Call for Papers

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

March 6-7, 2025, Groningen

Organizers: Valentina Vari (Sapienza Università di Roma - University of Groningen), Caroline van Toor (University of Groningen), Dr Saskia Peels-Matthey (University of Groningen), and Prof. Dr Onno van Nijf (University of Groningen).

Invited speakers: Prof. Dr. Alex Mullen (University of Nottingham), Prof. Dr. Bruno Rochette (Université de Liège), Prof. Dr. Silvia Orlandi (Sapienza Università di Roma, president AIEGL)

Background

The expansion of the territories controlled by Rome came with increasing contact between the conquerors and the local populations, with different outcomes depending on socio-political circumstances and geographical factors. Inscriptions constitute immediate evidence of this interaction. While onomastics aid the identification of the various socio-cultural groups involved in erecting the monuments, language and linguistic choices can reveal insights into the shared knowledge and mutual relations of these groups. In this context, inscriptions do not simply constitute the outcome of cultural interaction. Rather, they were actively used for communicative anchoring - to reconcile the new (intercultural contact) with what was already familiar. In this way, inscriptions can be considered a means to manage the common ground, and thus to negotiate intercultural relations.

With "common ground", borrowed from cognitive grammar, we mean the domain of knowledge that is shared among the participants, negotiated and updated between the parties during the communication act. Unlike speech events, the information provided by inscriptions is fixed, and can not be updated in accordance with a specific interlocutor. However, inscriptions also aim to resonate within a specific cultural context, for example through the use of specific words, a certain language, or even the monument itself. Despite being immovable objects, inscriptions interact with the passers-by creating perpetual mechanisms of inclusion or exclusion.

As such, comparative approaches to inscriptions can show the impact of cultural interaction on the epigraphic record. The choice of a new or old language, 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 inscriptions 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 languages other than Latin by the Romans, could be a way to anchor themselves into 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 ethnic 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 as a way to manage the common ground, and thereby the mutual relations, of the parties involved. 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.

Questions

Questions addressed include, but are not limited to:

- How can inscriptions help us to better understand cultural interaction in the ancient world?
- How can linguistic choices and linguistic change express cultural identity and changing reflections on them?
- How are social and cultural relationships negotiated in inscriptions in consideration of language, scripts, and overall appearance of the inscribed monument?
- To what extent can we distinguish deliberate acts of communicative anchoring (i.e. active common ground management) from accidental uses of language and form?
- How can the appearance and use of a new language be documented by the epigraphical record, and develop in a certain community or region?
- How do local languages interfere with new languages, like 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?

- How do Roman and local traditions merge on inscribed monuments and how can such changes be interpreted?

Practicalities and deadlines

We invite both junior and senior scholars to submit an abstract to present a paper at the conference. Proposals of no more than 500 words should be submitted no later than **Monday, October 21st, 2024**. We intend to publish the proceedings of the conference. Proposals as well as any questions can be sent to v.vari@rug.nl (Valentina Vari) and c.j.toor@rug.nl (Caroline van Toor).