces on pottery and elsewhere with the *forma quadrans* bounded by a circle (or with other lines that diagrammed space). Such concepts are crucial for the treatment of sacred space according to the *Etrusca disciplina*, indicating that manipulation and combination of signs within a partitioned space could target complex meanings in a synthetic way.

CONCLUSION

At this point, what can be said about the uses of *sigla* within Etruscan society? In the past, there has been a tendency to develop ideas on the basis of what was familiar in the *sigla*, i.e. letters and numbers. We feel that such attempts to explain *sigla* may have focused excessively on trying to find alphabetical signs and evidence of literacy; further, while there was certainly some use of numerals and marks that may have had significance for commerce or for craftsmanship, it would be an error to try to extend too far the idea of utilitarian purposes for *sigla*. At this time, we wish to keep an open mind and allow for the strong possibility that there is no single explanation that covers all usage of *sigla*. It is true that they may have been used as symbols, numbers, or letters for counting, abbreviations, or marks of identification. On the other hand, the results of the DIVORI project to date support an exciting new idea that *sigla* may have been used in a ritual way to express ideas about the sacred cosmos. But until the IESP database has been implemented, used and widely disseminated, and detailed knowledge is readily available to numerous scholars, on the whole it seems at present that one must be satisfied to note simply that the basic role of *sigla* in Etruscan society was to communicate by a non-verbal system in a variety of contexts, including economic, social and religious spheres.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It is a pleasure to acknowledge, in the time since the Conference took place, the shared direction of the Project with Alessandra Gobbi of the University of Pavia and Stefano Valtolina of the University of Milano in the International Etruscan Sigla Project. Undergraduate students in the Department of Classics at Florida State University and of the Dipartimento di Beni Culturali e Ambientali of the Università degli Studi di Milano assisted in compiling data and in formulating experiments with different categories of information.

NOTES

This paper corresponds to the paper read at the conference in 2010, with minor updating of the bibliography. Our project remains always in progress and is now provided with a database online open to scholars willing to implement it with their finds: <http://159.149.130.120/IESP/>

- 1 Recent trends in scholarship show a surge in interest in non-verbal markings: cf. conference proceedings of Haring & Kaper 2009, Baird & Taylor 2010.
- 2 The Italian conventional term for these spool-shaped objects. They may indeed have been spools, but likewise may have had other usages.
- 3 The initial version of the IESP website may be found at <http://xavier.ricerca.di.unimi.it/IESP>

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