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What Is an Inscription?
Problems of Definition and Identity of an Historical Source

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What Is an Inscription?
Problems of Definition and Identity of an Historical Source*

To Géza
in memory of our friendship

As strange as it may seem for a discipline that has behind it such a long and distinguished tradition of study, and that has contributed in such a decisive way, owing to the quantity of material gathered and studied, to an historical understanding of the ancient world, it must be admitted that neither epigraphists nor any one else has yet produced a generally accepted definition of 'inscription'. I am aware that questions of this sort are considered by many to be sterile and academic, but I am not among them, both because I maintain, on the contrary, that defining clearly the object of study is part of the primary duties of any discipline, and because experience has taught that it is precisely from a careful critical review of its own objects of investigation that a discipline can often emerge profoundly and vitally renewed, even in methodology. The examples of philology and archaeology, well known to all, provide excellent proof of this assertion.[1] The question is therefore less irrelevant than it may seem. It is in any case clear at the very least that a state of uncertainty does not help either for understanding the specificity of epigraphic writing and the difference between it and other forms of expression of written culture or for defining the proper tasks and the 'status' of the epigraphist. I propose, then, to review briefly and to discuss at least the principal problems that are encountered whenever epigraphists wish to clarify for themselves and for others what an inscription is.

1.– Let us note right away that the etymological route, although it is the one most frequently followed in handbooks, on the model of other disciplines, turns out in our case to be of little use, for several reasons.

In the first place, observing that both the Greek verb ἐπιγράφειν and the corresponding Latin term *inscribere* indicate the action of writing 'on' something, does not help much, because it is clear that every manifestation of writing implies writing 'on' something, and our problem is precisely to understand in what respect epigraphic writing differs from writing that is not epigraphic.[2] At most, given the double meaning that both ἐπιγραφή and *inscriptio* can assume – signifying not only 'something written' but also 'inscribed object' – a certain peculiarity of this type of writing can be discerned in its capacity, at least in certain

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[1] It is worth noting that, not by chance, these two disciplines also once were, like epigraphy, considered 'auxiliary' but no one today would be so misguided as to restrict them to such a narrow definition. On the 'autonomy' of epigraphy, to which I propose to return in another context, see, for now, S. Panciera, *Epigrafi, epigrafia, epigrafisti*, Roma 2006, pp. 12ff. and, further, J. de Santiago Fernández, La epigrafía: evolución conceptual y metodológica, in *Documenta & instrumenta*, 1, 2004, pp. 203–220. For a recent and concise affirmation of this view ('there is nothing ancillary about epigraphy today'), see S. A. Takács, Foreword, in F. Feraudi-Gruénais, ed., *Latin on Stone*, Lanham, Maryland, 2010, p. xv.

[2] The meaning 'writing in', with reference to writing that is incised, with the removal of material, rather than 'writing on', as some propose (for example, A. Sartori, *Relegis titulo sulcato marmore ferro*: gli intenti delle iscrizioni 'cruente', in *Parole per sempre*? (*Atti 1° Incontro di Dipartimento sull'Epigrafia*), Milan 2003, pp. 8–16), even if it were theoretically possible for *inscribere*, is clearly not encompassed by the Greek verb, which certainly does not in itself embrace this specific meaning. In any case the idea of attaching the concept of 'inscription' to a single type of writing is not one I favor: see below.

cases, to transform into an ἐπιγραφή or an *inscriptio* also the object to which it is applied. But this phenomenon does not always occur and cannot therefore be assumed to be a distinctive characteristic.

Furthermore, we need to bear in mind that, when we consider the terms 'epigraph' and 'inscription', regarding both as pregnant with meaning and therefore capable of providing some clue to the reality they describe, we refer only in part to the ancient lexicon. Incidentally, these two words were by no means the only ones used in antiquity to indicate epigraphic writing and indeed were not even the most important terms used in this sense.[3] In reality, the words we use are no longer the ancient ones but are instead the products of the recovery and transformation of them into technical terms by humanists – at first 'inscription', between the end of the fifteenth and the first half of the sixteenth century, and then 'epigraph' at the end of the seventeenth century. (The neologisms 'epigraphy' and 'epigraphist' began to be used only in the nineteenth century.)[4] The situation being thus, it is clear that the words have taken their meaning from the discipline, according to its evolution, rather than the reverse, even if the words were introduced by the discipline itself.

2.– Apart from etymology, what other evaluative criteria have been adopted to distinguish 'inscription' from other products of writing? Attempts have been made to make use of parameters of various sorts, either individually or in combination with each other, among which we can distinguish some that may be called material and others that, by contrast, can be described as immaterial. If we consider these attempts in this context, it is clear that although they have enabled important advances, they have not always led to results that are accepted or are acceptable. Let me begin with those that I have defined as 'material'.

3.– Still, in some recent manuals of Latin epigraphy the object of the study of epigraphy is said to be all the original writing of the Roman era that has come down to us on durable materials.[5]

Let us leave aside for the moment the question of original writing. Of primary interest here is the assumption of duration or hardness (often even of grandeur) of the support as a determining feature, a characteristic and distinctive element, of an inscription, inasmuch as the study of what is written on other materials, above all papyri and parchment, is said to belong to other disciplines.

This is a type of definition that goes back more than a century (at least to Boeckh – but it has subsequently been repeated countless times), of which the limits are evident, consisting above all in the renunciation of any attempt to identify intrinsic characteristics peculiar to epigraphic production and therefore in the delegation of the task of definition to the single external, albeit not irrelevant, characteristic of the material of the object that carries the text.[6] But this definition goes astray also in its inconsistency, when those who propose it count as inscriptions also the writing on objects such as wooden tablets, whether or not 'waxed', or other objects that can certainly not be said to be durable.

One might add that, even if it is true that a large part of epigraphic production was effectively and deliberately on durable objects, the adoption of this element as characteristic is mistaken in basing itself largely on the purely incidental fact that, of all that was once written epigraphically, it is principally, if not

[3] In Greek, for example, ἐπίγραμμα, and in Latin *titulus* are more common.

[4] For what happened in French, see the evidence provided by R. Favreau, *Les inscriptions médiévales*, Turnhout 1979, p. 13 ('inscription' was used a first time in the fourteenth century, then in 1496, and only became predominant in the sixteenth century; 'epigraph' appeared in 1694; 'epigraphy' was used from 1843 on, and the neologism was accepted by the Académie Française only in 1878. The situation in Italy is analogous, to judge from the first attestations of the words gathered in the *Grande dizionario della lingua italiana* founded by Salvatore Battaglia, in volumes VIII, 1973, p. 573 and V, 1968, p. 192 respectively (see also *Supplemento 2009*, p. 451): the first attestations of 'inscription' are found in Vasari (1511–1574), Adriani (1553–1604) and Buonarrotti the Younger (1568–1646); 'epigraphy' and 'epigraphist' appear for the first time in Perticari (1791–1822) and Barboni (1848–1921) respectively; in Tommaseo (1802–1874) we find also the rare 'inscriptionist'.

[5] E.g., M. G. Schmidt, *Einführung in die lateinische Epigraphik*[2], Darmstadt 2011, p. 1; see also J.-M. Lassère, *Manuel d'épigraphie romaine*[2], Paris 2007, pp. 4f.

[6] A. Boeckh, *Encyclopädie und Methodologie der philologischen Wissenschaften*, Leipzig 1877 (posthumous edition by E. Bratuschek of lessons delivered between 1809 and 1865), p. 719. See already C. Zell, *Handbuch der römischen Epigraphik*[2], Heidelberg 1874, p. 1, and further W. Larfeld, *Handbuch der griechischen Epigraphik*, I, Leipzig 1907, p. 3; H. Dessau, *Lateinische Epigraphik* (*Einleitung in die Altertumswissenschaft*, I, 10), Leipzig–Berlin 1925, p. 10.

invariably, precisely what was written on 'resistant' surfaces that has come down to us, whereas many other 'fragile' witnesses have inevitably been lost, as is demonstrated by the atypical example of the Vesuvian cities, where the plastered walls are at least partially preserved and with them, exceptionally, also the many inscriptions that appeared on them.

For this reason, proceeding in this fashion has been criticized now for several decades, even if the importance attributed to the material of the support retains some value if considered from a different perspective.[7] Cardona observes that "in various cultures the choice of the support <on which to write> is naturally dictated by what is available, but where it is possible to choose, materials become specialized and techniques suitable to each material are differentiated" (Bodel transl.).[8] From this point of view, the nature of the support (e.g. the choice of bronze for incising important legislative documents) cannot be considered an entirely external characteristic.

4.– Among the 'material' parameters sometimes adopted for the purpose of definition can be included also in a certain sense those derived from the technique used for writing. Particularly relevant in this regard are to be considered the 'subtractive' techniques whereby material is removed (e.g., incision with a chisel or burin or by scratching), with which, in effect, the majority of the examples of writing qualified as epigraphic was realized. But again, this is an external criterion that says nothing specific about an inscription and that furthermore unduly ignores all the various other techniques that were used, such as painting with a brush on plaster, as we have seen, or with mosaic tesserae, or damascening, or writing with a quill, or in charcoal or chalk, or impressing with a seal, or various other methods. I think that this criterion too is not useful.[9]

5.– Let as turn, then, to those criteria that we have described as 'immaterial', which are certainly more sophisticated and in a certain sense more interesting, although they too, as we shall see, are at least in part not entirely satisfactory. Instead of the external physical properties of the written product, the focus in this case is on the intentions that determined it, thus on internal characteristics, among which may be noted as especially significant the desire to perpetuate memory, the intention to communicate something publicly, and the aim of self-representation.

6.– That behind most inscriptions is a desire to secure a long life for the message they contain is not in doubt: "words for all time" they have been called.[10] On this point even the ancient sources are clear. Pliny the Elder, for example, praises the land because, by accommodating monuments and inscriptions (*tituli*), it secures the memory of those who have passed on by perpetuating their names and memory against and beyond the brevity of life.[11] Tertullian, too, understands well how behind the inscribing of *tituli* lies a quest for eternity.[12]

Moreover, counteracting the ephemerality of orality by preserving words through time is in essence one of the special functions of writing, particularly, it is often said, of poetic or other literary or philosophi-

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[7] On durability as a 'critère obscure de la science officielle' for defining epigraphic monuments, see already J. Mallon, L'archéologie des monuments graphiques, in *Rev. Hist*., 226, 1961, p. 312 (reprinted in id., *De l'écriture*, Paris 1986, p. 278), followed by G. C. Susini, *Il lapicida romano*, Bologna 1966, p. 81 (now also in id., *Epigraphica dilapidata*, Faenza 1997, p. 65); reservations are expressed also by, among others, A. Bellù, Paleografia dell'età classica, in *Introduzione allo studio della cultura classica*, Milano 1974, p. 295 and by Favreau, *Inscriptions*, cit. (nt. 4), p. 14.

[8] G. R. Cardona, *Antropologia della scrittura*, Torino 1981, p. 53.

[9] See also above, nt. 2. The indivisibility of the inscription from the support on which it is written and from the place where it is found applies not only in the case of incised inscriptions and does not derive from the fact itself of incision but is a distinctive feature of every form of writing that can be characterized as epigraphic.

[10] *Parole per sempre*?, cit. (nt. 2); the expression refers particularly to the contribution, there, of A. Sartori, at pp. 8–16.

[11] Plin., *N.H*., II, 154: *terra … etiam monumenta ac titulos gerens nomenque prorogans nostrum et memoriam extendens contra brevitatem aevi*.

[12] Tertull., *Apol*. 50, 11: *… titulos inciditis in aeternitatem*.

cal writing.[13] As we have seen, in the case of inscriptions this desire for longevity is often revealed and emphasized, other than through the intentions (at times explicit) of the writer, by the association of writing with materials (bronze, marble) and techniques (carving) particularly suited to the achievement of the aim. Often, but not always.

There are types of writing commonly and, I believe, rightly classified as inscriptions, such as the painted notices for lease or sale of rooms, or the announcements of spectacles and posters relaying electoral propaganda, or still others that, being destined to be cancelled once their purpose is fulfilled, show themselves not only to have no aspiration to eternity but even to aim for nothing other than an ephemeral existence. One can understand how even an excellent scholar, in maintaining that in order for an inscription to exist "il fallait … qu'il y eût le refus de la disparition définitive, le désir de s'arracher à l'oubli, la recherche d'une durée dépassant les bornes de l'existence éphémère",[14] finds himself at a loss to find a place in epigraphy for types of writing such as these, or wall graffiti, or those that appear together with stamps on objects of daily life, the inclusion of which among inscriptions he finds to be improper because they lack those characteristics of solemnity, reserve, and longevity that in his view are peculiar to 'true' inscriptions.[15]

7.– Particularly worthy of attention, on the other hand, is the idea of an inscription as public communication and a means of self-representation, even if here too one must voice a few reservations along with a large measure of agreement. Those in power – who also controlled public space and needed a tool to communicate with the populace in order to call attention to their achievements omiting their failures, by publicizing decisions and regulations, measuring out space and time, spreading slogans, propagating their ideology and promoting themselves with messages that were as much visual as they were verbal – were quick to identify in the displayed writing of more or less solemn and sumptous inscriptions the most suitable vehicle for this type of communication.

But less important persons too, who nonetheless were endowed with the economic and social means to avail themselves of a form of writing with wide accessibility (albeit a minority of the population), made use of inscriptions in various ways to call attention to the position they had won as members of various groups (in associations, for example, or in a family or *familia*), at times to advertise their reciprocal relations with the divine (e.g. through supplication or offerings of thanks), to lay claim to ownership of property or products, or even simply for the pleasure of displaying themselves.[16] The goal of visibility, of 'putting oneself before the eyes of all' (even if one must recognize that often with individual texts 'all' does not extend beyond a very restricted circle of those interested in the information transmitted) is in effect a need and an aspiration felt nearly universally throughout Roman society.[17]

More than its public character, which is too often understood as resulting from a public initiative and a desire to convey public messages, I would identify the specific quality of epigraphic communication in its addressing whatever information it is meant to communicate, at least in intention, *erga omnes*, or at least to the greatest number of potential readers, independent of the fact that this potentiality became realized, as is demonstrated by the case of long and important inscriptions placed in positions so remote and made with letters so small that no one would have been able to read them.

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[13] On this point see recently, for example, L. Cermatori, L'epistula come monumentum, in *Athenaeum*, 98, 2010, pp. 445–65.

[14] G. Sanders, Texte et monument, in *Il museo epigrafico*, Faenza 1984, p. 109 (id., *Lapides memores*, Faenza 1991, p. 417).

[15] Sanders, Texte, cit. (above, nt. 14), pp. 108 nt. 77, 116 (id., *Lapides*, cit., above, nt. 14, pp. 416 nt. 77, 422); see also id., Une jeune dame de Mevaniola, in *Cultura epigrafica dell'Appennino*, Faenza 1985, p. 31 nt. 39 (id., *Lapides*, cit., above, nt. 14, p. 442 nt. 39).

[16] That the lower levels of the social pyramid, which, needless to say, were also the most crowded, are underrepresented epigraphically can be considered certain independently from the much debated question of the diffusion of literacy in Roman society of the empire in various periods, places, and environments; furthermore, it is not at all obvious that for every inscription one must presume a person capable of reading and writing it.

[17] A. Sartori, Parole per tutti o comunicazione mirata ed esclusiva?, in *Parole per tutti?* (*Atti 3° Incontro di Dipartimento sull'Epigrafia*), Milano 2007, pp. 47–53.

From this a doubt arises, not in me alone, whether certain types of written documents from which this intention to communicate a message widely and, one might say, generally, is clearly absent – lead curse tablets, for example, which, after being inscribed, folded or rolled, and sometimes pierced with a nail, were withdrawn from public view by being placed in a tomb or thrown in a well or a stream or the sea – can truly be considered epigraphic.[18]

8.– The difficulty scholars face in trying to confine to a single formulation the peculiar sense – the specifics – of what 'inscription' means are clear, since any single formulation that seems satisfactory in certain respects is not so in all. It is therefore not surprising that scholars have sought to define the term by recourse to a multiplicity of formulations, rather than to a single one, and to a combination of different parameters, so as to embrace more thoroughly the complexity of the phenomenon, as happened in time also with the evolution of epigraphic studies.

I won't linger on this additive procedure, of which one might cite numerous examples. Because the characteristics we find combined are none other than those of 'durability of the inscribed object', 'memorializing purpose', 'publicity', and the like, which we have already discussed and have found to be more or less unsatisfactory, and because in principle it seems unlikely that the sum of several unsatisfactory parameters can produce a satisfactory result, it is not surprising that concrete analysis of these propositions amounts to no more than a confirmation of the a priori assumptions. One might add that following this route, which further complicates the discussion of definition, has the result not of moving us closer but of still further distancing us from that single comprehensive outcome that should, one hopes, be the natural result of any successful definition.

9.– We might try a different approach. Since everyone agrees that inscriptions, however they are understood, constitute an historical source of primary importance, we might see whether any clarification can emerge from what we have learned about sources from historians and students of the methodology of history, who have tirelessly concerned themselves with this issue for centuries, but especially since the middle of the nineteenth century, with contributions from many nations at the highest level.

By simplifying to the extreme the terms of a complex debate, the aim of which is to distinguish and to classify the various types of sources in order to understand their internal characteristics and thus to show how historians can better use them critically in their work, we may say that the principal guidelines followed in the classification of sources are four, specifically:[19]

i) Whether or not the information they contain was transmitted intentionally. In this case one must distinguish between what was done by those in the past for their own needs, without any wish to hand down memory of it, but which has nonetheless come down to us, and what was done, whether or not it was written down, to pass on a record of it or to shape a tradition; a third category is constituted by whatever was done for both a practical and a memorializing purpose. In this classification inscriptions occupy a highly ambiguous position between the second and third categories.

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[18] It has been rightly observed that *defixiones*, which are normally classified as inscriptions, when considered from the point of view of structure (but also of material and the type of writing), are more properly seen as letters, albeit of a certain type, and in fact sometimes refer to themselves as 'epistles'. On the ambiguous place of this sort of writing, which not by chance appears also on *ostraca*, see G. Bevilacqua, … (*h*)*os* (*h*)*omines*. Una nuova tabella defixionis da Olbia, in *L'Africa romana*, 18, 3, Roma 2010, pp. 1936 and 1960; on the use of *ostraca* in contexts of this sort, see also ead., *Scrittura e magia*, Roma 2010, pp. 40–44.

[19] For a detailed review and assessment of the principal theories put forward internationally from Droysen on, see above all, J. Topolski, *Metodologia della ricerca storica*, Bologna 1975 (first ed. 1973), pp. 447–61 and id. (in collaboration with Raffaello Righini), *Narrare la storia. Nuovi principi di metodologia storica*, Milano 1997, pp. 51–58. For more recent summaries in Italian of the state of the question, after the classic volume of F. Chabod, *Lezioni di metodo storico* (1941), which has continued to be reprinted following the author's death in 1960 (most recently Roma–Bari 2006, pp. 54–67), see, for example, A. D'Orsi, *Alla ricerca della storia. Teoria, metodo e storiografia*, Torino 1996, pp. 110–16; id., *Piccolo manuale di storiografia*, Milano 2002, pp. 58–62; G. Galasso, *Nient'altro che storia. Saggi di teoria e metodologia della storia*, Bologna 2000, pp. 293–353.

ii) Whether or not an intermediary intervenes between the ancient reality and the modern historian: here essentially one must distinguish between information that can be gleaned directly by historians from considering the fragments of the past at their disposal and information for which they depend upon an intermediary. Epigraphic information falls in the latter category.

iii) Whether the source is primary or secondary, that is, whether the historian is dealing with immediate reactions that are a direct and consequent expression of what was done (inscriptions belong in this category), or whether an act is viewed through the critical reflections and passions of an observer contemporary with or later than it.

iv) Whether or not the sources (whether direct or indirect) are written: on one side would be documentary and narrative sources, including inscriptions; on the other are sources that are oral, aural, monumental/archaeological, environmental, cartographic, iconographic, or even deriving from nature, that is, those interpreted with the aid of modern technologies such as aerial photography, dendrochronology and botany, chemical analysis, climatology, physics, geography, geology, medicine, zoology, and so on.

Recently, as a consequence of the so-called 'documentary revolution', which overturns the traditional hierarchy of sources by affirming that everything can be considered a document (a thesis maintained already by Croce[20]) and at the same time by denying that one can countenance the traditional opposition between documents that are objective, true, and authentic (*documenta*) and those that are subjective, tendentious, and false (*monumenta*), because all documents are both at the same time, and the truth is always mixed with falsehood, a tendency has arisen, to which I subscribe only in part, to maintain that this system of oppositions is wholly obsolete and useless.[21]

10.– This is not the place to discuss the merits and limits of each of these proposals, some of which are abundantly clear, and of other less significant ones, which, however, are not to be judged as alternatives but rather in relation to their objective. I limit myself to saying that, however useful they may be for the purpose of refining the craft of the historian, they do not generally contribute usefully toward clarifying the nature of inscriptions, because these are never considered in depth.

At the same time, because it is indisputable that an inscription cannot exist without writing (even if, with inscriptions, the writing has the peculiarity that it cannot be correctly interpreted without considering it in connection with the object on which it appears and the place in which it is found), I would like to consider briefly the classification that opposes the written and the non-written, a distinction that, even if apparently mechanical, has the advantage of distinguishing between various different communicative modes and, for our purposes, of suggesting a new type of definition.

If inscriptions are part of the written culture of a given society, can we first of all isolate within it certain strands of communicative behavior to which they can be said not to belong? As we have noted, in this classification written sources are themselves divided into two types, documentary and narrative, and in my view it is difficult to find an appropriate place for inscriptions in one subset or the other.

11.– Let us take the vast sector that in a wide sense embraces all literary production – poetry, narrative, history, philosophy, didactic tracts, and so on. With inscriptions we are clearly on a different plane – not only for reasons both quantitative (inscriptions are short) and qualitative (inscriptions are modest, both in general and also for the most part in the case of what has felicitously been called the "literature of the

[20] B. Croce, *La storia come pensiero e come azione*, Bari 1938, p. 109: "as documents are to be understood all the works of the past still recoverable through written signs, musical notations, pictures, sculpture and architecture, technological discoveries, transformations of the landscape, in those things formed in the depths of the soul, or in political, moral, and religious institutions, in the qualities and sentiments gradually formed over the centuries and still alive and working in us" (Bodel transl.).

[21] J. Le Goff, Documento/monumento, in *Enciclopedia Einaudi*, V, Torino 1978, pp. 38–48, with further essential bibliography.

street")[22], but also for more substantive reasons. If in no other way, inscriptions are different because of the diversity of motivations and intentions underlying them and because of the manner of their production and their intended destination. Literature, being addressed to a rather narrow public, was able to circulate, thanks to the possibility of unlimited reproduction in manuscripts, and, in the final analysis, was destined for libraries: neither of these features applies to inscriptions. The fact that certain substantially literary or historical works, such as the *Res Gestae* of Augustus or certain *laudationes*, survive in epigraphic versions does not eliminate the unbridgeable distance between them and their originals and proves only that in certain cases it was considered opportune to supplement the regular diffusion of a literary work by an epigraphic publication, thereby implicitly confirming the importance of the latter.

12.– More delicate is the relation of epigraphy to another essential nucleus of writing such as that constituted by the production of documents. Here the situation is complicated by the multiplicity of meanings attributed to the word 'document', which has passed from its original sense of 'something taught' (from *doceo*), 'something that shows or represents something done, a fact', to the various writings produced for administrative or practical purposes – letters, authenticated testimony, written judicial 'proofs', attestations of identity or the like – to the point where it now designates, as we have seen (unfortunately, in my view, because equivocally) virtually any source, written or unwritten, used by historians.[23]

Inscriptions too are often identified as documents (epigraphic documents), and this works well when the word is used in a general way. But I do not think that this usage can be accepted in any specific sense.[24] Conceptually, I don't see how all the material undoubtedly to be classified as documentary (for the most part consisting fundamentally of rights and obligations) – comprising wills, contracts, bills of sale, legal judgments, loan receipts, accounting records, even public and private letters, but also, at a higher level, decrees of the senate, laws, edicts, decrees, and imperial constitutions, which often are considered inscriptions *par excellence* – can be called epigraphic. In fact, some of these (not all) are very often found reproduced also epigraphically – sometimes we know them only from their epigraphic copies – and all have been studied principally or additionally by epigraphists, but documents are not for this reason the same thing as inscriptions.

So we may note incidentally that the position of those scholars, even the writers of handbooks and manuals, who, faced with the problem of definition, imagine that they can extricate themselves from embarrassment by making inscriptions coincide with what epigraphists study, and with what is included in the standard corpora, is not entirely satisfactory; in fact, it would be more correct to say that the tradition of epigraphic studies shows that, fortunately, epigraphists do not concern themselves only with 'inscriptions'.

I believe rather that what has been observed apropos of literary production applies also for documents: these materials are different from inscriptions, not only formally but also substantively – by their origin, by their function, by the modes of expression to which they must conform and by their natural destination, which in their case is neither the road nor the library but the archive. Inscriptions, even if they provide records of many documents (thus confirming the importance of epigraphic communication) are not themselves documents.[25]

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[22] G. Sanders Les inscriptions latine païennes et chrétiennes, in *D'une déposition à un couronnement (476–800)*, *Rév. Univ. Bruxelles*, 1977, pp. 46f. (id., *Lapides*, cit., nt. 14, pp. 158f.); see also A. Sartori, Le iscrizioni latine "littérature de rue", in *Urbs aeterna*, Pamplona 2003, pp. 737–46.

[23] "Any physical entity, of any form or material, in which information is registered" (Bodel transl.): G. Vigini, *Dizionario di biblioteconomia e scienze dell'informazione*, Milan 1985, p. 14.

[24] Useful but only partially persuasive is the contribution of M. H. Hansen, What Is a Document? An Ill-Defined Type of Source, in *Class. et Mediaev.*, 52, 2001, pp. 317–43, according to whom (pp. 331–33, 338–41) inscriptions, which for him would constitute only a subcategory of archaeological evidence, are to be contrasted with literary sources as having instead, normally but not always, the characteristics of documents.

[25] Doubts along these lines were voiced already by Antonio Agustín, *Dialogo de medallas, inscripciones y otras antigüedades*, Tarragona 1587; English translation by Bodel of the Italian edition (Rome 1658), p. 244: B: "Can the ancient tablets of laws and decrees of the senate that are found in Rome be called inscriptions? In no way!"

13.– Are we, then, to conclude at this point, disconsolately, that the nature of what we call inscriptions is so complex as to remain elusive? I have not yet referred, except in passing, to other important questions that revolve around the concept of what inscriptions are, such as their relation to the monument or object on which they are inscribed, or to the writer and the reader, or to the physical context, or to other written and non-written evidence, or to the extent, yet to be determined, to which they are representative of the world that produced them. I shall not do so here, because I would prefer to limit myself to trying to clarify a bit further, if possible, in what way the essence of epigraphic writing is in my view distinguishable from other types of writing in contemporary use.

More than a dozen years ago, after having criticized other proposed definitions, I hazarded the following reflections:

> "… inscriptions, or epigraphs, can be defined comprehensively as any writing effected in a given culture by the substitution of writing tools and surfaces used for writing in everyday practice (or one or the other) with others. It therefore follows that in a culture in which, for example, customarily one writes with suitable tools on wooden tablets (whether or not waxed), on tree bark, papyrus, parchment, or cloth, an inscription would be any writing made on different writing surfaces, regardless of the technique used, the destination, or the purpose. In other words, one could say that the distinctive quality of inscriptions lies in the first instance in their more or less intentional deviation from what may be said to be 'normal' writing in the context in which it was produced. In that case, neither the documents of various sorts found on waxed tablets nor letters of the Roman period on tree bark, nor literary, lexical, or administrative texts in cuneiform or Linear B on clay tablets from Ebla and Cnossos can be considered inscriptions, although all regularly appear in the tradition of epigraphic studies."[26]

Today, in light of the reasoning outlined above, and in an effort to provide a more positive formulation, I would propose to regard as an 'inscription' any particular type of written human communication of the sort that we would today call unidirectional, in the sense that it does not anticipate that a response will be provided to the sender, and which has the characteristic of not being addressed to a person or to a group but to a collectivity, and which for this reason is made with the location, writing technique, graphic form and impagination, mode and register of expression chosen because they are most suitable to the attainment of its intended goal, and which differentiates itself in this manner from other forms of contemporary verbal communication (oral, literary, or documentary). With this I reaffirm the concept of epigraphic writing as writing that is deviant (according to the time and place, naturally) in that it adopts a form of writing that is different, in its medium or technique or both, according to its intended purpose. At the same time, however, I also want to call greater attention to the other essential and peculiar characteristic of an inscription, namely its address to a collectivity.

Let me try to clarify the idea with a banal example: if I say to a girl, in person or on the telephone, "Francesca, I love you", I am making an oral, interpersonal, communication; if I write a poem in which I express my feelings and perhaps secure for it a certain circulation in print or otherwise, I produce a literary work, aspiring as such to become part of a library; if I write it to her in a letter or telegram or, as today would be more normal, in an email or text message (even break-ups happen ever more frequently in this fashion), with or without adding to it a proposal of marriage, I produce a document destined for the private files of the girl, or the couple, if one results; but if I spray-paint it in block capitals on the Aurelian Wall and broadcast it, through its location and through the chosen method of writing, not only to her but to the entire community, I am doing something reprehensible, to be sure, but I am also producing an inscription.

"Too simple", some will say. I don't believe so. Only a definition of 'inscription' such as this seems to me capable, on the one hand of comprehending material characterized by an extremely wide heterogeneity, and, on the other, of placing clearly outside its boundaries what does not belong to it, or at least does not exclusively belong to it. Durability and hardness of the text-carrier, a fixed or portable nature, content, longevity or ephemerality, uniqueness or not of the message, the solemnity or modesty of the writing – it is not

[26] S. Panciera, Epigrafia. Una voce soppressa, in *Arch. Class.*, 50, 1998, p. 314 (id., *Epigrafi*, cit. nt. 1, p. 1795).

that I discount these – quite the opposite – but these are only epiphenomena, or accessory attributes, which might vary indefinitely and infinitely and which might or might not be manifested, without compromising the specificity of the 'inscription', which in my view, as I have said, consists in the decision to effect a communication that is not directed at a single person or a group but to an entire community and that therefore necessitates the abandonment of the tools or media (or both) that a given culture employs for writing that is literary or documentary or in every day use and substitutes for them others more suitable to its purpose.

14.– It follows from this that the tablets from military camps at Vindolanda in Britain, which contain an entire series of letters from soldiers or to soldiers or to others, for the most part written in ink on thin wooden leaves, or the waxed tablets from Pompeii and Herculaneum bearing legal or financial documents, or a decree of the senate at the moment at which it is articulated verbally in order to be deposited in an archive, or a letter in which an emperor confers a promotion on an imperial functionary or for many other purposes – none of these are inscriptions, even if they may become such at the moment when someone (the senate itself, for example, in order to disseminate knowledge of its decisions or a promoted functionary in order to boast of the promotion conferred) decides to alter the nature of them by changing the intended destination or transferring them from one text-carrier to another or from one form of writing to another. In conclusion, then, in the field of epigraphy I believe we must distinguish among:

a) inscriptions that exist as such by original choice, because from the beginning they are conceived of and composed to be inscriptions, for example those that are sepulchral or votive or honorific, or graffiti ('normal' in the form of writing but deviant in the medium of transmission), or stamps on *instrumentum* (deviant in both the form of writing and the medium), and so on;[27]
b) inscriptions that are such by a secondary choice, for example the *lex de imperio Vespasiani*, which was in no sense conceived to be an inscription but rather was a systematic and normative statement of the prerogatives of the emperor in general and of Vespasian in particular, and only afterwards became an inscription at the time when it was considered important that the archived and thus binding legal document be realized also in a majestic copy (and perhaps more than one) on gilded bronze tablets, and that it be displayed in a suitable location; but the same reasoning applies also for many other documents transformed into inscriptions;
c) finally, a quantity of written productions, which, like the Vindolanda leaves, for example, or the waxed tablets mentioned above, or the graffiti on kiln dockets from La Graufesenque, or the military *ostraca* from Golas (Bu Njem, in Libya), with their daily reports or other records, or the administrative records from the granite quarries of the Mons Claudianus in Egypt, are certainly studied by epigraphists, often very well, as well as by paleographers and others, but which are neither born to be inscriptions nor ever become them.

[27] In contrast to others (see, e.g., above at nt. 15), I have no doubt about the epigraphic nature of stamps on *instrumentum* either independently or subsequently associated with other texts (graffiti, or texts that are punched or painted or drawn with a reed) or of the legends on coins, which share with these, in addition to their function of authentication and warranty, also the characteristic of infinite replication. (The study of sphragistics, although it has points in common, historically has different purposes). For the complex significance of stamps, even juridically, see D. Manacorda, Appunti sulla bollatura in età romana, in *The Inscribed Economy*, Ann Arbor, 1993, pp. 37–54; for the publicity value of stamps and other writings on *instrumentum*, see I. Di Stefano Manzella, *Emite lucernas colatas venales icones de officina Assenis et Donati*: un esempio epigrafico di marketing antico con promozione pubblicitaria 'gridata', in *L'Africa romana*, 18, 2, Roma 2010, pp. 1501–28. For the legends on coins, in every respect considered to be inscriptions of a public nature and thus treated in a long Appendix of her manual, see M. Guarducci, *Epigrafia Greca*, II, Roma 1969, reprinted 1995, pp. 535ff. and 615–705 (a summary reference only, however, in *L'epigrafia greca dalle origini al tardo impero*, Rome 1987, reprinted in 2001). Irrelevant in practice for our purposes, the fact that coin legends because of their inseparabily from the coins themselves and from the whole message they convey, not only written but metallic, iconographic and symbolic, are principally studied by numismatists. In contrast, the study of *instrumentum* is pursued both by epigraphists and by archaeologists, which is laudable from a scientific point of view, but has unfortunately not led to results so felicitous as to produce the desired continuation of their publication in *CIL,* by ancient regions, albeit according to new criteria.

15.– The discussion presented thus far does not pretend to have clarified entirely and finally the nature of inscriptions and therefore, indirectly, also the territory and tasks of the epigraphist, to whom (other than what has been recorded above about the relations of epigraphy with the monument or the object to which they are applied, the context, the other written and non-written testimony, and the fundamental task of editing) it remains at least to consider and, as with every type of writing, to organize into a chronological and territorial framework the information related to who is writing, what is written, how, where and to whom it is written, and with what purpose, rules, and creative or aesthetic aspirations it is written, even, perhaps, other considerations. All of this, eventually, I hope to treat in another context. The aim here, much more modestly, has been to propose and to bring to the attention of readers, with the obvious hope of persuading at least some, a different, or perhaps a further, way of regarding and of defining what we mean by the term 'inscription'.

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