

Call for Papers

LANGUAGE AND CULTURAL INTERACTIONS IN THE ROMAN WORLD: THE IMPACT OF INSCRIPTIONS

Place and date: University of Groningen, the Netherlands, March 6th-7th, 2025.

Organizers: Valentina Vari (Groningen-Rome Sapienza), Caroline van Toor (Groningen), Saskia Peels-Matthey (Groningen), Onno van Nijf (Groningen).

Key-note speaker: A. Mullen, Professor of Ancient History and Sociolinguistics (University of Nottingham).

The expansion of the territories controlled by Rome came with increasing contact between the conquerors and the local populations, with different outcomes depending on the socio-political circumstances and geographical factors. Inscriptions constitute immediate evidence of this interaction. Onomastics aid the identification of the various socio-cultural groups involved in erecting the monuments, while language and linguistic choices can reveal insights into the mutual relations of these groups. In this context, inscriptions do not simply constitute the outcome of cultural interaction; they were actively used as a medium through which such relations could be negotiated.

As such, comparative approaches to inscriptions can show the impact of a new language, Latin, on the epigraphic record. The social position of its users, the context in which they chose to use this language, and changes in such choices over time, can allow insights into the (changing) nature of the relations between the parties involved. This applies not only to the people mentioned in the inscriptions, but also to the relationship between the commissioner(s) and the possible audience of the texts. Thus, the way in which the inscription could function is an important factor in our evaluation of the use of the language(s).

Zooming in, a closer look at the language can also reveal its user's preferred way of self-representation. In order to entangle more intricate aspects of cultural interaction, it can be especially fruitful to study the use of a foreign language by a non-native speaker. The adoption of Latin and Roman epigraphic habits could, for example, be used as a tool of (elite) legitimization of the local population. The other way around, the use of Greek by Romans, could be a way for them to anchor themselves into the local practices. In both examples, it is possible to find signs of non-native competence, e.g. in the form of misspellings, errors, and anomalous palaeographical features. Syntactic irregularities or translations of idioms or formulae may point to different social identities or preferences on behalf of the inscribers. The fact that it is often hard to know whether certain choices were made consciously or not shows that cultural interaction takes place on different levels, and can therefore be blurry.

Our aim is to explore the topic of cultural interaction through the lens of inscriptions. The conference focuses on language and on how the choice of language functioned in its original context. The Roman provinces and the Italian Peninsula, roughly between the 3rd c. BCE and the 3rd c. CE, constitute the spatial and temporal scope of this conference.

We invite both scholars and young researchers to submit papers. Questions addressed include, but are not limited to:

- How can inscriptions help us better understand cultural interaction in the ancient world?

- How can linguistic choices and, eventually, linguistic change, express (variations in) cultural identity and changing reflections on them?
- How did the appearance and the use of Latin and the creation of inscriptions develop in a certain community or region? How can we interpret the effect of their presence?
- How do local languages interfere with Latin, and vice versa, and what does that tell us about the interaction between the users of these languages?
- What is the relationship between the inscribers and the audience of inscribed monuments? Who would be able to see the monument?
- In what genres and context(s) is the impact of a new community first documented? What can this tell us about the relationship between different communities?
- How do Roman and local traditions merge on inscribed monuments and how can such changes be interpreted?